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# Development-induced dispossession: *Adivasi* existence in the milieu of contemporary Indian texts in translation

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The paradigms of development around the globe involves mechanisms associated with its social purpose, which is more often than not dubious in nature! Natural resources form the fundamental aspect of any developmental activity. But in the process of accumulating these resources, the beneficiaries often rely on malignant mechanisms. The capitalist discourse has always been successful in manifesting their agendas of development as constructive and profitable for the entire humanity. Periodically, when the utility of development is foregrounded by dominant cultural forms, often the ramifications of progress remain uncritiqued. The developmental projects earmarked for the rural population remain unnoticed, for it serves the interest of the elite and the urban middle class. Many a time, the indigenous population, who inhabit the resource rich area are swayed away by the false propaganda for development, ultimately aggravating their existing deprivation. In the case of India, too, amidst all the development activities, the marginalized populace or the so-called *Adivasis* are the worst sufferers, because they have been encountering displacement for ages. The current study attempts to unveil the displacement of the tribal population (*Adivasi*) of India due to development projects, thereby offering a critical analysis of the social policies. The study employs select translated literary narratives to examine the development-induced dispossession of tribal population in the colonial, postcolonial and neo-liberal phase of Indian history, adopting the theoretical framework of new historicism.

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## Introduction

Developmental projects frequently mediated and touted as engines of progress, often involves unrepresented intricacies and harrowing instances of social injustice. In the wake of rapid economic development and international economic contest, developmental activities have become a discourse to manifest and legitimize power and hierarchy. Many a time, development becomes a political tool involving power dynamics that showcases authoritarian excellence. However, the activities currently addressed as ‘developmental’ projects across the world impose profound and lasting consequences, that remain unnoticed or overshadowed by its glorified representation, on various social groups. One of the most pressing issues arising from development initiatives is the phenomenon of development-induced displacement and land alienation. It refers to the forced eviction or relocation of individuals, families or communities from their homes or homeland as a consequence of development projects, typically resulting in dispossession from social, cultural and economic identity. Land is undoubtedly a ubiquitous resource that enables all aspects of life possible. “All sense of value in an enterprise is rooted in the value of land. From business to warfare, the characteristics of land have the power to determine the ultimate success of the endeavour” (Yoshino and Paul 2019). The severity of the issue becomes evident when taking into account the fact that, annually in the last decade (2010–2019) alone, approximately 15 million people experienced displacement worldwide due to development (Satiroglu and Choi 2015), even though precise statistics are unclear.

Debates on the concept and inherent logic of development has been problematized by various scholars around the globe. Land acquisition in the name of development is not limited to a particular geographical area, rather it is a universal phenomenon (Terminiski 2015). Between 1947 and 1997 in India, approximately 50 million people experienced displacement due to developmental projects, with large dam alone causing the dispossession of 16 million people (Baviskar 2019). Development-induced displacement in the Indian scenario gained attention in the recent years from scholars and became a pressing issue in the neo-liberal period although its historical precedence dates back to the colonial and postcolonial period. A close reading of history would reveal the fact that various developmental activities namely dams (Nayak 2013; Baviskar 2019, Singh 2020), mining activities (Noy 2023; Das 2021; Owen and Kemp 2014; Areeparampil 1996), Special Economic Zones (Levien 2013; Paul and Sarma 2019), industrialization in India have created displacement in the name of development a recurring phenomenon. “Involuntary land acquisition and the compulsory displacement of communities for a larger ‘public purpose’ centrally capture the quandary of ‘development’ in the modern Indian state. Nominally, this quandary speaks to the need to balance the interests of the majority while protecting the rights of the minority” (Somyaji and Talwar 2011). The neo-liberal period in India witnessed wide scale land acquisition and protest against real estate, infrastructure, factories and Special Economic Zones, across the country, revising the ontology of development (Levien 2018; D’Costa and Chakraborty 2017; Ganguly 2021).

While exploring the past and the present social experiences of development, it is a widely acknowledged fact that developmental projects inflict severe havocs to the indigenous population as compared to other sections of the society. The dispossession of indigenous community in the name of various development activities is a global phenomenon (Yates 2004; Kujur et al. 2020). The statistics of indigenous displacement extends far and wide across the globe, like the displacement of indigenous population of Argentina (Kaag and Zoomers 2014), the displacement of traditional indigenous communities of Cambodia due to the state

policy of Economic Land Concessions (ELCs), the land alienation of indigenous people in the continent of Africa due to the functioning of precious stone mines (Adeola 2021) and the popular Belo Monte Dam construction in Brazil owing to the displacement of indigenous communities of the Amazon, to name a few among the myriad examples. Development-induced displacement and its subsequent impact leaves severe consequences over the livelihood, socio-cultural existence of indigenous people. For instance, the Agta community of Philippine, one of the vulnerable indigenous communities which follows hunting-gathering technique for survival are under the threat of displacement due to developmental activities, as they solely depend on the local ecosystem (Hagen and Minter 2020). “Land dispossession—the taking or using of Indigenous land without consent—has contributed to a loss of language and culture, interrupted the transmission of knowledge, and become a source of intergenerational trauma” (Ninomiya 2023).

