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Tribal Life and the Crusade of Modernization: A Study of Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*

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ABSTRACT
The tribals of India have spent centuries, aloof in their own "eco-systems", established in inhospitable and inaccessible locations. "Othered" and left to their own ways by the then powerful, the tribals constructed a rich culture and tradition. The advent of modernization, symbolized through the construction of roads and railways, brought the tribals face to face with the ruthless modern civilized world. The very composition of civilization subsumes any digressions within it and the tribals were exposed to an identical storm but the resistance was strong.

The paper explores the impact of Modernization on the lives of *Adi* Tribe, one of the several tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, through *The Legends of Pensam* written by Mamang Dai. The paper ventures into how the advent of roads altered the register of *Adi* life. The paper also explores how the tribals, the "others" since antiquity, countered the idea of a coercive and hegemonic domination of their life and culture. The paper also expostulates, briefly, how modernization affected the other significant "other" in India, the Dalits and its juxtaposition to the tribal reality. Lastly, the paper tries to extract some aspects of *Adi* culture that could serve as a significant knowledge system for the civilized.

Keywords: Tribals, Register, Modernization, Roads, Resistance, Co-existence

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In India, inarguably, rests, one of the oldest continuously surviving civilizations. This surviving civilization, immanently, has an order of life and culture that, much like any civilization, reached its present form after undergoing a plethora of changes at the hands of diverse powers that ruled it in the last many a millennium. However, there has been, in accordance with the power principle, a hierarchal social structuring of the "human fabric" since the very beginning. The geographical entity known as India in contemporaneity follows suit and has two pairs of this structuring, albeit their presence is evident since antiquity:

1. Aryans and the Tribals
2. Caste Hindus and Lower Castes

Both the structures are placed at different moments in the historical chronology. A sweeping overview confides a sequential, albeit controversial genesis: the Aryans drove the aboriginals to remote habitats, promulgating them as *adivasis*, the first inhabitants, nomenclatured, then, as the tribals: "Economically and socially least advanced, the scheduled tribes are the earliest inhabitants of India. The English called them aborigines…" (ulturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/aboriginal-groups-india); while the Aryans, from amongst themselves, created the Upper Castes and the Dalits, setting it in stone with the *Vedas* and the *Manusmriti*, as Ambedkar says, "A study of the C*haturvarnya* must in its turn start with a study of the nineteenth Hymn of the Tenth Mandala of the *Rig Veda*—a Hymn, which is known by the famous name of *Purusha Sukta*…The Brahmin was his mouth, the Rajanya was made his arms; the being called the Vaishya, he was his thighs; the Shudra sprang from his feet" (21-22).

The Tribals have lived, for centuries, in exclusive spaces, distinguished by their remoteness and difficult accessibility; whilst the mainstream lived in places marked by easy accessibility and connectivity with other identical places. The living areas of both, thereby rarely crossed paths, yet, between the two, it was the Aryans that were powerful and the ones in whom rested power, invariably through kingship of an empire that contained isolated tribal communities. However, the "otherness" to the powerful "Self", combined with the inaccessibility that marked tribal lands, kept them eschewed from the mainstream, allowing them their unique lifestyles and cultures, invariably without much external ado. In other words, the invasion of cultures, of the mainstream, was minimal.

The social system followed the basic principle of "self" dominating the "other". The wielders of power changed with the change of empires but two things remained constant: the social hierarchal system and the tribals, that remained largely untouched but "othered". Industrialization and modernization, in the 20th century in India, made its presence felt in the midst of this "untouched" self-other relationship of the mainstream and tribals. Industrialization and modernization, conventionally, are identified with the birth of industries and several subsequent additions to social life. These industries and commercial set-ups, in turn, lead to urbanization and these urban centres have their own social orders founded in commercialization. The entire artifice of industrialization rests on two factors: roads and railways. The success of industrialization depends and relies on the efficiency of transference of raw materials as well as finished goods, and it is roads and railways that provide the necessary impetus. As Lawrence says in *Sons and Lovers*:

> Carston, Waite & Co. found they had struck on a good thing, so, down the valleys of the brooks from Selby and Nuttall, new mines were sunk, until soon there were six pits working. From Nuttall, high up on the sandstone among the woods, the railway ran, past the ruined priory of the Carthusians and past Robin Hood's Well, down to Spinney Park, then on to Minton, a large mine among corn-fields; from Minton across the farmlands of the valleyside to Bunker's Hill, branching off there, and running north to Beggarlee and Selby, that looks over at Crich and the hills of

> Derbyshire: six mines like black studs on the countryside, linked by a loop of fine chain, the railway. (https://www.fulltextarchive.com/page/Sons-and-Lovers-by-David-Herbert-Lawrence-D1/)

However, the role of roads and railways scarcely remained within the prescribed domains as it rapidly outgrew its 'primary' usage, as it was realized that they could handle transference of, not only goods, but humans as well. Subsequently, human life, beyond commerce, was expectedly significantly influenced by the induction of roads and railways thereby establishing new centres of urban life and, more significantly, making accessible the hitherto inaccessible world of the tribals, the untamed 'pastures' of sources, human, cultural and economic. The subsequent order that then emerged affected the world of the tribals, altering the 'age-honoured' relationships within. In the process, the native register was altered as it witnessed new, unseen avenues. As Mamang Dai, in *The Legends of Pensam*, opines about the tribal world of *Adis*, a tribe in Arunachal Pradesh:

> The village had moved to its own quiet rhythm for centuries, with old certainties and beliefs, but the road was changing all that. It had been over a year now, and the road was still being built. It ran up the mountain like a broken ladder of crumbling earth stained with iron ore. The red gash turned in great loops and bends and plunged into the heart of the far mountains, trying to reach the scattered villages buried deep in the land of mist and wild chestnut. (148)

The defining characteristic that 'demarcated' tribals, for centuries, was their physical and hence, cultural, distance from 'civilization'. They had existed and prospered, unhindered by the fanfare of the rapidly changing 'civilized' world, sustaining their own culture and lifestyle, that, even if altering, was neither doing so at the velocity and ferocity, nor in the paradigm of the civilized world. The tribal world, before the influx of modernization and urbanization, had its own social fabric and centre of power. Mamang Dai refers to some of the traditional practices in *The Legends of Pensam*: *Keyum*, *Kebang* and *Kiruk*. The origins of the *Adi* tribe are traced to the concept of *Keyum*, a nothingness that led to the origin of thought and finally creatures came into existence. The theory of creation from *ex-nihilo* is defined in the *Adi* tribe as:

> In the beginning, there was only Keyum. Nothingness. It was neither darkness nor light, nor had it any colour, shape or movement. Keyum is the remote past, way beyond the reach of our senses. It is the place of ancient things from where no answer is received. Out of this place of great stillness, the first flicker of thought began to shine like a light in the soul of man. It became a shimmering trail, took shape and expanded and became the Pathway. Out of this nebulous zone, a spark was born that was the light of imagination. The spark grew into a shining stream that was the consciousness of man, and from this all the stories of the world and all its creatures came into being. (Dai, 56)

The notions of life and culture for the *Adis* were very simple and this is evidently seen in their practices and rituals that were an extension of their practical life. *Kiruk*, the hunting ritual is a classical example of this: "The men were following the rules of the kiruk, a chosen number beating an area to drive out animals while others waited in ambush,…" (Dai, 13). Hunting, the most significant activity in the life of the *Adis*, was not merely an act of killing, but an elaborate ritual that had to be religiously followed. The traditional order of life had little participation with the civilized world as the two were distinct and communication between the two negligible: "The

villagers at that time had only a vague idea of the places the two men had been to. They knew that far in the east, where there were big caves in an evergreen forest, a road was being carved out of the mountainside" (Dai 38).

