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ENVIRONMENT

Remembering K.J. Baby, the Passionate Chronicler of Wayanad

M.J. Vijayan

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Baby expressed a lifetime of camaraderie with the Adivasis of Wayanad through his activism, songs, plays, novels, and the residential Adivasi school, Kanavu, that he established. He tried to communicate the message of sustainability, co-existence and compassion that defined the Adivasi identity of self.



K.J. Baby (1954-2024). Photo courtesy: M.J. Vijayan.

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An ordinary man with an extraordinary life that celebrated people, collectivism and nature, K.J. Baby's demise has left a deep void in the world and in the lives of the people he impacted. His passing, at a time when a deadly landslide in his adopted land, Wayanad, has swept away entire villages, claiming hundreds of lives and livelihoods, has only added to the grief of the Adivasi community amidst whom he lived.

Baby, 70, was found dead on September 1, in his favourite place, the 'kalari' (arena), adjoining his house, in Wayanad. His final decision was not to continue living, and he left behind letters to spell out how he wanted his last rites to be and what should be the way forward for people around him.

What was K.J. Baby's primary contribution to the Adivasi community in Wayanad?

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Who was K.J. Baby?

How did he become Nadavayal Baby (Nadavayal being the place where he and many of his progressive friends put down roots decades ago)?

When did he get a *kanavu* (dream, in Malayalam) to start a live-in forest school, Kanavu, in the process becoming Kanavu Baby and a favourite *maman* (uncle) to the Adivasi children of Wayanad?

Why is it important for us to know him?

Baby was born in Kannur district in 1954. He was 19 when his family migrated to Wayanad. From then on, Baby became a friend of the Adivasi communities in Wayanad, and a fellow traveller. His political exploration made him an ally of the Naxal ideology, and his cultural quest made him a playwright, novelist, lyricist, a musician and film maker.

The songs written by Baby show his eventful journey. His initial songs like *Enikkente daivame maappu tharika* (Oh my Lord, forgive me, forgive

my existence), satirised the ritualistic aspects of the Christian faith. Other songs, like *Vazhiyorukkan orungum koottare, vazhiyethu* (Those of you who have come prepared to show a new path, please indicate which path to take) challenged the evangelism built around the idea of salvation, which ignores the day-to-day lives of the masses living in poverty.



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Later came songs like *Wayanad, Wayanad*, a powerful secular song depicting the rich, resilient history of Wayanad and its indigenous people. *Wayanad Wayanad* is now considered the anthem of the district.

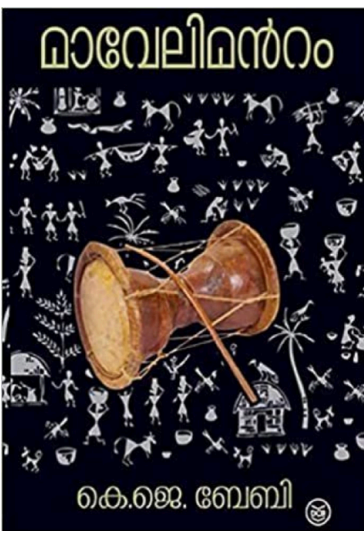
Songs like *Martya neeye, neeye sharanam martya* were a sharp and witty take on the way humans (read men) have exploited women and nature, using brute force and the privileges of caste and class within a rigid patriarchal framework. *Pey pey mazha pey pey* was a farmer's plea to Mother Nature for rains to save them and their crops from summer drought. All these were classics in the history of *janakeeya ganangal*, or people's songs, a musical tradition encompassing the ideas of Dalit, Adivasi and gender liberation initiated by groups like Dynamic Action in Kerala, of which Baby was an active participant. His song, *Udhanam, udhanam, punarudhanam... ninditharude, peedhithharude punarudhanam*, was a call for justice that reiterated the politics of oppressed people's liberation and salvation in this very world and not the next world as semitic religions would profess.

Baby was a performer par excellence, a natural in music and theatre. Anyone who has seen him sing *Wayanad* or *Pey pey mazha* would know what one is talking about. Alternating between low and high octaves, he would transport the listeners to a pitch-perfect and melodious universe.