Ironically in India, the tribal population which comprises of 8.6% of the total population constitutes more than 40% among the total population displaced by developmental activities (Baviskar 2019; Negi and Azeez 2022). Development-induced displacement posits serious challenges to the tribal population of India (Dutta et al. 2018). In the postcolonial period, the hydro-electric projects were a threat to the tribal population, displacing the indigenous community from their habitat (Baviskar 2019). Neo-liberal economic policies and industrialisation has accentuated tribal dispossession in the twenty first century (Kumar and Sahoo 2017). Capital developmentalism aiming the natural resources also posit threat to the tribal population and their subsistence economy (Kumar and Mishra 2017; Kumar and Sahoo 2019). In contemporary India, the encounter between the state and corporate capital on one hand, and the adivasis on the other, exemplifies the clash between the commodity and the non-commodity character of land (Bhattacharya et al. 2017). The relationship of tribals in India is truly remarkable that it reflects a symbiotic relationship with environment (Varughese and Mukherjee 2023), thus having a shared ecological world view (Negi and Azeez 2022). The livelihood of the tribal community depends on land and the geographical particularities (Munshi 2012) thus making them vulnerable victims of development-induced displacement. It affects the socio-cultural identity, health and education of the tribal population (Negi and Azeez 2022). Notably apart from the immediate consequences, displacement creates long-term impact on the tribal population, subjecting them to severe material and immaterial impoverishments. In this context, resistance against land alienation emerges owing to the ‘cultural genocide’, poverty and alienation resulting from expropriation of tribal lands and natural resources (Kumar and Sahoo 2017). With emerging right-consciousness and escalating deprivation of Adivasi situation, the whole logic of development and its purpose becomes problematic that a demystification is essential (Sharma 2015). However, problematisation and critique of development in the background of tribal displacement demands more academic intervention especially, interdisciplinary examinations, similar to the ongoing discussion.

It is anticipated that developmental discourse has unleashed severe damages over the various tribal population of India, irrespective of their geographical distribution in the colonial, post-colonial and neo-colonial period. Further the study detects the fact that the quest for modernity and infrastructural advancements results in inequality and social injustice, in the context of land alienation operated through the discourse of development. National literature transcends the boundaries of fictionality and endeavours not only to critique the logic of development but also to identify and expose the discourse that operates as part of the

developmental agenda. Thus, the idea of development remains an ambiguous phenomenon, in which the natural resources are being exploited, paving way to capital accumulation favouring the economically privileged while in the process, the economically backward communities become more deprived.

The proposed study adopts an interdisciplinary analysis of development-induced displacement of tribals in India and the subsequent land alienation, with the help of select literary writings in national literature particularly from Malayalam literature translated to English. Malayalam, the native language of Kerala, is recognised as a classical language by the Government of India. The study intends to demonstrate the potential of region-specific literature in broadcasting the social inequities encountered by the marginalised population. Literary representations of Adivasi actuality in Malayalam literature are notable for its diversity and resistance. The current study aims to understand how development-induced displacement have affected the tribal population of India in the colonial, post-colonial and neo-colonial period. The study endeavours to problematize the discourse of development that legitimized and favoured displacement of the Adivasi. Discourse assumes discreet devices in its operation, creating difficulty in identifying it. To overcome the difficulty, the paper adopts the theoretical framework of new historicism to unravel the objectives mentioned above.

The paper in the subsequent pages provides a brief idea of the theoretical framework of new historicism, supplemented by a discussion on the idea of developmental discourse to substantiate the theory of new historicism. Moreover, the paper discusses a brief overview of the tribal population of India and their deep connection to nature and natural resources. Subsequently it explores the development-induced displacement of tribal population of India as depicted in select literary narratives, finally concluding with the findings and suggestions.

### New historicism

New historicism, developed by Stephen Greenblatt, is a literary and cultural theory that emerged in the late twentieth century. This mode of literary analysis focuses on interpreting and understanding literary works within the broader context of historical and cultural forces, involving a reciprocal relationship between the literary text and historical circumstances. New historicism gives importance to the marginalized and the disempowered who are silenced by the power politics (Bertens 1994). To highlight the marginalised, it adopts a revisionist reading of history in the context of literary text and other cultural productions, thus critiquing the existing historical knowledge. In the process, it constitutes a critical analytical approach concentrating on the text as a locus of power dynamics (Nayar 2017). Power takes different forms while it shifts from one period to another, and the task of the new historicist is to identify the working of power in the text. New Historicist critic primarily exposes the systems and operations of power (Brannigan 1998). The task of identifying and exposition is mainly an interdisciplinary phenomenon, in which various disciplines of knowledge are scrutinized, providing opportunities for scholars to transcend the boundaries separating various disciplines (Veese 1989). Influenced by Foucauldian notions of power, new historicism identifies various discourses of power, and exposes its seemingly legitimized operation. While comprehending the tribal actuality of India through a new historicist lens, development appears as a discourse operated for the benefit of oppressive forces supported by authoritarian mechanisms. The application of new historicism in the selected texts helps in identifying the a few power structures involved in the discourse of development in India. Further, it aids in revealing the operation of the

development discourse and how it has affected the social, cultural and economic living of the Adivasi population. Hence, the concept of development as a discourse demands a brief discussion to further comprehend the ongoing discussion.

