Tribal Woman: A Dissent against Established Perceptions

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It is necessary to broadly identify the main foundations of Kannada feminist theory.Within the scope and limitations of this article, it is not possible to analyse the perspectives of all scholars (both male and female) who have studied women.Therefore, based on the representative statements of a few thinkers, this essay attempts, in broad outline, to grasp the main foundations of Kannada women's thought.

Caste, varna, and class divisions are artificial constructions in the human-made social order. The struggle for power within these inequalities is the central element of the novel.In contrast, the distinction between male and female is a purposeful act of nature.In accordance with this purposeful act, there are differences in bodily constitution, muscular strength, and, to some extent, psychological disposition. Yet what must be understood is that there is no hierarchy of superiority or inferiority between the two, for only together do they complete life (Shrimati H.S. 1999, pp. 123–124). Although Shrimati speaks of caste, varna, and class divisions, she does not extend this discussion to the context of women.The "human-made society" she describes includes only males.By not recognising women in relation to caste, varna, and class divisions, she sets them apart from these social and class hierarchies and conceives of women on a unified plane, developing her theoretical framework accordingly.Thus, she treats caste/varna/class differences and male-female inequality as distinct categories.For her, the oppression women face in terms of gender inequality is more severe than that within caste, varna, and class stratifications.That is, she prefers to discuss women's oppression on biological grounds rather than in terms of its social dimensions.The problems she identifies on the basis of male–female inequality are largely those of upper-caste, upper-class, and middle-class women.

Dabbé asserts that women have been systematically bound in every possible way for centuries.This is a universal fact that is often ignored.Women were excluded from the sphere of social production and from the mainstream of social, political, and cultural life.She was confined to her family. The ideals of motherhood, wifehood, and womanhood were formulated in ways convenient for "ruling" over her, not with her welfare in mind. Indian and Kannada women are no exception to this global history (Vijaya Dabbé 1994, p. 212). Dabbé treats women's biological identity as the standard and interprets women at all levels - global, Indian, Kannada - as a single unit. Having conceived of women universally, she analyzes their issues on a unified basis.

However, the ideals of motherhood, wifehood, and womanhood that Dabbé identifies as obstacles to women's welfare are primarily relevant to upper-caste, upper-class, and middle-caste, middle-class women.Since these ideals emerged within a caste-stratified society as norms sanctioned by dominant groups, they naturally exclude women

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from lower communities and tribal women.In a society like India's, where caste and class hierarchies dominate, women from marginalised communities and tribal groups have never been represented as models of womanhood.

Keshava Sharma, in his feminist literary criticism, approaches women in this way: "When we speak of 'woman,' our primary standpoint is based on physical and gender differences. If we take bodily difference as the main criterion of discussion, then we must understand what impact this bodily difference has upon the mind and upon thought" (Keshava Sharma, 1998, p. 96). Based on this, he undertakes feminist literary criticism.Starting from the female body, he seeks to identify the sexual politics of patriarchy and, with reference to women's economic liberation, the class politics of it.However, Sharma does not recognise gender-specific oppression as intersecting with caste and class hierarchies.Although he critiques the description of the *`Soole'*(courtesan) in *Pampa Bharata,* it remains only a contextual critique and does not form a major part of his overall thinking.Like others, he interprets women as a homogeneous unit based on physical and gender-related differences.Although he considers class, he interprets women as a single unit.Following a Marxist framework, he conceives all women as a dependent and oppressed class.

Thus, Shrimati, Vijaya Dabbé, Nemichandra, Keshava Sharma, and others conceive of women as a homogeneous category, and from a standpoint opposed to men, they define society, literature, culture, and values.The conceptual frameworks of these thinkers dominate Kannada feminist discourse. Since these models take gender difference as a predetermined framework, they view any issue concerning women only in terms of "male" and "female."

Some women scholars pay attention to women from marginalised and tribal communities, but they tend to interpret them from a liberal perspective. Scholars such as D. R. Nagaraj, R. Sunandamma, Gayatri Navad, and DharanideviMalagatti speak about tribal and marginalised women in various contexts, but their observations remain situated within a framework of glorification of the women.Tribal and marginalised women appear in their writings, but their experiences are not fully encompassed.When constructing the caste- and class-inflected histories of women or discussing women's world, women from marginalised and tribal communities are often left out. Even in the writings of scholars like H. C. Boralingayya and Siddalingayya, tribal and marginalised women, appear prominently, yet they are seen through highly elevated or idealised lenses.This issue is discussed in detail in the final section of this article.

Research studies can be broadly categorised into three types: (1) studies that treat women as a homogeneous group; (2) studies that examine marginalised and tribal women in a situational or context-specific manner; and (3) studies that examine marginalised and tribal women comprehensively.However, none of these approaches have focused on the fundamental problems faced by women from marginalised, tribal, or indigenous communities and the oppression they face.There is a need to develop different perspectives and methodologies to understand the lives and literature of untouchable, tribal, and marginalised women.This study attempts to address this issue.

While matriarchal societies in Indian culture have largely disappeared, they continue to thrive in cultural and symbolic domains.Even among lower castes and tribal communities, the symbolic and social spheres exhibit considerable power (D. R. Nagaraj,

1993, p. 122). Nagaraj and many other scholars interpret tribal women as relatively autonomous and free from exploitation.

Women can be broadly categorised into two groups: (1) those outside the civic society and (2) those within the civic society.Women outside the civic society are tribal women.Even tribal women cannot be treated as a homogeneous unit because the structure of oppression varies across different tribal communities.Women in civic society are divided by caste, varna, and class, with enormous social barriers between them.While tribal communities are formally outside civic society, it is not accurate to say that they have no relation or connection with it.Many tribal communities have been integrated into civic society.There can be tribal communities outside the civic society and tribal communities within it.How these communities treat their women and what perceptions civic society holds of tribal women affect the lives of tribal women, and this is the focus of the present study.