Baby, who wrote his first play *Apoorna* in the 1970s, became known in literary circles with his revolutionary play *Nadugaddika* (1982), which was ironically banned by the Left front government led by E.K. Nayanar. In fact, he along with Adivasi artists and fellow cultural activists had also been jailed for their immensely popular performance of *Naadugaddika*.

The title of the play refers to the tribal ritual of ridding the land of evil spirits through exorcism traditionally performed by the Gadhikakaran. Set in a contemporary context, the play's narrative seeks to awaken the collective memory of two Adivasi communities, the Adiyas and Paniyas, so that they can resist and be free of the 'evil spirit' of continuing oppression in their present.

Already acknowledged in Malayalam literary circles, Baby's literary popularity rose after his novel *Mavelimantram* won the Kerala Sahitya Academy Award in 1994. Set in the



'Mavelimantram' by K.J. Baby.

context of the feudal oppression of Adivasis, the novel follows the quest of a couple for the ideal place, or *mavelimantram*, defined by equality. Baby's other significant literary contribution was *Bespurkana*, a novel on the hardships of migrant life. His last work was the novel *Goodbye Malabar*, published in 2019, where Baby narrates the story of the British Collector of Malabar, William Logan, through the eyes of his wife Anna.

Those who knew Baby were not surprised when he became a filmmaker with *Guda* (The Cage, 2003). The film had several firsts: it

was made in the Kattunayakar tribe's language, and boasted the collective engagement of several tribal communities in Wayanad. Baby's idea of film making, based on the twinning of progressive politics and aesthetics, became the guiding principle for his disciples like Leela, who went on to experiment fearlessly with the medium.

The essence of Baby's politics was realised when his *kanavu*, or dream, became the *Kanavu* of the Adivasi community as well, namely an Adivasi school with a difference, in Wayanad, in 1991. He was joined by his partner Shirley Joseph, a college lecturer, and two daughters in his endeavour to create a residential institution focused on providing high quality participatory education to tribal students from near and far. It was a holistic curriculum for a productive life, including traditional martial arts like Kalaripayattu, yoga, farming, art, sculpture, music, and film making. No wonder the school soon became a haven for both practitioners and theoreticians. It also became something of a pilgrimage for those wanting to seriously engage with alternate educational models. In 2007, Baby and Shirley handed over *Kanavu* to the younger generation of Adivasi youth who were its alumni.



A still from K.J. Baby's 'Guda'.

Inspired by the traditional, natural resource-based communities, Baby believed in people's revolution. An Ambedkarite by virtue of his belief in

the principle, 'educate, organise, agitate', Baby was a theoretical Marxist, too, with a firm belief that 'you have nothing to lose but your chains'. Baby was also inspired by the ideas of liberation theology. Simultaneously, he followed the values professed by Narayana Guru, Ayyankali and Gandhi also. His fascination with this eclectic group played out as a critical engagement with their ideas.

In retrospect, one realises that the songs, plays, films, indeed the creative energies of Baby were a means for him to express the essence and politics of the Adivasi way of life, positing them as an alternative to the excesses of the capitalist and consumerist mainstream. His aim was to communicate to as large an audience as possible, the message of sustainability, co-existence and compassion that defined the Adivasi *svatvam*, or the tribal identity of self. From that perspective, more than his creative writings, Kanavu, his effort at transformation through collectivism, will be counted as his greatest achievement.

For fellow travellers and admirers of Baby and for those who love Wayanad, these are extremely trying times. The Covid years were tough and isolating. In 2021, Baby suffered a grievous loss when his wife Shirley lost her battle with cancer. The lovers of Wayanad, like Baby, who had been opposing the capitalist exploitation of nature by destructive infrastructure projects, mining, *et al*, were numbed by the landslide of July 2024. Baby's death, including the manner of his passing, has added yet another layer of grief.

It is important to realise that the questions Baby leaves for the world, particularly for those sensitive to the lives of the historically oppressed and marginalised indigenous peoples, are far more crucial. As one who studied and understood the earth from the prism of indigenous perspectives, when he wrote his novel *Mavelimantram*, his aim was to share with the world the wisdom, knowledge and way of life of the Adivasis of Wayanad. In that wisdom probably, lies the answers to our collective problems.

Good bye, charming chronicler of Wayanad.

M.J. Vijayan is a Delhi-based activist and writer. He has been a companion of the cultural movements K.J. Baby has been associated with and has known Baby for many decades.

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