

Poems from the Periphery: Incorporating the Marginalised into Mainstream

By

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Introduction

The complexity of India's geopolitical situation has been reduced to simple dichotomies like India versus China or Pakistan versus India. When it comes to geopolitics involving India, China, and Pakistan, the possibility of other factors and perspectives has been largely ignored or silenced. The public opinion of Arunachal Pradesh and Kashmir has been assumed to be in line with that of so-called mainland India in the ongoing border dispute between the two states. By branding them separatists, militants, and terrorists, the dissenting voices in both Kashmir and Arunachal Pradesh have been either silenced or shunned. By ignoring the variety of opinions on both sides, it has become easier to promote the simplified narrative that frames public opinion as being either pro-India or pro-China and Pakistan. An examination of the literature from these regions reveals a public opinion that is diametrically opposed to the one propagated by the country's dominant media.

Many different ethnic groups coexist in India's northeast. The largest state in the Northeast, Arunachal Pradesh (previously known as Northeast Frontier Agency), is no different. Many different tribes and sub-tribes can be found in this state. Some of the most prominent indigenous groups in Arunachal Pradesh are the Adi, Nyishi, Yobin/Lisu, Galo, Tagin, and Apatani. The Mishmi tribe (Sulu) is divided into three subtribes: the Idu-Mishmi, the Digaru-Mishmi, and the Miju-Mishmi. Indigenous peoples speak a total of around 50 different languages and dialects, the vast majority of which are Tibeto-Burman.

The state and the rest of the Northeast were relatively peaceful until the British came with their guns and ammunition, followed by the Indian Union, which, armed with a different set of tools, decided to absorb the Northeast into its empire while preaching lofty ideals like unity in diversity. The People's Republic of China, which includes much of the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh in its South Tibet territory, provoked the Sino-Indian War in 1962 (Mohan), the first major conflict in the region. During the war, the Chinese People's Liberation Army overran and occupied a large portion of Arunachal Pradesh. Since joining the Indian Union, nearly every Northeastern state has had some sort of territorial dispute with a neighbouring state or a foreign country, and border violence has become commonplace (Prashar).

Yumlam Tana is a member of the Nyishi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. The Nyishi are one of the Tani groups of tribes, along with the Adi, Apatani, Galo, and Mishings of Assam, and they believe that they are descended from the mythical ancestor Abotani¹ and Jiwt², the

¹ The mythical forefather of the Tani group of tribes, Nyishi, Adi, Apatani, Galo, and Mishings of Assam.

² The daughter of the sun goddess who was married to Abotani. From her and spiders, the tribes had learnt the art of loom weaving.

sun goddess's daughter and Abotani's wife. His writings provide a lens through which to examine state politics that is distinct from the one promoted by the country's most influential media outlets. These books offer a rare glimpse into tribal life and the effects of colonisation from the inside. You learn more about the native people of Arunachal Pradesh and their role in the region's complex geopolitical landscape.