Sexuality: 'Realities' and Perceptions

Historically, upper-caste and upper-class men have considered women from lower and tribal communities as their property.Consequently, men from lower-caste, Dalit, and tribal communities experience both physical (labour) and sexual exploitation within social and economic hierarchies.To illustrate this, the narrative songs *Bettada Chamundi* and *Gangee Gauri Haadu* were selected.Only the opening sections of these songs are analysed.

In *Bettada Chamundi* (Rajasekhar P. K., 1992, pp. 1–45), Chamundi returns from hunting and goes to bathe in a stream to wash her bloodstained body.After bathing, she sits with her head exposed to sunlight.Nanjunda, who arrives there, is captivated by her and insists that she sit with him. She initially refuses, but after repeated insistence and because she has no parents, Chamundi yields to him.

In *Gangee Gauri Haadu* (Kapase Revappa, 2000, pp. 185–187), Shiva sets out to fetch Ganga, insisting that she accompany him.Although she protests, saying, "Our father is alive, our mother is alive", Shiva falsely claims that he has no wife and forcibly takes Ganga away.

As Chamundi sat quietly, Nanjunda, from an upper caste came running toward her, roughly 'grabbed the front of her pearl necklace' (Rajasekhara P.K., ed., 1972, p. 30), and insisted that she live with him. Similarly, Shiva urges Ganga, a girl from the Besta (fishing) community who is plucking flowers, to come with him. When she protests, saying, *"I too have a family; my mother would scold me, my father would beat me"* (Revappa Kapase, ed., 2000, p. 186), he replies, "let your father scold, let your father beat, but come soon to me" (p. 186), thus coercing her.Such depictions of upper-caste, upper-class men forcing women from lower communities and tribal groups into sexual acts, and the helpless submission of those women, are found in abundance in folk and tribal songs and stories.These examples serve as evidence of the sexual violence perpetrated by upper-caste and upper-class men against Shudra, Dalit, and tribal women in India.

Simultaneously, the repeated narration and performance of such stories among lower and tribal communities suppress the potential for resistance among both women and men in these groups.Caste, class, and gender-based hierarchies constantly undermine their self-confidence to imagine alternative, egalitarian systems within their societies.

They create in them a sense that "they are forever subordinate, deprived of freedom, and born to submit to the desires of the privileged. *"* Thus, the stories and songs prevalent among lower and tribal communities, while testifying to the sexual violence inflicted by upper-caste and upper-class men, also perpetuate a persistent fear of the oppressors.

Between the two forces - the oppression exerted by upper-caste, upper-class men and the fear of them that lives within the oppressed–the latter operates more powerfully.This is because upper-caste, upper-class men are the creators and enforcers of social laws.Therefore, understanding the structure of oppression, identifying oppressors, and recognising the mechanisms through which exploitation operates in a caste- and class-stratified society is extremely difficult.The themes and content of the songs and narratives of the lower and tribal communities, which exist within and in relation to such a complex social order, generate and sustain a deep, living fear of the upper-caste and upper-class world.

How did the lower castes and tribal communities respond to the process by which the upper castes and elite groups subjected them to sexual exploitation in the name of moral and social codes? Are there examples in folk and tribal literature where such communities devised counterstrategies to protect themselves from these processes?How should we interpret narratives in which a woman, through resistance or strategic defiance, protects her existence and reclaims her dignity on her own terms?Similarly, what meanings can be derived from narratives portraying a woman's solitary struggle against sexual violence?All these aspects require careful consideration.

In this context, the story **"Korati Kanchiya Kathe"** (as compiled by Hanur, 1998, pp. 140–143) is analysed.A brief summary of the story is as follows:

Korati Kanchi goes beyond the hill to gather firewood. Narayana Swami arrives and tries to coerce her into a sexual relationship. Kanchi replies, "I am Korra Kanchi, you cannot touch me." However, when he insists on sexual favours, she says she must first go home to serve gruel to her husband.Narayana Swami states that he cannot trust that she will return.At that moment, Korati Kanchi takes his signet ring as a token of assurance and leaves, promising to return.However, instead of returning to him, Korati Kanchi goes straight to Narayana Swami's wife, **Malakshmi Amma**, dresses her in her (Kanchi's) own clothes and ornaments, gives her the signet ring that Narayana Swami had given her, and sends her to the spot beyond the hill where Narayana Swami is waiting.Mistaking Malakshmi Amma, who brings the signet ring for Korati Kanchi,NarayanaSwamihas sex with her.

While engaged in her daily chores, managing household duties, carrying a bundle of firewood for her family's needs, climbing over the hill to Maguddi, gathering and chopping wood, Korati Kanchi is approached by Narayana Swami, who invites her to engage in sexual relations. Referring to the hierarchical order created by the Vedic seers, she replies, "You are Narayana Swami, born of that order, and I am Korra Kanchi. You cannot eat the food I have cooked" (neevu Narayanaswamy embaru, naakorrakanchiembavalu). naakottasunnavaneevaruthinnabardu) (p. 140), thus gently rejecting his sexual invitation.Kanchi understands well the politics underlying the desire of the upper castes, upper classes, and privileged groups to cross the caste and varna boundaries they themselves created.Their urge to transgress these boundaries is not a permanent impulse but a momentary one, driven only by sexual desire. The consequences

of such extramarital relations, however, fall entirely on the woman, for by the natural structure of her body she alone bears the burden of motherhood. The upper-caste or upper-class man, after such a relationship, denies paternity; at best, he may provide some food or clothing for the child, but this act in no way delivers social justice either to the mother or to the child.Hence, upper-caste, upper-class men easily invite women from lower castes and tribal communities into sexual relationships. Korati Kanchi, however, wisely and cautiously rejects such an invitation.