### Discourse of development

Discourse pertains to the utilization of language in spoken or written form which signifies the various forms of expressions, conventions and language patterns that give rise to distinct meanings tooted in historical and cultural context. Power is an underlying factor in the formation of discourse. Power is interlinked with knowledge and they operate parallelly, creating social realities at the micro-level. Power in terms of Foucault is not a person or institution but a web of power relations in which people and institutions are nodes in it (Ziai 2016). Similarly, power relations and knowledge constitute the genesis of 'development' and continues to be the fundamental factor in its manifestation. Thus, the discourse of development creates and mediates a social reality, "dominant with Euro centric and American driven motives" (Sapkota and Tharu, 2016). Further, the intricate power relations and corresponding knowledge mechanisms, legitimized displacement through the ideology of 'development', referring to its social benefits.

Development-induced alienation of tribals in India has become a normalised phenomenon from the colonial period onwards. This act of normalisation by the mainstream society operates under the excuse of what Arundhati Roy address as 'greater common good' (1999) or price of 'development'. The web of power relation encompassing various agents: colonialism, state developmentalism, capital industrialization, represented 'development' as a univocal beneficial phenomenon, overshadowing the intricacies and adversities involved in it. To facilitate the developmental agendas, the agents apart from other devices, employed legislation as a tool that formed part of the power relations. The colonial and postcolonial land acts from 1894 till 2013 in India, embodied the concept of 'eminent domain', which empowered the state to acquire any land compulsorily, even in the absence of people's consent, under the pretext of 'public interest' (Gogoi 2018). Identifying the discourse and its circulation is a complex task, owing to the fact that it is always legitimised. The understanding of socio-cultural circumstances helps in the identification of discourse. Hence the socio-historical framework of new historicism, enables the identification of discourse and its operative mechanisms that lead to exploitation of the marginalised.

### Land, forest and adivasi

Indigenous population around the globe are addressed by different names in various countries. The Indian scenario on the discussion of indigenous population is complicated while considering the situation of other nations. Various terms like 'tribe', 'adivasi', 'forest dwellers', 'janjati', are used in India to denote the communities distinguished by their relative isolation, cultural distinctiveness and low level of production and subsistence (Munshi 2012). The terms 'adivasi', 'tribal' and 'indigenous communities' in the Indian context are generally used synonymously. The term 'Adivasi', meaning 'first inhabitants', is used as a common label by the various groups self-identifying social groups, excluding the tribes of north-east who prefer the colonial terminology 'tribe' (Karlsson and Subba 2006). The term 'Adivasi' is associated with indigeneity claims by the social groups, although the Government of India maintains the notion that all its citizens are indigenous population. "Being adivasi", as Ajay Skaria puts it, 'is about shared experiences of the loss of the forests, the alienation of land, repeated displacements since

independence in the name of “development projects”, and much more” (Karlsson and Subba 2006).

Indigenous cultures around the world are strongly attached to the land they inhabit. The various aspects of indigenous life such as social identity, cultural and spiritual distinctiveness are undoubtedly rooted in their territory (Perera 2009). Land for the Adivasi population like other indigenous community is neither a transactional commodity nor a profit-making entity. The totality of tribal life involving ancestral spirits, belief systems, identity centres around the land they inhabit (Malik 2020). Cultural aspects of land with reference to the Adivasi life is a matter of crucial significance. Land for the Adivasi is not a mere material entity but forms part of their cultural existence. “Each; words, peoples and cultures, are woven into a land epistemology and it is on such an epistemological premise that origin stories, community narratives, folk stories are produced” (Bodhi and Ziipao 2019). The cultural forms of the Adivasi are related to the land they inhabit, and “are a means of assertion against the socio-cultural oppression and hegemony they have had to suffer owing to their different status considered inferior” (Trivedi and Burke 2018). The cultural art forms of the Adivasi which include the songs, dance, paintings and other arts are related to land and its components. The Warli painting of the tribals in Maharashtra acts as a prime illustration where the natural elements such as the sun, moon, trees and land are distinctively evident (Sharma 2011).

Moreover, similar to other indigenous communities, tribal population of India largely depend on land and its resources for their subsistence. Forest and land-based resources are imperative for the economic existence of tribals. For example, the Banjara community of Punjab follows both their traditional economic activity as well as the current practice of performance arts. They are skilled artists in the performance of *bazi*. “With the modernisation of tradition, their occupations have undergone change, though some of the old ones have been retained. The women used to sell brooms, small needles (suian) and large ones (gadhuian) for long stitches on quilts, and bangles, etc” (Singh 2010). Hence, the traditional economic activity of rearing cattle, and making products from resources collected from forests that were part of their identity has diminished due to the alienation they have faced. Majority of the Adivasi population derive livelihood from agriculture and forest and their reliance on forest and land is significant, compared to non-tribal communities (Munshi 2012). Alienation from land, signifies a loss of identity, culture, self, economy and freedom which challenges their whole existence (Malik 2020). Tribal alienation, induced by the discourse of development demands critical interdisciplinary academic attention in this context.