Indian Leadership and Arunachal Pradesh

The following extracts from Friere's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* do an excellent job of outlining the Indian leadership and its role in the Northeast after 1947: "Leaders who do not act dialogically, but insist on imposing their decisions, do not organize the people--they manipulate them. They do not liberate, nor are they liberated: they oppress" (Friere 126). "The oppressors do not favour promoting the community as a whole, but rather selected leaders" (103). The people of India underwent a radical transformation after the British left in 1947, becoming the antithesis of their colonial masters. Upon gaining control of their own destinies, instead of humanising themselves, they set their sights on conquering other peoples, and the Northeast, with its plentiful resources and diverse population of different ethnicities, was an easy choice. The British set out to mould Indians into "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" ("*Minute on Education* (1835) by Thomas Babington Macaulay"). This was accomplished through a rigorous process of Indianization that used gentler tactics. A class of people who are Arunachalee in blood and colour but Nyipaks³ in taste, in opinions, and in morals have been created as a result of the government institutions across the state offering higher education in either English or Hindi, excluding the local languages; emphasising the employment and career opportunities that these two languages offer; and promoting North Indian and western culture through newspapers, magazines, cellphones, TV. This caste has been institutionalised to serve as government representatives over the entire tribe. Like an oppressor, the government has been picky about which citizens to help. Those whose prosperity helps bring it to power and who faithfully serve it have benefited from it. This urban, privileged class is made up of former slaves and other members of the oppressed. Tana observes that the men of the tribe who have moved to the new cities look down on their own people, their language, and their culture with disdain. As a result of their new-found wealth and power, they have begun to exert dominance over their fellow tribesmen and have even adopted some of their masters' personality traits. According to him, the brotherly relationship that once existed between the tribal city dweller and the villager has broken down because the city dweller has abandoned the tribal language, clothing, and mannerisms he once knew. The following lines are taken from a poem he wrote to his brother who attended public schools and now resides in the city, and they discuss this predicament:

"Where they say men are taught to scorn their culture
And women made to spurn their lovers,
Where little children are taught to lisp foreign words
And feel ashamed of their mother tongue.
Look how you lord over us now,
Basking in your newfound glory," (Tana 9).

The poet also claims that the tribes felt the same under Indian government rule as they did when they were ruled by the British. The following lines addressed to the Indian government are an expression of this sentiment:

"Benevolent masters!

³ A word for non-tribal or outsider in the Nyishi language
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You had masters before
You developed the capability
To become a master yourself-
Of our people and our land-
Our forests and mineral resources.
How does it feel to be lorded over by foreigners?
Know that the feeling is very mutual here” (28).

Exactly what Nyipaks were after in these far-flung jungles and mountains remains a mystery to him. The state of Arunachal Pradesh has always been considered a developing nation. There are no major corporations head-quartered there and no major industries or factories producing anything. The following lines echo the poet's confusion at the thought of his house being coveted:

“There is nothing to covet here,
No wealth, no pomp, or personal glory;
Only the harsh realities of life-” (15)

A developed state may lack the natural resources that the Nyipaks covet, but he comes to see that his home country has plenty to offer. He says:

“...we are poor but our land is rich” (20).

The Arunachal Pradesh tribes had previously been isolated from modern warfare until the Chinese invasion. Tribes from outlying settlements fled into the jungles for safety as the war raged. They saw their forests cut down, their houses razed, and their loved ones killed. The tribes were terrified as they witnessed a war on an unprecedented scale. First, the dragons descended from the mountains and delivered a message to the tribes:

“Look at us...how we look like you.
You are chinks⁴ like us, my dear brothers
We are here only to drive away
The brown and hairy people off your property” (Tana 19).

The natives were baffled by the sudden appearance and violent clashes of so many soldiers of varying hues on their territory:

“They came from the mountains
And also from the plains-
Soldiers yellow, brown and black-
And murdered one another
In our backyard.
Who were they?
Why did they come?
What were they doing in our lands?” (37)

And now they know why two Asian giants fought in their lands, the poet continues:

“Now we realized
That it was to have mastery over us,

⁴ A derogatory name used to address people from Northeast India.

To claim our land and its resources,
To increase the size of their maps
For strategic considerations,
For ambitions and hubris,
Not out of concern for our language and culture
Or for us, the children of the dawn” (38).

The “Other” Voice

Supporters of India and China dominated public discourse during the conflict. Media outlets at the time portrayed the conflict as being between two stakeholders, India and China, and ignored the third stakeholders, the tribes on whose land the war was fought. Major world powers sided with China or India. No matter what the tribes wanted or which side they were on, public opinion cast them out. Tana's poem tackles these meaty issues head-on. His poetry captures the emotions of the "third parties" involved in the conflict: confusion, fear, and a desire for peace and quiet in their homeland.