It is worth noting that the woman Narayana Swami desires, Korati Kanchi, is a married woman.In contrast, Chamundi (whom Nanjunda invites) and Gange (whom Shiva invites) are both unmarried.When Kanchi says, "It is time for my man to return, I shall serve him gruel and return" (p. 141), she indirectly but clearly affirms that she is married.Among women of the upper castes, upper classes, and the middle strata of caste and class, marriage provides a form of protection from the lustful gaze of other men.If an upper-caste or upper-class man desires a married woman from his own or a similar social stratum, he is seen as a violator, a Duryodhana, a Ravana, or like the Station Master of *Kadlimatti* or Sangya's tragic pursuer in *Sangyabalya.*

However, marriage does not provide such protection to women from lower castes and tribal communities.The episode of Narayana Swami inviting the married Korati Kanchi to a sexual relationship stands as evidence of this harsh social truth.

The poem takes a new turn at the point where Korati Kanchi, who had said she would go home to serve gruel to her husband, is told by Narayana Swami, "I don't trust that you'll come back" (p. 141). He gives her his signet ring as a pledge and extracts a promise from her to return to him. Taking the ring, Korati Kanchi does not go home to prepare gruel for her husband. Instead, she goes directly to Narayana Swami's wife, **Malakshmi Amma**, and says:

Take this signet ring in your hand,
Put on my clothes,
Wear my ornaments,
Take this basket and carry it on your head,
Climb this hill
Your husband is waiting there
Go and meet him.(p. 141)

Korati Kanchi does not directly tell Malakshmi Amma that her husband is lustful. Rather, she makes Malakshmi Amma wear her own garments and ornaments, gives her the signet ring that Narayana Swami had given her, and sends her to the hill where Narayana Swami is waiting to receive her. Narayana Swami, failing to recognize his own wife in Korati Kanchi's guise, mistakes her for Korati Kanchi and unites with her.

Unlike Draupadi, Korati Kanchi does not pray to a divine man to come and save her; nor does she taunt her powerless husband, as Draupadi did, for his inability to protect her. Like Sita, who was imprisoned by another man's lust and later rescued by Rama, Kanchi's husband does not rush to save her.Significantly, Korati Kanchi never informs her husband that Narayana Swami had tried to seduce her; she feels no need to do so.Even if she had, it would have changed nothing because her husband, as a man

from a lower caste, lacked the social standing to confront an upper-caste man like Narayana Swami.Therefore, by saying she must serve gruel to her husband, a deliberate falsehood, she goes to Malakshmi Amma, makes her wear her clothes, and sends her to Narayana Swami.Thus, rather than confronting the upper-caste man directly, Korati Kanchi employs a clever counter-strategy to save herself from sexual violence.Her act is not merely a momentary solution to the situation; it serves as a subtle yet powerful warning, ensuring that Narayana Swami would never again look at her with a lustful gaze.

Another notable aspect is Malakshmi Amma's participation: a woman from an upper-caste background assists a tribal woman. In a rigidly hierarchical social system divided by caste, varna, and class, such direct intervention is extraordinary and rare.In the Indian caste-based society, rules often dictate who may touch what or whom.Here, Malakshmi Amma not only accepts Korati Kanchi's garments and ornaments but also steps across social and caste boundaries to act on her behalf.The tale illustrates that one woman can prevent sexual violence against another woman.

Korati Kanchi, though a tribal woman, is not helpless. She demonstrates complete control over her body and mind within a patriarchal and caste-stratified society.Stories in which women transcend caste barriers, listen to each other's distress, and offer protection or strategize solutions, highlight the potential for solidarity and collective empowerment among women.This narrative exemplifies *sisterhood*.Despite systemic oppression and social hierarchies, women can exercise agency, create strategies to resist sexual violence, and support each other in ways that bypass rigid controls of a patriarchal, caste-bound society.

If the story of *Korati Kanchi* narrates the struggle and triumph of a tribal woman who frees herself from the sexual violence of an upper-caste man, the narrative song *"Ganda Bandan Henge Maadalo"* ("What do I do, my Husband is back?") Krishnamurthy Hanur (1998, pp. 62–63) tells a different kind of story–that of a tribal woman who, by her own choice, secretly maintains a relationship with another man without her husband's knowledge.

The summary of the song is as follows: a married tribal woman has a lover.One day, while she is with her lover, her husband arrives unexpectedly. To conceal her secret affair at all costs, she devises a quick and clever plan. She gives her lover her own sari, blouse, and bangles, asking him to wear them and become her. She then places him in the household shrine, smears sacred ash on his forehead, and puts neem leaves in his mouth. Introducing the disguised lover to her unsuspecting husband as the goddess *Ellavva Devi* or *Ucchangi Ellavva*, she urges him to bow before the deity and pray for offspring. Unaware of the deception, the husband prostrates himself before the man in disguise, earnestly praying for the gift of offspring. Meanwhile, the startled lover, terrified by the unexpected turn of events, nervously gazes at his beloved woman's husband from the corner of his eye.

In the inner world of this song's heroine, there is no place for the moral value of chastity (*pativratya*). She lives within a social system that glorifies such ideals, yet her life runs contrary to it.Her secret relationship with another man remains hidden because she lives under the pressures of that system.When the unexpected happens, her husband's

sudden arrival, she responds not with guilt or repentance but with wit and agility, transforming the entire situation through her presence of mind:

Wear the sari I'm wearing, my dear,
Put on the blouse I've worn,
Adorn yourself with my bangles,
Hold a piece of firewood in your hand,
Go stand straight in the shrine of the gods,
Sing softly, even a little prayer tune,
Smear sacred ash on your forehead,
And put neem leaves in your mouth. (pp. 62–63)

In this way, the woman transforms her lover into a female deity.In Indian social systems, concepts such as God, religion, or divinity are rarely questioned or subjected to scrutiny, whether one belongs to an urban/patriarchal society or to tribal communities outside it.Both groups valorise and divine-ize husbands.The tribal woman's actions are highly strategic; she uses this social process of divinisation to protect herself with intelligence and skill.