### Chronicles of resistance: development-induced displacement in literary narratives

Tribal literature is widely misconceived as a nascent field, owing to the prominent notion that literature to be considered literature should have a written form. Although written form of literary expressions is a nascent phenomenon, the tribal communities of India are rich in oral tradition and heritage. Their oral forms have always highlighted their issues and problems along with their world view. However, they have now recognised that absence of writing is a self-destructive process of cultural erasure. In response, tribal writings have undertaken the task of documenting their agony and deprivation, thus creating resistance against exploitative forces (Hembrom 2022). For instance, tribal writings from north-east have a rich treasure of literature that contextualize the history of the various tribes inhabiting the area. Mamang Dai, a significant literary figure from the north-east weaves the theme of colonialism into her literary tapestry,

providing readers with a profound exploration of its enduring impacts in her notable works *The Black Hill* and *The Legends of Pensam*. Although literary narratives that solely explores the displacement and alienation issue of Adivasi population are scarce, the writings by/on Adivasi, contextualize these issues, while delineating their sufferings and oppression. The existent narratives formulate a counter- struggle against the power structures that instigate displacement in various historical periods. It becomes evident when the texts are subjected to a new historicist analysis, owing to the fact that the theoretical approach of new historicism reveals the power structures and how they utilize discourse to maintain their hegemony.

The current investigation includes three literary narratives originally written in Malayalam, later translated to English namely, *Budhini* by Sara Joseph, *Kocharethi* by Narayan and *Mayilamma: The Life of a Tribal Eco-warrior* by Jyothibai Pariyadath. A new-historicist reading of the select texts reveal the trajectory of land alienation encountered by the tribal population in India during the colonial, postcolonial and the neo-colonial period. An interdisciplinary reading through the theoretical framework of new historicism, unveils various domineering forces involved in the exploitation of tribal population, under the pretext of development in history. Further, it also exposes the operation of the discourse, its legitimization and its impact on Adivasi population.

### Engines of displacement: colonial governance and the indigenous truth

*Kocharethi* written originally in Malayalam by Narayan who belongs to the Malayaraya tribal community in Kerala, is a critically acclaimed work for its projection of *Adivasi* life in Kerala. The narrative records the life of tribal population of Kerala in colonial and postcolonial phase. “A striking feature of Narayan’s *Kocharethi* is its composite identity. The novel has entire chapters devoted to the description of the life of the “adivasis” (Thankamma 2018). The life represented involves centrality of land and territory that the cultural, social and economic aspect is linked to the land. South India formed part of the Madras presidency during the British period and the various forest policies and land acts were implemented in which the tribals were victimized.

The legitimization of power exerted by the colonial government moved parallel to the imperialist policies in India. The concept of ‘development’ was pivotal in the act of this legitimization that it favoured the idea of superiority and hierarchy. Thus, all forms of exploitation in India during the colonial period were recognised and justified within the ambit of developmental projects. The colonial state initiated large public works throughout India, focussing on the construction of railways and canals from 1830 (Ramesh and Raveendranathan 2020). Natural resources were an inevitable element for the inception of the so called infrastructural developmental activities.

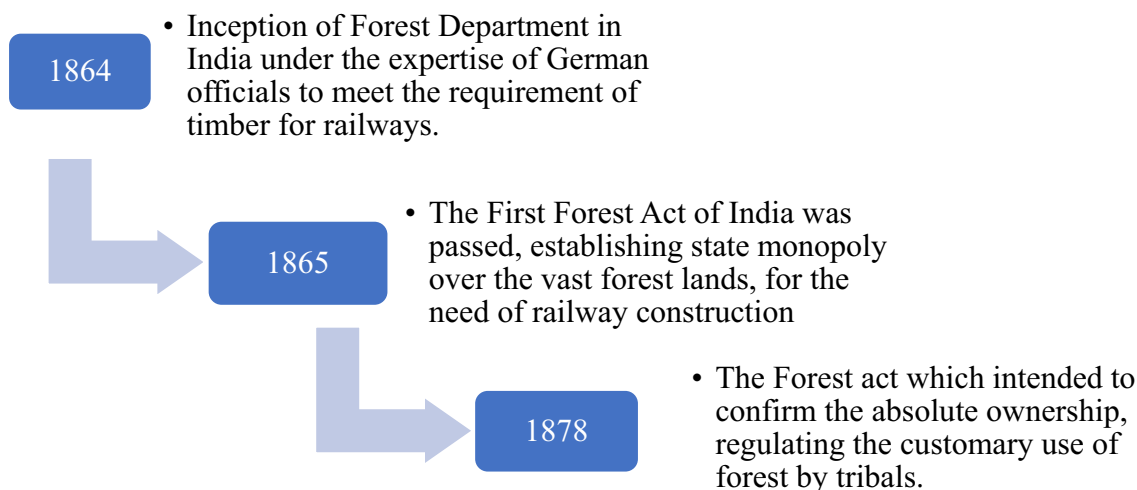
Construction of railways was a main tool used by the colonial developmental discourse in India. Railways were consistently represented as instruments of progress, and the British perceived locomotives and the burgeoning railway networks as undeniable evidence of material superiority and dedication to ‘civilizing’ and ‘improving’ India (Kerr 2003). Most notably, the Governor General, Dalhousie, in 1855, in the ‘Report of the Opening of Indian Railway’, observes that:

The railway might justly be characterised as the greatest good that had been conferred on India by the application of European science. (Hear, hear.) To the Government it would be of the highest value as a political engine; but its advantages in that point of view would sink into

comparative insignificance when contrasted with the benefits which it would confer upon the country and people, both physically and morally... (Report of the opening of the East Indian Railway, 1855).

