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Kerala

## INTERVIEW | Will join hands with devil if it helps my people: CK Janu

*The violence during the 2003 Muthanga agitation is one of the darkest episodes in Kerala's sociopolitical history.*



CK Janu (Photo | EPS)

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The violence during the 2003 Muthanga agitation is one of the darkest episodes in Kerala's sociopolitical history. An uneducated woman born to slave parents had led the tribal movement. Her swollen face, thanks to police brutality, remains etched in the collective psyche of Keralites. Many things about CK Janu have changed since then. She has formed a political party, which is now part of NDA, and has contested elections. Janu interacts with TNIE, as part of the Express Dialogues series, and shares her views on politics, society and why tribals remain alienated in God's Own Country. Excerpts

**Nearly 20 years have passed since the Muthanga agitation. When you look back, what do you see now?**

The agitation was not able to achieve its goal of ensuring land for all landless tribals. But the 48-day-long struggle did give the tribals something valuable – a realisation that they are all alone in their fight for dignity. The tribals who participated in the agitation had affiliations to political parties like CPM, Congress, and BJP. They strongly believed that

their leaders would come to their help. That didn't happen. It also brought the issue of landless tribals out of Wayanad. It became an international issue.

**The picture of C K Janu's swollen face shocked the conscience of Malayalees across the globe...**

The fight was never personal. The struggle was a collective movement for our rights. I joined in because I could see what people like me suffered. The agitation was handled by the state government with brutality and force because we were hapless tribals. They didn't even consider us as human beings. Small children and women were beaten up badly. It revealed how cruel and brutal the police personnel were.

**The brutality took place when A K Antony was chief minister, a person known to be peace-loving. Did you expect such a suppressive move from Antony?**

No we did not. What we had seen over the years was how the successive governments handled agitations by sitting face to face to discuss and resolve issues. So we were completely shocked when police launched an attack unannounced. It's shameful that such police brutality took place when a person like Antony was chief minister. I met him a couple of times after that and discussed various issues with him.

**Did Antony at any point in time express regret about the police brutality?**

He had never openly expressed any regret but I had noticed remorse and pain on his face about the incident. Expressing remorse or regret on a decision taken as chief minister of the state would have looked ridiculous. He stood firm on his decision. I respect him for that.

**It was alleged that Maoists were involved in the agitation...**

No outsiders were involved.

**Geethanandan was part of the struggle. What made you snap ties with him?**

When I took a political decision to align with NDA, Geethanandan objected to it. So we had to stop working together. I respect his stand. We haven't severed our relationship with Geethanandan.

**What prompted you to join electoral politics?**

We have seen a lot of political fronts coming to power through elections. But have you seen any legislature setting a political agenda for Scheduled Caste and Tribes? So the issues of SC/STs are not resolved politically. I decided to align with NDA as a political move for the benefit of my community. I didn't want to join any party. So, I floated Janadhipathiya Rashtriya Party (JRP).

**In 2011, Congress offered you a seat to contest. Why didn't you accept it?**

They wanted me to contest as a Congress candidate. I said no. I decided against it because I have seen what political parties like CPM, BJP and Congress have been doing for the welfare of the tribals in the state. I am firm on my decision that I will not be a part of any mainstream political party till my death. If I find that my party is not able to achieve the desired results, I am ready to disband it.

**When you refused, Congress fielded P K Jayalakshmi in Sultan Bathery and made her a minister. Do you regret your decision?**

Never. What has Jayalakshmi done for the community?

### **Why did you go with NDA, instead of Congress or CPM, which are stronger in Kerala?**

Today, if we are part of NDA, both CPM and Congress are responsible for that. I resigned from CPM membership in 1987 after I realised that they have been exploiting us. Congress has also never done anything for us. We don't find anything wrong in allying with NDA which agreed to look into our problems.