In folk and tribal narratives such as *"AsalajatiHennu"*, *"Sampige TeneyantaHuduga"*, *"ChandruGi", and "Giddapori"* (thickly woven jasmine), and in plays like *Sangyabalya*, heroines who engage in relationships with men other than their husbands are socially punished.In contrast, in the narrative song under analysis, the heroine punishes neither herself nor others.

The song continues:

Husband oh, husband,
We were supposed to go to Ellavva,
Ucchangi Ellavva
Has herself come and stood there.
Husband oh, husband,
Pray for the gift of children.
A true husband,
prostrates and prays,
and the Mindayya (one having an extra marital affair)
Steals a sidelong glance

Remarkably, in this patriarchal society, a potentially grave situation is transformed into a moment of humour.Throughout the poem, no moral voice labels the married woman's sexual relationship with another man as immoral, obscene, or shameful.The physical and spiritual significance typically assigned to the "husband" is deliberately set aside in this case. In doing so, the conventional marital framework is subverted.In the inner world of this tribal woman, the husband is not seen as a divine figure, nor is there any place for pativrata ideals or marital norms in the relationship.However, because she lives within a patriarchal social system, she performs as if she adheres to those values while internally mocking and subverting them. When her husband unexpectedly arrives, she immediately dresses her lover in Jogamma's clothes and symbolically calls him *Ellamma, Ucchangi Ellamma.*

It is significant that in most folk narratives about Ellamma, she is portrayed as having opposed marriage. For example, she tells Parashurama, "I have no husband; you have no father" (M.S. Sunkapur, 1977, p. 35), or songs might celebrate her as the ultimate power, independent of marital or patriarchal ties: "She has seperated the husband and wife!She has resolved the differences and shed stubbornness; separated the husband and wife, hung a bag of *bhandara,* walked on earth; the primordial power is you, Ellamma" (pp. 72–89). These narratives demonstrate that Ellamma rejects the husband-wife model and patriarchal authority.By using the image of this goddess in the moment of confrontation, the tribal woman symbolically denies and subverts both the husband and the institution of marriage, cleverly safeguarding herself from sexual violence and from societal control.

It is necessary to analyse how folk and tribal narratives have represented the *Bēda* (hunter) woman and what kinds of perceptions about tribal women such representations construct.For this analysis, the *Īra Baappa* narrative song was chosen. Īra Baappa appears in this song as the leader of the *Golla* (cowherd) community. The main conflict in this song is between the *Golla* and *Bēda* communities.Because of a deceit committed by a *Bēda a* girl named Obamma, ĪraBaappa heroically dies on the battlefield.

In this narrative song, the sections beginning with *"Īrannanadattigesūleolidāle"* (the prostitute's gaze has captured iranna's house) and *"Muttayyanammakuchagala"* (Hold our breasts) (pp. 35, 41) contain a continuous flow of social perceptions of the sexuality of the *Bēda* woman.Hence, only these two sections were selected for analysis.Armed with a silver spear and accompanied by his hunting dog, ĪraBaappa goes to the fields.Seeing him go alone with his dog, Obamma, the *Bēda* girl follows him. As she follows him, several people stop her and ask where she is going. She openly replies that she is going to see ĪraBaappa.When she reaches him, she loosens her blouse, approaches him, and says

"Hunter girl has loosened her bodice!

She has taken hold of the end of the sari!

O Golla Īra, look at our breasts!"

To this, ĪraBaappa responds, "If I touch your breasts, it will bring disgrace; our words will be in vain, Obamma, go back home."But Obamma "Enters the buffalo pen, enters the snake pit", and persists that she would come to him. Finally, when he tells her, "Hunter Obamma, the children of Harti are like our siblings, you are like a little sister to us," she rejects this kinship by saying, "We have no such brotherhood." When he offers her help"I will give you an ox; you can work and eat."She refuses and invites him to her bed.

While ĪraBaappa is busy watering the oxen, she deliberately stands before him, loosens her blouse again, and repeats: "O Golla Īra, look at our breasts."(Kara. Kr%. SaC., 1963, p. 35). Thus, tribal women are represented as lustful beings, sexually available, and easily accessible to men.Whenever they see a strong, healthy, wealthy young man, they disrobe and invite him to pleasure.The *Bēda* girl invites him saying, "O Golla Īra, look at our breasts, moments of peaceful sleep is enough, Come, my lord, to our palace". (pp. 35–36)

To this, ĪraBaappa anxiously replies, "You go back to your palace, if my mother sees this she will scold me."In the moral order created by society, ĪraBaappa's behaviour is regulated by the fear of his mother and the community. However, the *Bēda* girl has no such fears.Civic society, especially the patriarchal culture within it, has created perceptions of tribal women as lustful and shameless.Although ĪraBaappa himself belongs to a tribal community, the *Gollas'* profession of cattle-rearing is closely allied with agrarian life. Hence, they assimilated into the settled village society.However, the *Bēda'* occupation remained tied to the forest; they continued to be forest dwellers.Thus, two distinct worlds came into being: the world of the village and the world of the forest.

To the villagers, the forest dwellers were strangers, possessing strange temperaments and peculiar mentalities. The patriarchal societies within the villages, which already held distorted notions about the bodies and minds of their own women and female relatives, constructed even more fantastic and perverse notions about the women living in the forests, far from their villages.Hence, we find representations such as

"She loosened her bodice
The hunter girl caught hold of her sari end,
O Golla Īra, look at our breasts,
moments of peaceful sleep is enough."

Such imagery reveals the deep-rooted social imagination that portrays the *Bēda* woman as the embodiment of unrestrained sexuality and moral transgression.The narrative also contains another episode worth noting in *ĪraBaappa's* story.