The discursive formation through the written representation of railways in India was established by the colonial forces which later became a practice among the natives. Thus, the construction of railways, under the pretext of development contributed to the legitimizing ideology of the colonial governance and their moral 'superiority'. However, the discourse of railway development unleashed severe consequences on the tribal population in India, particularly alienation from forest lands and resources. *Kocharethi: The Araya Woman* contextualizes the displacement and alienation of Adivasi population in the name of development owing to the ideological and legal devices utilized by the colonial government in maintaining the discourse of development. The construction and later functioning of the railway required timber

was established in 1894. Following this, in need of legislative power, the First Forest Act of 1865 was passed, which "empowered the government to declare any piece of land covered with 'trees or brush-wood as government's forest and to make rule regarding the management of it" (Dungdung, 2019). With the formulation of the act, entire forest cover in India came under the government control. Subsequently in 1866, the forest department was established to control and exercise the law formulated. The forest laws and policies in the colonial period namely, The Indian Forest Act of 1878, The National Forest Policy of 1894 and The Indian Forest Act of 1927 remained unfavourable to the socio-economic sustenance of *Adivasi* population. For example, "the Indian Forest Act 1878 categorised the large areas of forest into reserved, protected and village forests which diminished the rights. As the result of colonial forest laws and policies, restriction over forest produce were implemented that deprived *Adivasi* livelihood.



that directed the colonial government to the vast forest of India, subsequently disturbing the forest inhabitants. The new historicist analysis of *Kocharethi: The Araya Woman* along with the prevalent discourses similar to the excerpt by General Dalhousie, depicts the operation of power that is non-repressive. New historicism removes the conception of power to be repressive, rather it can be self-regulative (Brannigan 1998) through cultural practices or ideological mediums.

To further illuminate the idea, it would be appropriate to mention that: at the outset of railway construction, the initial demand for timber from forests was primarily for sleepers. While the railway commenced its operation in the mid of 1860, an additional need of firewood as railway fuel emerged. The growing need of construction and operation of the railway thus contributed to the depletion of forests in colonial India (Das 2013). To facilitate the need of trees and to regulate the Adivasi dependence on the resources, the colonial government resorted to self-declared laws without taking into account the existence of tribal community.

The colonial government formulated several forest policies to meet the need of timber from forest lands. The need of timber for railway forced them to invite German expertise to formulate forest governance, as a result of which the Forest department

*Kocharethi* representing a community, dependent on forest land and its resources, practicing agricultural economy, thus elucidates deprivation encountered by the tribal population through the forest policies. The work charts the implementation and the implication of these laws in its course of narration. Narayan mentions the survey and the preparation done by the forest officials to assess the resources. The initial implementation of the forest policies become evident when Narayan mentions that the forest officials have come to mark the boundary along with the construction of forest path for two elephants to walk easily (Narayan 2011). The construction of the forest path was the primary action to facilitate the transport of timber. Narayan unfolds the layers of formation of a discourse through the declaration "the lords have come to mark the boundary" (Narayan 2011). Further the discourse becomes internalized and asserted when a native declares that "the entire forest belongs to the precious king" (Narayan 2011). The forest policies initially took account of the trees and resources. "Each one should give a list of the trees- ebony, teak, maruthu-their exact number. The honey,inja, mace etc. for the treasury should be brought before the summer ends" (Narayan 2011), shows the control of forest and forest produce exerted by the government through the forest policies till then alien to the forest dwellers. Additionally, the

marking of boundary and survey of trees in the land exposes the authoritarianism exerted over the land till then enjoyed privately by the Adivasi.

Followed by the marking of boundaries and the construction of the forest paths, forest came under the control of the colonial state and the tribal population became alienated from the territory they lived for many years. Narayan depicts the alienation of the tribal population in the novel mentioning that “The forest officials came again, with the overseers. They numbered all the hardwood trees like rosewood and teak that belonged to the crown and stood in the clearings around Araya dwellings. ‘All these belong to the government. They’ll be cut down’” (Narayan 2011). It is to be noted that over 90% of tribal households in various hills of Madras presidency possessed modest land holdings, which became reserve forest with the implementation of Madras Forest Act 1882. (Saravanan 2017). Narayan undertakes the role of a counter historian through the representation of tribal alienation that happened due to the implementation of forest policies in India. Additionally, he ventures to explain the process of deforestation and its immediate and long-term impact elaborating that “The forest authorities came with their implements—big and small axes, and several other tools. They also brought two elephants. They built a shed bordering the road where trees were to be felled...The elephants destroyed the coconut palms and plantains. The woodcutters took away Shankaran’s tapioca and a bunch of bananas” (Narayan 2011). The perpetrators legitimize the action addressing it as ‘government business’, declaring the non-existence of tribal dwellings in the area, which rightly demonstrates the discursive practice. As a result, displacement issue emerges through which the community suddenly without any compensation or resettlement policy becomes alienated. “They climbed the hills, their hearts heavy with awareness that the land they stood was not theirs” (Narayan 2011). Thus, the heist for resources for the purpose of constructing railways was legitimized under the pretext of development in which the operation of power through the forest policies worked correspondingly, resulting in the alienation of tribal community.