The arrival of the roads, then, was gradual, from being a part of heard stories to a city where it had reached to finally "coming home". However, the gradual but certain 'development' marked a paradigm shift, at each stage, in the order of tribal life and things. The urbanized world that entered the tribal domain is referred to as:

> Much later, Pigo became the first choice of the British officers in the area, and for a while it was the only town in the region with tarred roads and concrete buildings and electricity and daily bazaars. The villages at the far edge of the Duyang cluster, however, from where the domain of the tallest hills and the most secret mountains began, had little connection with Pigo. They remained mysterious and remote even long after the British left. They were beyond time. Till the road came. (Dai, 147)

The tribals sat at the periphery of the social order, the "others" produced by the invasion of the Aryans, whether foreign or internal. It also led to the aboriginals being displaced into remote and inaccessible corners. Consequently, the tribals never shared a common physical space with the Aryans and had little stake as direct participants in the social fabric. However, it also leads to the logical conclusion that their existence continued along a different register and dimension, albeit culturally rich and remarkable in its own ways, an "eco-system" of their own. The tribals, consequently, lived their life unabated, in their habitats, till the arrival of modernization. The tribals' plight, then, "re-commenced" 'properly' with the onset of modernization. The argument of "re-commencing" stands the testimony of logic and proof. "Othered" once in antiquity, they were left to their own devices by the mainstream, who scarcely troubled themselves into venturing into the inhospitable locales where the tribals resided. Modernization and the arrival of roads led to a derogatory alteration for them as it reflected the immigration of an alien power structure that was supposedly superior to their 'brutish' realities.

Two distinct registers, then, for the first time, came in contact with each other: the tribal and the modern. The synthesis demanded an active interaction and participation from both the cultures. But the almost paradoxical cultures, made a cohesive start, on amiable grounds, an impossibility. The urban world brought with it, a cultural fabric and register that prided in its "selfness" and hence, was, utterly alien to the *Adi* culture. It asserted itself over the tribal, and much like the first time, ages ago, reduced them to an otherness. However, what made the matters worse this time was that unlike last time when the tribals were displaced to remote locations by physical force of coercion, this influx, less humane and more ideological, asserted its dominance in a shared physical space. The urban culture, then, reduced the tribals to the lowest in the social hierarchy, in their own backyard, limiting their participation to two major avenues: labourers and migrants: "…clan brothers and sisters who travelled down from the hills like a migratory labour force in search of any old job to help them cope in these times of change"(Dai, 172). These are *Adis* who emigrated to the urbanized sectors and were working as cooks evoking the exotica, in the form of traditional cuisines, for the urban elite. Primarily roped in as workers for constructing roads, the tribals persistently were placed at the margins, as the undesired, yet, necessary "other.

As Dai says, "…the migluns were digging a tunnel right across the world. They wanted help in this work and a labour corps was being recruited from the various hill tribes" (38).

The tragedy, however, was also evoked by the realization that the roads were a mere route to the resources, human and economical, that the tribals had in plenty, rather than for any tribal development. The roads, essentially, were constructed for commerce and strategic purposes and the tribals merely were "in the way" and their "otherness" made them easy and convenient workforce. Once the 'connectivity' was achieved, the grossness of urban life was flung into the tribal belts, and decimating their cultural zones in favour of a new world. The urban grossness is evident in the form of burglary, gambling and violence. As Dai says:

> The village had never heard of anything like it before. Their granary doors had been broken and all their precious beads and jewels stolen. It happened at night…Never in living memory had anyone tampered with these houses. The granary was sacred property and it was a taboo to enter one without the consent of the owner. Doors were simply jammed shut with a bamboo stick, and only recently had a few families taken to locking them. (147)

The powerless tribals, the "other", were now directly 'in-touch' with the "self", leading to a severe cultural loss, and traditional practices lost their piousness: "Not so long ago the kebang was the shining institution of these villages that solved all disputes and dispensed justice" (Dai, 159). The entire construct stands in direct contrast to the second major "other" in India, the Dalits, for whom, modernization was an emigration to the alien power structure, superior to their native culture. While the tribals had little or no participation, the Dalits participated as the "other", the powerless, at the mercy of the upper castes, in the same social fabric. The urban social order, that brought a world that was industrial and casteless into being, came as a boon for the Dalits as an alternative order, but on the contrary, played 'havoc' on the tribals. The commonality of the "superiority of urban culture", merely owing to the delineation of power, then becomes contrastingly manifest for the tribals and the Dalits. The tribals, then, protested against the inroads that urbanization made into its fabric and matrix, while the Dalits protested against the centuries old oppression using urbanization as a tool. In other words, while for the tribals, urbanization was an imposter; for the Dalits, it was an escape from oppression. It is significant here, that the protest of the tribals was not against urbanization as much as it was against the cons of urbanization.