When Īrabaappa says,

Bedas of the Harti are our siblings
You are our younger sister, go away
….
The bedas of the hill are our brothers
You are our sister go away
Obamma says,
Oh Golla Ira, we have no kings
Come home to our palace
…
Ohgolla Ira we have none called husbands
Walk home to our palace (karakrsam 1963, pg 45)

If Īrabaappa speaks of kinship in terms of father-child, elder-younger brother, or sister, Obamma rejects such relations altogether, saying that in her community, where there are no husbands, there can be no brothers, fathers, or sisters either.The patriarchal society of the upper castes and classes, which legitimises the caste hierarchy, perceives the lower and tribal communities as people without families.Relationships such as husband and wife, brother and sister, father and daughter, and mother and son are considered exclusive property. They believe that only marriages solemnised according to scriptural norms are true marriages, and only the relationships born of such marriages

are genuine familial bonds.Since the lower and tribal communities were deemed untouchable, not only were individuals from those communities rendered untouchable, but their collective conduct, moral codes, and familial relations were also considered impure.Thus, strong prejudices developed against their family structures and social customs were developed.Moreover, the upper-caste, upper-class society treated the lower and tribal communities as its property.These communities were identified as servants and slaves, as movable property that could be transferred or sent anywhere.

Moreover, in the upper-caste and upper-class conception of marriage, the husband owns his wife and children as his property. Consequently, for the men of lower or tribal communities, already regarded as the property of upper-caste men, relations such as husband-wife, father-daughter, or brother-sister could not exist in a legitimate or social sense. Therefore, women belonging to tribal communities, such as the *Bēda*s, do not look at men through the lens of kinship - brother, uncle, father, or cousin.Rather, the perception that *Bēda* women view men through the lens of lust and sexuality pervades the *Îrabaappa Kathana Gīte* (Ballad of Îrabaappa).

Another important aspect to note here is that all the women of the *Bēda* community are identified as prostitutes, yet none of them are *dâsis* dedicated to the gods.Nowhere in the *Īrabaappa Kathana Gīte* do we find references suggesting the existence of a *devadāsi* tradition. Though she says, "I toil for my food by herding cattle," Obammaburning with sexual yearningdeclares, "We have no men of our own; the Golla's Īra and Naeyaiah are the ones for our palace."This reveals that the entire *Bēda* community has been perceived as sexual commodities.

Although both Îra, the Golla, and Obamma, the *Bēda* woman, belong to tribal communities, their social positions are different.As discussed earlier, Îra's occupation of animal husbandry was integral to the agrarian civic society, whereas Obamma's community, whose livelihood depended on forest life, remained outside it.Therefore, tribal communities cannot be seen as a homogeneous whole; they differ among themselves and contain internal hierarchies.Thus, one cannot generalise the familial or social status of tribal women as though they all form a single category.

The three narrative ballads discussed above - *KorātiKanciya Kathe* (The Story of KorātiKanchi), *Ganda BandanhengeMāalo* (What shall I do? The husband is back.), and *Îrabaappa Kathana Gîte* (The Ballad of Īrabaappa)–each construct different social perceptions of tribal women's sexuality.Although KorâtiKanchi is a married woman, her marital status does not protect her from the sexual gaze of other men.The heroine of *Ganda BandanhengeMāalo*, though living in a marriage-centred society, defies all the values of marital fidelity through her own life.In Ī*rabaappa Kathana Gīte*, Obamma and the women of her community are represented as sexual beings, or prostitutes.One woman is portrayed as one who exercises agency and control over her body; another as one who freely uses her sexuality according to her own will; and yet another as one who rejects all kin relations–father, brother, uncle–and views all men as objects of sexual desire.These three ballads together reveal how women of different tribal communities are perceived differently by those within the civic/agrarian society and those outside it.

Motherhood and Barrenhood

Many tribal communities, like the urban and agrarian ones, call women who

cannot bear children a *banje* (barren).The term *banje* defines womanhood as incomplete and deficient, while implying that man is a complete being.Across communities, while there are words to identify a woman as "barren", there are no equivalent terms to describe a man's infertility.

In many tribal societies, if a couple has no children, the woman is held responsible, and the man is permitted to marry again.Thus, like women in the urban world, tribal women turn to rituals, magic, and spiritual healers in their yearning for motherhood.Some even unite with other men.

Scholars have often interpreted such women as having violated the ideal of *pativratya* (chastity or wifely fidelity).For instance, studies of *Madeshwara Kavya,* where Sankavve of the Soliga community unites with Madesha and bears children, have read her action as a transgression of *pativratya* values. As H.C. Boralingayya (1995, pp. 60–63) observes, "When a woman seeks liberation, man begins to fortify the fences of control.What emerges here is a conflict between the needs and denials of a transforming society, a clash of desires and repressions, and a struggle between the values of freedom and *wifely fidelity*. This moment becomes significant as an act that transcends *pativratya* by disregarding the patriarchal virtue of chastity."

Gayatri Navada (1997, p. 126), however, interprets Sankamma differently. She writes, "Sankamma's longing should not be viewed as a breach of chastity, nor her relationship with Madesha as immoral. Without any inner turmoil, she seeks Madesha, attains the boon of motherhood, responds truthfully to her husband Neelayya's questions, accepts the divine trials of chastity he imposes on her with the same courage, and emerges victorious. This redefines and reconstructs the established notions of *pativratya* and chastity."

Therefore, women like Sankavve must be analysed differently. Did they consciously cross the patriarchal *Lakshmana Rekha of the pativratya?*Or was there another force that compelled them to break these boundaries?This requires careful examination.