However, it is worth mentioning that the developmental activities such as railways and new roads that were constructed, aimed not the benefit of the Indian population, but to meet the requirements of imperialist mechanisms. Guha asserts: “The crucial watershed in the history of Indian forestry is undoubtedly the building of the railway network. This was created to meet the need for rapid troop communication felt after the Mutiny and for enabling the characteristic pattern of colonial trade i.e, export of primary commodities from the colony and import of finished goods into the colony from the metropolis” (Guha 1983). The intricate web of power relation in the discourse of development namely between colonialism, colonial capitalism, and imperialism is made visible in this context. Narayan in his writing attempts to critique the representation and purpose of railways classified as the instrument of progress causing deforestation and land alienation. In fact, Narayan reminds the readers a great resource heist shadowed under the discourse of development in *Kocharethi: The Araya Woman*.

### **Tribe, hydro-projects and the post-colonial development discourse**

The postcolonial period witnessed the construction of several hydro-electric projects across the country, displacing several people to an alien space. Following the World War II countries worldwide, both developed and developing initiated strategies for economic growth. Economic growth became a key indicator of progress and significant emphasis was given to infrastructural development such as railways, industries, telecommunication,

power and roads. Hydro-electric projects emerged as a result of this development-focused approach, becoming the symbolic representations of progress (Nayak 2013). In the post-independence scenario, the state similar to other nations gave much importance to hydro-electric projects, that resulted in the displacement of tribal population in India. The discourse of development represented dams as ‘temples of modern India’ which was “part of a vision of development where large, capital-intensive projects represented economic progress” (Baviskar 2019). Thus, the discourse of development acquired the legitimacy of state developmentalism, that again alienated tribal population from their habitat. It is in this context that the literary narrative of *Budhini* becomes relevant.

*Budhini*, originally written in Malayalam by Sarah Joseph in 2019 and later translated to English by Sangeetha Sreenivasan is much-acclaimed of the author for its feminist and ecological concerns. The work narrates the story of Budhini Mehjan, the Santhal girl and how the inauguration of Panchet dam situated in the state of Jharkhand, India, in December 1959 tragically transformed her life resulting in the excommunication from her community and the economic and the social devastations, she undergoes. Although the work fundamentally focuses on the ill fate of Budhini caused due to the superstitious and patriarchal sensibilities of the community, it also points out the harrowing incidents of the Damodar Valley project that resulted in the displacement of large number of tribal communities. The work particularly focuses on the consequences erupting out of the construction of the Panchet Dam in 1959 situated in the then Bihar, now in Jharkhand province of India. Amita Baviskar notes that “It bears repeating: 50 million people displaced by development projects between 1947 and 1997; 16 million dispossessed by large dams alone; 8 million of them adivasi, among the poorest and most vulnerable sections of Indian society. Yet, despite the scale of these evictions – project-specific as well as cumulative – there was little public attention to the fate of those affected” (Baviskar 2019). The work attempts to reinforce the sacrifice of the *Santhali community* in particular and tribal community in general in the process of nation building. The construction of dam submerged several villages forcing people to leave the land. Although the Santhal community resisted the displacement warnings by the state, later, the floods force them to leave the land.

The villagers having realised that the water in the village was there “for no sojourn” (58), ultimately decides to leave the land. Due to the mega projects, “Millions of the most vulnerable people in the country were displaced. Hundreds of thousands of square kilometres of forested and farmed hills, valleys and rivers and their distinctive flora and fauna were destroyed forever” (Baviskar 2019). The submerged land forces the villagers to migrate to other places and a few people had “decided to leave for Chhattisgarh” and become labourers (Joseph 60). Thus, it represents the situation in which the “industries and irrigation schemes built on large dams have displaced many tribal people and transformed them into landless migrant labour” (Sethi 2006). For the construction of dam, large area of land was acquired by the state that affected the traditional land and farming of the tribal population. “Don’t you know the fields belong to the sarkar? Water needs to occupy space once the dam rises. So this time you are not supposed to farm here’, they said. That was a strict order and the beginning of all distress” (Joseph 2019). The construction of dam caused trouble to the livelihood of the people transforming them to poor labourers. The livelihood and basic sustenance become a vital question in this situation. Big dams and other hydroelectric projects naturally bring with them the threats of submergence of hundreds of villages and the forced displacement of thousands of people. In the absence of people-friendly rehabilitation and

resettlement packages, it remains questionable, whether these development projects are truly worthwhile since they deprive one population of its livelihood to enhance that of another (Sethi 2006). The mentioned inequitable approach created widescale impoverishment of the subaltern population in the post-independent nation state. Although the work mentions the Panchet Dam and the Santhali tribe, it is to be noted that it represents the general trend of the period. “There were many dams built in the period starting from the 1950, for example, Pong Dam in Himachal Pradesh (1970), Chandil Dam in Bihar (1978), Bhakra Nangal (Punjab) and Tehri Dam (1976). There were agitations attached to most of these. But,... ‘None of these agitations proved successful either in stopping the project or getting a good resettlement package, and none lasted more than one or two years’” (Sathe, 2020). *Budhini* represents the alienation of Adivasi population that happened across the nation. The first fifty years after independence witnessed a situation in which mega projects alienated the Adivasi population drastically. The *Narmada Bachao Andolan* (1985) launched in view of preserving the rights of Adivasi population inhabiting the Narmada valley and other resistant movements are to be placed in the historical development of *Budhini*. Many displacements due to hydro-electric projects remain unnoticed in the postcolonial period, The displacement of tribal community of north-east due to various hydro-electric projects is worth mentioning at this juncture. The construction of the Dumbur Hydro Electric dam in Tripura led to the displacement of 2558 families possessing land titles. However, a significant oversight occurred as an additional 5500 to 6500 families, reliant on the forests and other natural resources in the region, were not taken into account during the displacement process (Arora and Kipgen 2012). The discourse of development in alienation of Adivasi land appears repeatedly in every activity. It is important to not here that:

The first critical evaluations of the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP) focused on reviewing the cost-benefit analysis used to justify the project. Economists showed that the social and environmental costs of the dam were severely underestimated while its potential benefits were greatly exaggerated...If the SSP stripped away the meagre assets of impoverished adivasis to further enrich well-off farmers with irrigation, how could the dam be described as ‘serving the public interest’, they asked. A state project that did not first serve the poorest and most oppressed and that irretrievably destroyed the country’s natural wealth was neither ‘national’ nor ‘development’ (Baviskar 2019).

Thus, *Budhini* offers a revision of the concept of development in which the teleology of development is critiqued and subverted.

The work also problematizes the belief system affected due to the displacement. The Santhali belief in *Bongas* that “dwell inside the water, on the trees and in the folds of the ridges (Joseph 2019)” and the statement that “it is no good building s dam across the river...Water is *aadi bhoota*. The flow should not be hindered” (Joseph 2019) illustrates the tribal philosophy built on ecological world view. Displacement creates disruption to this traditional belief and knowledge system. For instance, the construction of Tipaimukh dam in Manipur not only alienated the tribal population of North-east, but also affect their sacred land named *rounglevaisuo* where the Barak and Tuivai rivers confluence. Sacred lands play a significant role in tribal cosmology. The work illustrates the alienation issues of the *Adivasis* in the postcolonial period voicing the social, economic and cultural tribulations associated with displacement. Although the dam pledges electricity for urban Indians, provides water for large-scale farmers, enhances the influence of government bureaucracies, and offers profitable contracts to the wealthy, it displaces

the indigenous and tribal populations from their forested habitats, pushing them towards the thresholds of urban poverty and degradation (Khan 2012). The note by the author: “crores of people have been uprooted from their soil for mega development projects before and after independence. It was a disturbing thought that their stories had gone unrecorded” (Joseph 2019) justifies the comprehensive thematization of the colonial and post-independent displacement of Adivasi population.

### Tribal actuality in the neo-liberal discourse of development

The New Economic Policy, initiated in 1991, was a glorified economic reform represented as economic progress. The base of the neoliberal transition was the market-centrism replacing the state-centrism, in which private capital especially foreign private capital played a major role (Dasgupta 2013). Neoliberalism and economic reforms are justified and legitimized as progress, making it part of the developmental discourse. It is often viewed that these reforms are important in increasing growth and thereby reducing poverty. The supporters of neo-liberalism represented and legitimized it as an act which provides capital to the government by which the economically backward section receives benefits in terms of health and other facilities (Das 2015). The hegemonic developmental propaganda, thus continues to mystify the intricacies and adversities faced by the vulnerable social groups. *Mayilamma: The Life of a Tribal Eco-Warrior* becomes poignant at this juncture, that it reveals the exploitative developmental discourse of land alienation and displacement from its resources.

*Mayilamma: The Life of a Tribal Eco-Warrior* translated in 2018, holds a critical position in the Eco-narrative discourse in Indian literature. The narrative records the life of Mayilamma, the tribal woman who led the struggle against the Coca-Cola plantation established in Plachimada village in Palakkad District of Kerala, India. The narrative maps the childhood, marriage and the struggle of Mayilamma against the multinational corporation within a few pages.

The new economic policy of the Indian government in 1991 gave priority to the policies of liberalization, privatization and globalization, ultimately aiming an economic augmentation. The economic policy of 1991 aimed at the development of Indian economy. Although it boosted the economy, the disparity of between classes widened. “Once the government opened up foreign investment markets, the effect of globalization on Indian demand started in the early 1990s...Indian development has globalized many industries” (Manhas 2020) that intruded the rural resource rich areas inhabited by the Adivasi. The work represents the post-liberal situation of Adivasi population and occupies a position among the narratives that critique the new economic policies introduced as development projects in the states of Jharkhand, Orissa and Chattisgarh. As Gladson Dungdung notes “after India’s new economic liberalisation in 1991, these areas found space in the eyes of the ruling elite. Not because they wanted to develop these regions in real, human terms, but to exploit its natural resources” (Dungdung 2015).

The problems faced by the Adivasi population of Palakkad district of Kerala, due to the inception of a soft drink factory and this lived experience is detailed in the text. With the inception of the factory, the company started extracting the ground water as the basic resource for its production that made the life of the people vulnerable. Mayilamma explaining the situation mentions that the water in the wells became unfit for drinking and cooking. “If we had bath, our hair would turn sticky. If we used it to clean the vessels, our fingers would burn and itch. The moment we ate food, we felt the need to defecate. After that we would feel tired and drowsy. Our eyelids would become swollen” (Pariyadathu