### **What has the tribal community gained from aligning with NDA?**

The alliance hasn't yielded any good result for the tribals in Kerala. But the most positive outcome is that they were the first to consider tribal outfit as an ally in a political front. UDF and LDF never did that. This recognition for us has made a huge impact on the community.

### **Now we have Droupadi Murmu, a tribal woman, as the President...**

It's a major recognition to the tribals in the country. We cherish the moment. But, just see the criticisms coming in from different quarters. It's being said she will be a rubber stamp president and that she will be living in a 340-room bungalow. Why were there no such criticisms when other persons became President? It shows the discriminatory attitude of our society.



### **How will the tribal communities benefit?**

Whether people like Droupadi Murmu become President or not, the exploitation of tribals will continue in different forms. But her appointment has sent out a strong message that a tribal person is eligible for the President's post. For how many years did

Congress rule the country? Why didn't they elect a tribal as President? Now, Congress is saying BJP is aiming for political mileage with her appointment.

**But don't you think this will undermine the relevance of political parties like JRP?**

No, such moves will not affect the relevance of the parties formed by tribals. Even if that happens I am not worried as long as tribals get some benefits out of it. If a devil comes and tells me that it will help me solve the issues of my people, then I won't think twice before joining hands with it even if there is a danger of me being swallowed whole.

**Has BJP benefitted from the alliance with JRP?**

So far the alliance hasn't made any impact. That doesn't mean there will be no impact in the future. All alliances are for mutual benefit.

**Do you subscribe to the Hindutva politics of BJP?**

I am not bothered about their political ideology. They took us as an ally and gave us recognition as a political force.

**Then why did you leave NDA in 2018?**

We came out because a few of our workers objected to the alliance and I had to honour their sentiments.

**But, you joined again...**

We later allied with NDA after the party workers laid out a proper road map for the alliance.

**Do you think your credibility has taken a beating due to the fluctuating stance?**

I am not bothered what others think about me. I make a decision when I feel that it will help me solve the problems faced by the community. I will tell you an example... A person who got land due to our struggle started showering abuses on me every day after getting drunk. I went to his house and asked why he was doing it. He told me that he gets rice, Rs 50 for buying vegetables and a bottle of brandy from CPM workers for verbally abusing me. When I heard what he said, I told him to abuse me regularly so that he continues to get what he was getting. I was happy for him. There is nothing else that can match the happiness of getting up in the morning with a stomach that had dinner the previous night.

**Is being landless the root cause of the tribals' problems?**

Yes. How can you build a roof without a base? Won't the roof collapse?

**Do you have data on the number of landless tribals?**

No, I don't have accurate data. But, most are landless. When the land was distributed among the adivasis, we had reminded the government how these people eke out a living as daily wage labourers. Hence, along with land, the government needs to give a three-year rehabilitation package. If that doesn't happen, though their 'landless' status changes, nothing much happens in terms of upgrading their quality of life. They continue to be daily wage labourers and get accused of neglecting the land.

**How did adivasi leader C K Janu come into being? Did some incident act as a trigger?**

It just happened. It was never planned. However, if I see the rights of an adivasi being

denied or if I see them getting trampled on, I would surely react. I have my views and this has many times landed me in controversies. But I don't care.

**Speaking about controversies, there were allegations that BJP president K Surendran gave you money. What's the truth?**

There is no truth in the allegations. The case regarding the same is going on and I have told everyone that I am ready to come anywhere to answer the questions.

**Did this dent Janu's image as a political figure?**

Well, we can't say that. Image is not something that gets a dent even if someone tries. If we believe in such a thing, that is the start of our downfall. I don't care what people think about me.

**Even when you bought a car, it became a controversy...**

Why can't C K Janu buy a car? Is she not eligible because she is a tribal? When you step out, you see roads filled with cars of different makes and sizes. That's fine. But when Janu buys a car, it is a problem. This shows the very feudalistic attitude of society. This shows the contempt that the well-heeled, so-called upper-class people have for the tribals.