For such analysis, I take as my primary source the section on Sankavve from *Maleya Madeshwarana Mahakavya,* collected by Keshavan Prasad. In this narrative, before her husband Neelagowda speaks of going to *Hejjenu Male* (the sacred hill), Sankavve confides in him about the humiliation and ridicule she faces within the family and society because of his infertility.

When Neelagowda's journey to *Hejjenu Male* becomes inevitable, he is deeply troubled by two thoughts:

1.His inability to have children.

2.Since he lives separately from the joint family, his wife will be left alone during his absence.

Therefore, he insists that Sankavve take an oath of *pativratya* before he departs for the war.However, Sankavve resists, asking, "If I give you the oath of fidelity, what will become of my *pativrata dharma*? Husband, I will certainly not take such an oath."Despite Neelagowda's physical violence, Sankavve remains firm in her decision to not marry.

The episode in which Neelagowda compels Sankavve to take the *pativrata* vow (pp. 148–178) highlights two central aspects: 1. Neelagowda's obsession with having his own children through his wife. 2. The latent yearning for motherhood within Sankavve, who refuses the *pativratya* vow.

In *Malemadeshwara Kavya*, Sankavve says, *"If I give my right-hand vow as a barren woman, then my truth itself will become false."* It is necessary to ask: what is this *truth* that would become false if she gave a vow of chastity, and why does she say this? In society, once a person gives their *right-hand vow* (balagaibhāche), they are bound to it for life. This is why Neelagowda insists that his wife, Sankavve, give him the right-hand vow before he leaves.However, Sankavve, despite her desperation to escape the curse of barrenness, refuses to do so.

To understand this, one must also examine the episode in which Madesha comes to Sankavve.Madesha frees Sankavve from the magical bondage imposed by Neelagowda and blesses her with prosperity. After helping her so generously, Madesha wishes to see her face again.However, Sankavve does not appear before him. When she refuses to come out, Madesha deliberately asks, *"Are there children in the house?"* The very mention of children makes Sankavve collapse to the ground and cry out, *"I am a barren woman without children!"* (p.121). Madesha's sarcastic question pierces her deeply; humiliated by his words, she falls at his feet and pleads with him to grant her children. She vows to offer hundreds of pledges, serve at his temple for forty-two days, and make numerous offerings if he frees her from her barrenness.

Madesha did not yield at first. Only when Sankavve promises, *"If you give me twin children, I will make offerings to your shrine"* (p.252), does he consent to bless her with children. Sankavve must have already known that she could not bear children through her husband, Neelagowda.Hence, before his return, she urges Madesha to bless her with children.Before the social curse of barrenness, the value of *pativratya* (chastity or fidelity) is meaningless.Even when Madesha reminds her of her husband and her marital vows, Sankavve pays no heed. She openly declares, *"I will speak the truth, that it was Madesha who gave me these children."*She knows that the life that follows will not be easy, yet the social stigma of barrenness troubles her more deeply than any personal hardship.First and foremost, she seeks children.

However, Madesha retains authority over the children he grants and gives Sankavve the *pindaprasada* (sacred offering). It is important to note here that Sankavve does not unite with Madesha out of love or sexual desire. Nor is she driven by revenge for the cruelty her husband inflicted.Her union with Madesha is motivated purely by her wish to be released from the curse of barrenness.For this reason, she relinquishes her right over the children born from that union.If Sankavve's yearning were simply a maternal instinct, she would not have given up her claim to the children.Thus, her union with Madesha cannot be regarded as a violation of chastity or an act driven by carnal desire.Her struggle to free herself from barrenness cannot be interpreted solely as a rebellion against *pativratya* or as an expression of maternal longing.

Sankavve faced only two choices: 1. To uphold *pativratya* and endure the curse of barrenness, or 2. to abandon *pativratya* and be freed from their barrenness.

Had she chosen the first, she would have condemned herself to living with a co-wife brought in by Neelagowda under the pretext of continuing the lineage. In such

a predicament, barren women receive neither sympathy from their families nor support from society. Choosing the second option, however, would liberate her from the social humiliation of being childless.Sankavve's union with another man and the birth of her children remain a secret known only to her, Madesha, and perhaps her husband.If a husband publicly denied the paternity of his wife's children, he would bring disgrace upon himself and his family.

Even when Sankavve remained faithful, Neelagowda did not treat her with love or trust. Hence, whether she maintained chastity or broke it made little difference to her life.Within the four walls of her home, she could not escape her husband's violence, and if she did, the patriarchal society would never deem such escape virtuous.Women like her also find no refuge in their parents' homes.A woman who breaks the domestic frame cannot easily survive in society.However, by freeing herself from barrenness, she can at least escape social humiliation.Therefore, Sankavve must have deliberately chosen the second option, which was a wise choice.Her primary aim was not to transgress the bounds of *pativratya* but to attain liberation from the curse of barrenness.

Social and Cultural Empowerment

This study seeks to examine gender relations within tribal communities by analysing two oral narrative songs.These narrative songs reveal how gender systems are structured within tribal societies and how these structures influence women's familial and social status.

It is not possible to analyse the empowerment of tribal women merely by focusing on certain practices or values that appear to be women-centric or emancipatory.Such analyses fail to uncover the real conditions of the lives of tribal women.For this purpose, the section "Sinnamma's Test of Chastity" (SinnammanSatvaparikshe Sandu) from JunjappaMahakavya (Chaluvaraju, 1997, pp.186–244) was chosen for analysis.

