

Poetry as Social Commentary: A Study of Select Poems of Yumlam Tana

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Abstract:

Tana's commitment and deep attachment to his native land and people becomes his main source of inspiration for writing poetry. His poems are chronology of the transition of culture and annihilation of natural world of his native land with the advent of hollow modernisation. This social unrest and chaos which has been born out of these transitions take a shape of discourse in his poems. In this juncture of shallow conflict between the tradition and modernisation he tried to discover the missing link and attempt to understand the tribal roots through his poetry.

Keywords: cultural transition, annihilation of tradition, racial discrimination, identity and cultural crisis

The development of writing poetry by indigenous writers of Arunachal Pradesh is a very recent trend. It begins with the publication of Sahitiya Akademi Y.D Thongchi's first poem entitled *Junbai* in Assamese language which was published in Assamese children's magazine of same title *Junbai* in the year 1967. In the beginning the poems were written in Assamese language. It is because the first educated generation of Arunachal Pradesh were basically taught in Assamese medium. The themes of these poems were mostly patriotic. Even though literary icon of first generation like Y.D Thongchi could not established himself as a poet but with his few poems he showed a way to his literary followers the possibilities of writing in the genre of poetry. Talom Rukbo, a social thinker in order to develop indigenous language and literature of Arunachal Pradesh wrote a collection of poems called *Baali Apun*(1996) in Adi language using Roman script. With the publication of Yumlam Tana's collection of poems *Man and the Tiger* in the year 1999 writing poetry in English language took a valid shape as discourse of literature in Arunachal Pradesh. It was followed by Padmashree Mamang Dai's collection of poems *River poems* (2004). *The Balm of Time* (2008) and Yumlam Tana's *The wind also sings* (2015). Taro Sindik by winning Sahitiya Akademi Yuva Puraskar award 2017 for his collection of poetry *Aksoro Ki Vinti* (2017) in Hindi language set another milestone in the progress in the genre of poetry in Arunachal Pradesh.

The poems of Y.D Thongchi, Talom Rukbo and Mamang Dai, witnesses the beauty of land and sings the glory of our old age culture and tradition. Yumlam Tana silently laments for the degradation of culture by the influence of insidious foreign culture. Taro Sindik choose to write about intricacies of human relationship, social issues such as religion, corruption in society and personal themes of love.

Yumlam Tana a contemporary of Mamang Dai has his own unique identity in the world of poetry in Arunachal Pradesh. He begins writing poetry very early in his life. Tana is a multi talented mortal. He is a poet, novelist, Journalist, cartoonist and also a painter. He was born on 15th August, 1976 in a poor family of Nyishi tribe. He had completed his graduation from Cotton College Guwahati.

His poems are published in two anthologies, *The Man and Tiger* (1999) and *The Wind also Sings* (2015). Beside, his poems have found space in prestigious publication houses and Universities like *Penguin Book of New Writings from India Vol.4*(2008), *Anthology of contemporary Writers from Northeast India, NEHU*(2003), *Borderlands of Asia, culture, place and poetry*,(2017). He has the great honour of being the first writer in the Arunachal Pradesh who was listed for Gold Medal for his contribution in the field of literature in the year 2016.

Mamang Dai and Yumlam Tana is the first generation of English writer in Arunachal Pradesh. They laid the foundation of creative writing in English. Tana's first anthology *The Man and Tiger*(1999) may be consider as a first valid work of creative writing in English in Arunachal Pradesh.

Tana utters his deep attachment to his native land, culture and people. His poems are chronology of the transition of culture, tradition and annihilation of natural world of his native land with the advent of hollow modernisation. This social unrest and chaos which have been born out of these transitions take a shape of discourse in his poems. In this juncture of shallow conflict between the tradition and modernisation he tried to discover the missing link and attempt to understand the tribal roots.

In his poetry he dwells on the themes of identity crises, racial discrimination, and gradual decaying of tribal culture. His poems are deeply rooted to tribal ethos. He is more concerned about the harsh reality of contemporary time where people are blind by the fascination of western lifestyle. They are no longer a naive tribal people who live in harmony with nature, taking delight in folk tradition but a gentlemen and lady who are more flexible to change. A new culture flourished mainly influence from western culture and lifestyle. The inner contradiction and chaos of fast growth of the new culture brought a cultural amnesia to tribal people, forcing them unconsciously to abandon their own culture and brought them a feeling of inferiority complex for their own tradition.

According to Yumlam Tana, in the last few decades, the state of Arunachal Pradesh has seen many changes, both positive and negative.... In this context, poetry to me is about trying to understand my tribal roots and examine the drastic changes that occurred in our short period of history by the extension of civilization; Especially, the after-effects of postcolonial events from circa 1947 (xii). He describes the changes that society is going through in both positive and negative way. The effect of these transitions is articulated in his poems by a character of ordinary tribal middle age man who is keen observer and profoundly perplexed. In the poem *No Clever English* he sought to voice the ultimate suffering of his people:

*I am a singer
Who prefers to sing,
Uninhibited
By the laws and lexicons of any language,
Songs full-blooded and feral-
songs for my people
Distraught and heartbroken,
Victims of circumstances beyond their ken
And the rapacity of clever people
With education and knowledge (7-16)*

After independence, the native people of Arunachal Pradesh readily submitted themselves to the reign of central government with the expectation of peace and progress, unaware of the fact that this progress will be a Pandora box to them. The progress came with a heavy price to pay. The modern education and lifestyle exposed the naive tribal to world beyond their green mountains. An advanced world of different in manners which erodes the unadulterated life style of natives by making them realized they are backward, primitive and bring an inferior sense for their own culture. In *A Tribal Man Speaks* he depicts the irony of development and progress:

*Let us build towns and cities for them
So that they become shopkeepers, tradesmen,
Politicians and bureaucrats-
Not some hunters and gatherers... (54-57)*

These lines suggest the expectation of integration of tribal's into the modern culture, which may force them unconsciously to abandon their tradition and custom.