2018). The excerpt demonstrates the real-life experience of Adivasi community as the result of industrialisation and resources grab. Contamination as well as lack of water forces them to stage an open struggle against the company as the functioning of the company posited threat of displacement. “Within two years, the people around the plant experienced problems that they had never encountered before, the receding of the water table and the drastic change in the quality of water spread around 1 to 1.5 km radius of the plant. Water shortage upset the agricultural operations. Water became unfit for human consumption and domestic use” (Bijoy 2006). Adding to the existing trouble, the company offered contaminated wastes as fertilisers to the farmers that depleted fertility of the agricultural land (Pariyadathu 2018). Mayilamma also narrates the various devices used by the company to maintain its operations like providing water from other sources and attempting to create internal problems in the protest. For instance, Mayilamma describes the operation of discourse in which the company workers were taken to the capital of the state, staging protest in support of the company (Pariyadathu 2018). The unscrupulous devices of capitalist discourse, solely driven by profit mechanisms in made visible by Mayilamma in the narrative. The tribal concept of “territory is generally holistic and constitutes the hills, the rivers, the natural resources, the mineral resources, the air, the waters and the peoples who firstly inhabit it” (Bodhi and Ziipao 2019). This concept makes them concerned of the natural resources in the area they inhabit. As the natural resource forms part of their identity, the Adivasi struggle against the natural resource extraction forms part of their resistance to preserve their identity.

Mostly considered as an environmental struggle, the Plachimada struggle is in fact a struggle against displacement. The background knowledge regarding the establishment of the company would provide a better understanding. The company bought land from a few people by various means and “some Adivasis in the area who were also approached refused to sell the very small pieces of land on which they live (Parmar 2015). Pooja Parmar’s, *Indigeneity and Legal Pluralism in India: Claims, Histories, Meanings* becomes a poignant reference in this context. Parmar in the book notes:

Kecharan, an Adivasi man, told me that they refused to sell their land simply because “[t]his is the place where [they] have been living.” He said that money offered by the company did not matter as they “cannot go and live in another place.” Even with regard to the situation today, he says that while they cannot leave this place, the company can easily buy land elsewhere. Several other Adivasis echoed the same sentiments. These repeated references to living and dying “here” were an early indication to me about the significance of questions of land and displacement in the protests against Coca-Cola (Parmar 2015).

The Adivasi attachment to their territory and the problem associated with displacement and indigeneity is revealed through the particular reference. “Today there is considerable pressure to transform land into a commodity to be bought and sold in the market for non-agricultural purposes. The motivation behind this dramatic turnaround in how land is used is driven by India’s contemporary economic development concerns, such as industrialization, infrastructure, special economic zones (SEZs), and real estate expansion” (D’Costa and Chakraborty 2017). This general trend has affected the Adivasi population as Adivasi community largely depend on agriculture. Mayilamma’s statement “Our air, water and soil belong to us alone! We will always fight against those who try to destroy them” (Pariyadathu 2018), denotes the assertion of indigeneity and the traditional rights of Adivasi over the land from which they have been displaced due to various forces. The protest against the company was in fact the

determined scuffle of the people to stay in the land they have been living. It was indeed a struggle against the dispossession they have been subjected to, as well as the assertion of rights over the natural resources. The alienation of land in the neo-liberal or post-globalisation era similar to the colonial and post-independent period finds legitimacy under the pretext of development and the reign of power continues even now.

## Conclusion

The select works are pivotal in the understanding of development-induced displacement and land alienation of Adivasi population. A new historicist reading of the select literary narratives expose the historical marginalisation encountered by the tribal population of India. The authors assume the role of a new historian in depicting the peripheralized actuality of tribal community who continues to bear the consequences of the developmental discourse. The comprehensive analysis of the three narratives using the tool of new historicism, unmasks the complex web of power relations that exploit tribal population in the context of development discourse. The intersection of three literary narratives with narratives from other disciplines, informs the circulation of development discourse throughout history. Influenced by the Foucauldian analysis of power, new historicism attempts to identify the various forms assumed by power in various stages of history. Similarly, the current study incorporating the theoretical methodology of new historicism in the selected texts identify the different forms of hegemonic structures involved in the development-induced displacement of the Adivasi population of India. The select works belong to the fabric of mini narratives that offer resistance against the social injustices, critiquing history and its representation of grand narratives, particularly the developmental discourse in the current discussion. In new-historicist reading, the works offer resistance against the hegemonic relations that represent developmental paradigm, advantageous for the society in general, to legitimize their operation. The interdisciplinary reading of the narratives, with the aim of understanding the plight of tribal population, align with the new historicist tenet of unearthing the saga of the marginalised and the disempowered. The new-historicist analysis of the selected texts bridges the gap between literature and neglected historic-reality, proving the fact that literary narratives are deeply embedded in socio-historical practices. The implications and the teleology of social policies should be critically evaluated before its implementation. Policies prioritizing tribal rights over land, fostering inclusive development strategies involving consultation with indigenous communities would create a better situation against the development-induced displacements. A socially conscious approach guided by the principles of equity, justice and sustainability, instead of capital driven motives should form the basis of social policies affecting the indigenous population.

## Data availability

The study is a qualitative exploration, in which journal articles and books are used. No data were generated or analysed for the study.

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### Author contributions

Mr. Roshan Varughese has conducted the study and framed the research paper. Dr. Soumen Mukherjee, the corresponding author, has proofread and edited the research paper.

### Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

### Ethical approval

The study doesn't involve human participants; hence the section is not applicable for the research paper.

### Informed consent

The study doesn't involve human participants; hence the section is not applicable for the research paper.

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