"They are widowed even if husband dies
They are widows on the day Krishna died
If a woman becomes pregnant after her husband's death,
She is cast out as impure.
She may still hold the kalasa (ritual pot),
She may still wear turmeric and vermilion,
She may still wear flowers on her hair.
The tali (mangalsutra) is not removed,
Nor are her toe rings or bangles taken off." (p.216)

If we take these lines to mean that women's lives are liberated, or that, except for one day of widowhood, the rest of their lives as sumangalis (married women whose husbands are alive) reject male dominance, or that widows in the Golla community live better than Brahmin widows of caste society, such claims would only serve to mask the realities of oppression.The lines quoted above–"On the day Krishna died, they become widows; if a woman becomes pregnant after her husband's death, she is cast out"–reveal another aspect of Golla women's lives.Even if they wear vermilion and turmeric on other days, they cannot escape being a widow, at least for one day. Except for that

single day, though they continue to wear auspicious symbols, they must live as loyal wives to their dead husbands. If they lose that loyalty, they are expelled from both the family and the community.The entire episode of Sinnamma's Test of Chastity exposes the deeply oppressive conditions of Golla women's existence.

> "Once the sun sets,
> A woman having born in the Golla community
> She must stay within the confines of her house.
> —
> If a woman spends even one night outside the house in the village means,
> That she has become impure,
> And that she has become of another caste,
> And they never allow her back into the house, oh dear.
> May this custom continue
> As long as the earth and moon exist.
> I swear before our ancestor Junjappa
> Like I got my grandpa
> Build a hut for nursing baby
> So shall they build
> For all of the golla girls
> …
> "A menstruating girl must stay outside the village in a hut for sixteen days.
> After burning that hut, she may be taken inside.
> A new mother must stay in a hut till her impurity is over.
> Women who have given birth
> Must remain outside for five panchamis (fifth day of the lunar calendar)
> after the fifth day of birth.
> After that, they may re-enter the village
> Thus blessed Junjappa." (pp.206–207)

Women must stay indoors after sunset; spending even one night outside the village leads to excommunication from the community.A woman in childbirth is considered impure and must live in a temporary hut until she is cleansed.A menstruating girl must live in an isolated hut outside the village for 16 days and then burn it before re-entering.Newly delivered mothers must remain in such huts for five days after childbirth before returning to their homes.

These practices reveal the oppressive dimensions of women's lives.The tendency to regard natural biological processes, such as menstruation and childbirth, as forms of impurity is not confined to upper or middle castes; it exists within tribal societies as well.By exercising control over the female body and mind, patriarchal systems deprive women of self-ownership.This tendency is equally visible among lower-caste and tribal communities.

Is labour Economic Empowerment?

A Golla woman can stay outside until the sun sets.However, such freedom does not exist for women of the upper caste and class, or even the middle caste and class.They are bound by the *Ghosha* system. Imprisoned within four walls for twenty-four hours, sunlight never touches their bodies. Even in today's so-called modern age, many women remain trapped in such dreadful domestic confinement due to patriarchal structures.However, this does not mean that the condition of Golla women, who can remain outside until sunset, is any better than that of upper-class or middle-class women.I assume that most tribal women engage in the labour necessary for family survival under the instruction and control of the men in their communities is my assumption.

To clarify this assumption, let us analyze a section from Junjappa's '*Satvapariksheya Sandu.*' Sinnamma, crushed by poverty, must work to feed her children. One of her sons, seven-year-old Junjappa, instructs her as follows:

Dear, Hiriyur Market is 30 km away
Cut and take a bundle of firewood
There you will find a Komtigashetti
He will ask you to supply wood for three coins
Don't sell for more
—
Give the wood for 3 coins
Buy salt and chilli for one coin
Buy beetle and arecanut for you
Buy one measure of raw peanut
Just buy these and come back
We do not need anything more, he said (pp. 199–200)

When Sinnamma, unwilling to sell the firewood for such a low price, says to the merchant, "It's worth four coins, sir, and you ask for just three" (p. 200), Junjappa becomes angry for disobeying his words.He curses her, not caring for her blistered feet, and says her trade will fail. When Sinnamma pleads, "I was wrong to go against you; I'll sell it for the price you said," Junjappa lifts the curse, allowing her business to continue.This entire process of Sinnamma going out to work reveals the condition of Golla women in the village. It is her seven-year-old son who dictates what she must do outside, how much the firewood should be sold for, to whom she must sell it, and what she must buy with the earnings. The responsibility of maintaining the household rests on Sinnamma, but she does not become the key decision-maker in the family.This is because the Golla community is structured around male dominance. The absent father's authority is assumed by the son, Junjappa. Although Sinnamma tries to disobey her son, she ultimately fails.She apologises for breaking his command.It is natural for one who fails in her task to apologise and obey the one who dictates the rules.But the key point is that Sinnamma's defeat is not because of her son's power or any miracle he performs. Her helplessness and subordination are products of patriarchal values embedded in her community. She has no rights over her own labour. She cannot decide what to do with the money she earns - what to buy, whether to save or not. These decisions are not hers.

Sinnamma's subordination and helplessness do not represent her individual weakness alone; she stands as a representative of all Golla women. Therefore, her subjugation symbolises the collective subordination of women in the Golla community.

Socially, culturally, and domestically subordinated, the Golla woman may remain outside until sunset, but that does not make her free or empowered.Being outside during the day does not mean that she goes where she pleases.She stays where her community's social order instructs her to be, performing the tasks that men assign to her.Thus, the Golla woman's mobility is not a sign of freedom or choice but of compulsion.There is no freedom or agency, only instruction and command.Her outwards, day-long movements are also regulated and controlled by the men of her community.

Tribal Woman: A Male Perspective

Boralingayya, who conducted an in-depth study of the HalakkiOkkaliga community, expresses the following opinion about the gender relations within it: "Within the inner world of the Halakki people's stories and songs, a gentle conflict between man and woman can be seen. In almost all such instances, it is the woman who ultimately triumphs - this is noteworthy." (Boralingayya H.C., 2002, p. 73)

Naik also observes: "It would be wrong to call Halakki women helpless. In terms of labour, they have surpassed men and this is no exaggeration."(Naik N.R., 1993, p. 48)Both these scholars have glorified Halakki Okkaliga women. Many scholars seem particularly interested in portraying women from lower and tribal communities as possessing a strong social foundation.Using the narratives of such women, they reinterpret them according to their ideological leanings and attempt to depict them as empowered.However, there is a need to *reanalyse* such analyses and *reevaluate* the conclusions drawn from them.