He further adds,

*They must be taught that
The trees, rivers, and the mountains are priceless
But have to be cleaved, deforested, and dammed
In order to make more resources
for development and progress – for civilization. (64-67)*

The tree, rivers and mountains are something which defines the identity of the tribal's. Nature is an integral part of tribal world. Extermination of nature is metaphorically annihilation of their culture.

On Leaving the Village and *My Brother, You Live In The City*, like Goldsmith, Tana also idealizes the rural life and natural world. The poems reflect how the natural world of tribal's is being destroyed by intrusion of alien culture and economic and political changes. The acquisition of tribal's learning a new manner of different culture leads them to abandon their mother tongue, cloth, religion, song therefore their identity. In *On Leaving the Village*, these changes are seen by poet as something ill which pollutes the unsoiled atmosphere of his native land:

*Learnt to smoke and gamble, booze and party,
Ride a desk, drive a car, sing a Bollywood song,
Contest election, bid for tender works,
Climb up the social ladder,(33-36)*

.....
*That we forget everything about ourselves,
Our customs, our tradition, our history, our world view.
Now after us,
Our children have disowned their mother tongue...(42-46)*

On Leaving the Village, village stands for old age tradition. Leaving the village by a young boy in the poem can be seen as disowning their own tradition, a tradition which describes history of their ancestor and their identity by present generation. The poet is hopeless to think whether it is ever possible for the present generation to come back to their root:

*In place of the boy who was long gone.
The boy was like the river for whom
Returning life was never an option –(52-54)*

My Brother, You Live In The City, Tana evokes for straightforward way of tribal life compared to deceptive modern life. He is sceptic of modern education which makes the present generation feel ashamed of their ancestral value. Tana strongly believe that modern way of life with its focus on materialistic gain exhaust the simplicity of tribal culture which stand sharp contrast to the way of life pursued by present generation. He blames the advent of hollow modernization has inflicted disconnection between tribal's to their land.

*And in that thing that you call education,
Which I take to be some odious and loathsome,
Dangerous weapon of self-annihilation (35-37)*

Yumlam Tana living with the ugliness of present time is concerned about the contemporary situation. He raised the social issue of racial discrimination of tribal's of Northeast India by mainlanders in his poem. *When An Indian from the Mainland Is Knifed In Australia* is a statement about the treatment of northeast people by mainlanders. He voice against the intolerance and hatred of mainlanders towards northeast people for their distinct looks and culture. Tana painfully laments for those victims who died in the conflicts of racial discrimination. He entreats for equality and acceptance for tribal people of northeast India to live better and in harmony in their own home country. He demands unity and peace with the words:

*In the land of satya and ahimsa –
In the land of the Mahatma and Buddha –
In the land where the people venerate
The pir and the baba equally,
There cannot be intolerance and hated –
There cannot be malice or prejudice.
Man from the mainland India,
We seek an answer. (45-52)*

His poems are impregnate with tradition, custom and myth that are fading away gradually. He is not against progress and development but he is against of negative digression of development and modern way of life which is pushing his people away from primordial bond. By singing for the lost glory of their proud culture, he tried to make his readers feel responsible and connect them to their root when he writes in *A Dirge from the North- East*:

We are the proud children of Abotani. (15)

He uses his poems with an intention to revive the old sublime association between the native people and their traditional world. In doing so he attempts to preserve their identity. In persevering identity, he keeps the traditional culture accessible for posterity.

Tana raises another important issue of crisis of identity and culture. The mainlanders who take pride in calling themselves highly civilized distinct tribal culture as immature and primitive and abhorrence tribal's for being different from them. This made tribal's stranger in their own motherland which has inflicted a deep sense of alienation. His conveyed this feeling of being alienated, rootless and helpless in his poem *who are we*:

*Who are we?
We are tribal people
living in north-east India. (1-3)*

His poems act as means to express dissatisfaction and protest towards various injustices of his people which he expressed in the following lines in *A Dirge from the North-East*:

*The book of maps
Says nothing about our lands and forest rights,
The exploitation of the poor by the rich
The loss of our traditions and culture. (1-4)*

The Poets of India's North-East are known for depicting the prevalent crisis of violence, inter-tribe conflicts, identity crises, intolerance, cultural erosion and so on. They make their product of creativity to make their silent suffering audible to periphery. Yumlam Tana joins the league by expressing his discomfort for erosion of tribal ethos in the face of modernization - a voice giving the correct simulacra of the pitfall of tribal's culture. His poems showcase his deep attachment to his land, which seems to be the main source of his inspiration for writing poetry. It is a chronology of the transition of culture and gradual bereavement of natural world of his native land. He projects the consequences of cultural transition which initiate issues of dying of old age culture and brings home a sense of cultural identity crisis.

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