Modernization, for its greater cons, for the tribals, proved to be a mere chimera, and roads, which were projected as symbols of progress soon emerged to be a mere mirage that had mesmerized the *Adis:* "…images of a road, vehicles and long rows of electric poles…progress…" (Dai, 149); and disillusionment set in "This one terrible road is all they have managed for us in fifty years" (Dai, 156). However, the onslaught was not untested and "Very few locals took this ragged road" (Dai, 148). Even as the roads were being constructed far away, and tribals sought as migrant labourers, dissenting voices were evident: "What! Ask our own boys to go off into an unknown land and dig earth and die like worms?" (Dai 38). Violence, too was resorted to, in attempts to curtail the rushing bandwagon of modernization, but eventually it reached a point of acknowledgement of the irrevocability of the change and the invasion of an erstwhile alien culture.

What is striking here, though, is that the eventual solution to this inevitability was not any desperate measure, but a reflection of the purest and most traditional aspect of *adi* life: to do good to others. In the *Adi* world, the civilized were the "others", the ones who came, and so, the *Adis*, irrespective of their intentions and cultural paradigms, stuck to theirs: "…if men from the distant cities can come so far to live and serve in these remote outposts, why should we not do better being natives of this land?" (Dai, 142). And better they did, as this eventual stage of protest, far from being violent and bloody, was a product of one of their eternal principles and values: "community living".

Both the salient ideologies of tribal life, sustained themselves in the midst of their "otherness" to the big egoistic "I living" of the civilized world. Mamang Dai, in *The Legends of Pensam* presents a picture of participation that draws, not from the principle of power, but from the principle of "offering" and here, the tribal world takes the upper hand comfortably and constructively. The *Adi* world, then, re-defines the denotative and connotative meanings associated with the term "participation", as their protest accommodated the urban, not because the *Adis* were weak, but because theirs was a culture that assimilated all, relying on the fundamental principle of "EMBRACING CHANGE" (emphasis mine):

> I held up the old binoculars and peered into the glass…I saw, yes, a canopy of trees and a river stretching like an ocean with a trembling silver of light polishing its flat surface. Then, turning the ring a little bit more, I saw, in the distance, narrow apartment blocks, grubby streets, and bamboo scaffolding. I held my breath, mystified, and as I continued to peer intently my sight travelled the horizon and I saw a blue, smoky evening through a window, and through cement walls and through the hills, suddenly, I saw a view of a bright harbor, and sail boats! (Dai, 192)

The essential tribal protest, then, is a stoic upholding of a culture and tradition that is being slandered by the modern urbanized world as the remnant of a smudged and unknown past, resting on oral laurels, worthy of exotica but not worthy in the real world. The gravitas of the act becomes amply clear with the exotic recreation of the traditional art forms in the modern world, a practice purely commercial for the urban world, but is nostalgic for the tribals.

The station, then, reached is critical: co-existence. For the tribals, it comes from an acceptance of the fact that urbanization is here to stay and the conviction that their culture and beliefs are worth protecting, not as ones beyond the domains of reason and logic, but ones that answer the critical questions that the modern world raises: how to survive the Modern World, one where creation exceeds the creator? How to brave the storm of a modern urbanized order that is eating into its own matrix through an absolute surrender to the forces of exclusivity and specializations? The mulish attitude of the modern psyche of self-centredness and self-obsession is turning the modern age into a large sarcophagus. The issue of participation, protest and power in tribal life teaches of a social order that is constructive for humanity, across time and space, a universal truth, in times of hyperreal; a force, much needed in a tattered civilization: Accepting change and co-existing. The straggly outgrowth of the urban on the tribal organism, then, has to acknowledge that the only way forward is a world of assimilation, rather than coercion:

"What a place indeed. Hadn't it survived for so long? Wouldn't it survive these winds of change as well?" (Dai, 161), eventually leading to "Let us live together" (Dai, 156).

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