The thought expressed above by Boralingayya focuses mainly on the domestic relations between men and women.Although his studies centre on the social life of the Halakki Okkaligas, they do not probe deeply into the structure of gender relations within the community.

In the HalakkiOkkaliga tribal community, all adult men of the village are regular members of the *koota* (village council).Women are denied membership in the club.Each settlement or village has a *Gowda* (village head), who is assisted by messengers called *kolkāra*.Occasionally, there may also be another official called *a Māthōbaari*."The Kōlkāra performs the duty of messenger, carrying the Gowda's orders to every household."(Naik N.R., 1993, pp. 32–33)The Halakki Okkaliga community, which denies women membership in the council, is evidently a patriarchal society. Membership in the *koota* is of great importance, as these councils frame the customs, beliefs, traditions and taboos that govern the community.They shape both the domestic and social lives of the Halakki people.This process institutionalises gender hierarchies and discrimination within communities. Hence, Boralingayya's earlier assertion becomes difficult to accept.

The fact that a Halakki Okkaliga woman works hard does not automatically mean that she is *economically empowered*. When labour is directly equated with empowerment, we end up with conclusions like those of Naik. Halakki women are defined culturally, domestically, and socially within a patriarchal framework.Therefore,

it is not adequate to evaluate her empowerment solely on the basis of her work.One must understand the *nature* of this labour.

In this community, it is the woman's duty to collect firewood and other household necessities.She assists men in carrying manure to the fields.Tasks such as transplanting paddy, weeding, and pounding rice are considered women's work, but ploughing the land is not."In the HalakkiOkkaliga community, all women's tasks are aligned with the expectations of a male-dominated society. Ploughing is regarded as a man's work, while transplanting, weeding, and pounding rice are seen as women's work."(Bhat L.G., 1988, p. 38)

The division of labour based on gender in this community arises from prejudices tied to the biological differences between men and women.The notions of *weak* and *strong* are social prejudices inherited from patriarchal society.Tasks such as collecting firewood or pounding rice do not yield visible economic income.When a woman works in someone else's field transplanting paddy, weeding, or carrying manure, she earns a small wage.However, it is necessary to ask whether she truly has any control over that income. Often, as seen in the story of Junjappa and his mother Sinnamma, it is the men in the Golla or Halakki communities who decide how the woman's earnings are spent.

Scholars such as Boralingayya and Naik express great affection, respect, and concern for tribal women.However, studies arising from such affection often *glorify* tribal women's activities, labour, and intelligence.In most such analyses, women's intelligence, agency, and freedom operate *within* the limits set by the patriarchal system. Her so-called independence is defined according to male expectations.

Therefore, while narratives that celebrate the tribal woman's agency and strength are important, equal importance must be given to narratives that expose her oppression.When these two strands - glorification and exploitation–are separated and studied in isolation, conclusions such as those mentioned above become inevitable.In such a situation, women from lower castes and tribal communities, who are already marginalised, risk further invisibility: the glorification of their labour and resilience can obscure the violence - both domestic and societal–that they continue to face. Recognising these dangers, gender relations within tribal societies must be analysed with greater critical attention.

The Tribal Woman in Feminist Thought

Many feminist thinkers believe that images and archetypes of feminine power (*strî-úakti*) exist in tribal cultures. Gayatri Nawad writes:"Indian feminist thought must search for the feminine power icons and archetypes expressed in folk and oral traditions and in matriarchal tribal cultures. Only by understanding such diverse models of women's narratives can an Indian feminism be built."(Gayatri Nawad 1997, p. 13)

Women's histories have rarely been recorded, and this work certainly needs to be undertaken.However, this does not mean that a *nonexistent* history must be invented. Many feminists, eager to prove that women were not always weak but were once powerful, have shown particular interest in the sources related to tribal women, oral traditions, rituals, and practices.This is because tribal cultures are often regarded as remnants of ancient matriarchal systems.

However, in such explorations, only those aspects that highlight female power are selected, while other elements are conveniently excluded. Feminists often define "woman" as a single, universal category, framing all women within their own caste or class as the problems of all women. By doing so, they find solutions suited to their social positions.

At the same time, by highlighting evidence of feminine power in tribal cultures, they argue that women once possessed a strong and glorious past, and by contrasting that with the present, they seek to prove that the current condition of women's oppression is the result of a long-standing patriarchal system. Upper-caste, upper-class, and middle-class women often use the image of the tribal woman to articulate and validate their own feminist positions. Consequently, the real issues and lived experiences of tribal women rarely find expression in feminist studies. Rather than building Indian feminism by merely appropriating the narrative models of female power found in tribal cultures, feminist theories capable of analysing the gender relations within tribal societies themselves are needed.

Thinkers such as Gayatri Nawada, Sandhya Reddy and R.Sunandamma, Shalini Raghunath, and Leela Sampige, when studying folk literature and ritual practices, often interpret tribal women as being free from bondageand beyond oppression.However, all these scholars belong to the upper or middle castes.Though these women have stepped out into the public world owing to modern education and employment, historically, women of their own castes lived under severe domestic confinement.Therefore, for upper- and middle-caste women, tribal women who have long led mobile and outdoor lives appear to be independent and empowered.To them, it must seem that while upper-caste women were wrongfully confined within the home simply because they were women, tribal women were free, strong and unbound.

However, this perception is shaped through the lens of domestic confinement. When tribal women are viewed through this lens, they appear to be liberated and powerful. However, when that lens is removed and one walks alongside them, observing their lives closely, the structures of gender-based oppression within each tribal community become clearly visible.

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