**Adivasis are called the children of the forest. They have a way of life. Do you want them to come into the mainstream? Won't it lead to an erosion of their culture and traditions?**

In my opinion, the adivasis haven't signed any agreement with anyone saying they will remain in the forest forever in a certain way. They are also eligible for a life of dignity and full of choices as others have. They shouldn't be seen as separate entities. They too have the right to equality and the Constitution guarantees that. Their existence is very essential for the survival of society as a whole.

**Child marriage is rampant among tribal communities...**

Adivasis don't know laws. What needs to be done is to make them aware of the laws and rules. In our system, nobody gets married based on age. They marry when they think they are ready for marriage. But I can tell you that there are no unwed mothers among tribals.

**Your parents were slave workers. How was their life?**

My parents used to work in the paddy fields from 6am to 6pm. They used to get paddy as their wage. It was two litres for women and three for men. However, the amount of paddy received could never satisfy the hungry bellies of five kids. Hunger used to be our constant companion. Adivasi is always half hungry.

**You were associated with Arundhati Roy. Do you still maintain contact?**

Arundhati Roy is a friend. She was the one who helped change the status of our agitation. When I was arrested and jailed, I wasn't allowed to meet anyone for a month. It was only after her intervention that I got to meet people.

**Heard that K R Gouri Amma had helped you...**

Yes. She did. I consider Gouri Amma to be like a mother to me. She is the only political figure that I admire in Kerala.



**Do you think had she become CM, tribals would have benefitted?**

If she had become CM, she would have worked for the uplift of women. However, she was denied the chance by the men here. She was a person who had the guts to decide and take action. A person should be evaluated based on his or her capability and not by gender.

**The governments have been implementing various schemes for tribals. But their living conditions remain deplorable...**

The adivasis don't know about the development projects or schemes. What is happening is that these projects are benefitting the middlemen. As long as this system remains, nothing will change. To put a stop to this, the government should set up a special tribal mission. Besides the mission, a monitoring system also needs to be set up to track what is happening. However, it is a sad fact that for parties, adivasis are a commodity and a means to win elections.

**There are allegations that BJP is attempting to Hinduise the tribal population...**

Tribals are not Hindus. See, I belong to the Adiya community. Our life is based on the Gothra custom. I wish to live in this culture till I die. My culture, knowledge, and custom are a contribution to this society. In our area, when the village officer issues community certificates to our people, caste is mentioned as Hindu Adiya. In my words, they should create an 'Adivasi' religion.

**Religion requires a god. Isn't it?**

All gods are created by man. We gave them the aura of belief and faith. I say that religion should require only the concept of Surya Bhagavan and Bhumi Devi. That's my concept.

**Some tribals have been given land. Have their lives got better?**

I own 1.25 acres of land, which I got through the agitation. However, I have no pattayam (title deed) for this land and only the possession certificate. We have no right to cut trees on this land, nor we can sell this land or pay land tax. If we face a loss to our crops, we do not get compensation nor can I take loans. The government is creating second-grade citizens through this discrimination.

**These norms were made with the intention that outsiders don't usurp your land...**

Who encroached on our land? Those who claim to have education, knowledge, and political consciousness did this. The government fears that tribals will sell their lands. Then why did they distribute pattayams to those who encroached on tribals' land? Why shouldn't we be able to sell our land? It's our land. No political party should think that they are doing a favour to tribals by giving land.

**How did you learn letters?**

I learned by myself. I knew that there was nobody to teach me.

**Rahul Gandhi becoming Wayanad MP brought national attention. Do you think this will do good for Wayanad?**

We don't want national attention. What we want is practical action. He is a good person and can do several things for Wayanad. But, he has not done much so far.

**Heard you are writing an autobiography?**

The book will come out in six months.

**Does the book have personal or political things?**

It's basically about my life and struggles. Politics is an essential part of my life.