The Indian Union promotes the concept of unity in diversity, but Tana laments that in the push to unify diverse tribes with the rest of India, the tribes have lost their unique identities and cultures. The tribes have strayed from their traditional, ancient ways of life as a result of their integration with the rest of India, the establishment of English and Hindi medium schools, colleges, and universities, and the promotion of one national identity. They are so interested in foreign cultures that they have begun a lifestyle that Tana warns is “full of pitfalls and tragedies if they are not very careful” (Tana 26). Due to unemployment and poverty, young people have abandoned their language and culture, begun naming their children after popular Bollywood actors, and listened to Western and Bollywood music instead.

The poet laments that Jiwt's daughters, the tribal girls, no longer weave tapestries with intricate patterns and rich colours, neither do they “in the wake of automation and the onslaught of cheap bazaar/ Goods... the time or the knack for a dying art...” (22).

Tana describes how Indian leaders—whom he labels as "trespassers"—attempted to reshape the Northeast and its people by giving the region new names in a language alien to its original inhabitants:

“The trespassers, not knowing what to call the place,
Named it, in alien tongue, Arunachal Pradesh,
Albeit the land of rising sun” (Tana 13)
“That is how Gekar Sanyi became Ganga” (14)

He uses two examples to illustrate this point: the state of Arunachal Pradesh, whose Sanskrit name means "Land of the Dawn-Lit Mountains," and a lake near Itanagar that was previously known as Gekar Sanyi but is now known as Ganga lake due to the state's incorporation into India. The government of India didn't stop with just changing the names of the state, lakes, and rivers. The locals were even given new names as a result. Arunachalee is the new name for the people formerly known as Adi, Niyshi, and Apatani. Since everyone already had lovely tribal names, the poet is left wondering why anyone felt the need to change them.

Conclusion

Despite living under the same roof for the past seven decades and promoting the catchphrase "unity in diversity," there has been little genuine integration on the ground between

the tribes and the rest of the population of the country. The state's tribal population remains divided from the rest of India because successive Indian governments have done nothing to improve their status in Indian society or to end their discriminatory treatment as second-class citizens. The Indian population, like the government, has been indifferent to the tribes' plight. In the streets of major Indian cities, including the nation's capital, people from the Northeast are regularly harassed and called derogatory names like chinki, momo⁵, and corona⁶ (Tripathi). As racial discrimination cases skyrocketed, the government considered adding new provisions to the Indian Penal Code (IPC) (Hakoip). Despite decades of living together, people in the South still assume everyone from the Northeast is from China, Thailand, or Myanmar. They refuse to accept the reality that India is home to people of many different ethnicities and that just because someone looks a certain way, it doesn't mean they're from another country.

In the lines that follow, the poet vents his anger at the futility of the integration process his tribe has undergone with the rest of India. His dissatisfaction with the rest of India's seeming indifference to his efforts is evident:

“When you mistake us
For a Japanese or a Chinese tourist.
You know so little about us,
Despite six decades of living together
And adopting your freedom fighters
As our patriots,
Accepting your government,
Learning to speak your languages,
And trying to fit in every possible way” (Tana 16).

Taking into account the prevalence of insurgent and separatist groups in the Northeast, the support they receive from the general public, their capacity to cause disturbances in the region, and the widespread apprehension among indigenous communities that they will be conquered by outsiders, Yumlam Tana's writings demand a careful and sympathetic analysis that paints a clear picture of the complex causes that gave rise to them. Instead of dismissing Tana as "just another separatist voice babbling about various issues of the tribes," we should read his writings with compassion and understanding. If the Indian government doesn't take preventative measures to ease the tribes' anxiety and insecurity, which have been exacerbated by the recent Citizenship Amendment Act, a darker future may be unfolding before our eyes. The works should be viewed positively as a means of enlightenment for those in authority, shedding light on the realities on the ground in the state of Arunachal Pradesh and the rest of the Northeast, and the potential consequences that the status quo may have for India as a union of states in the near future.

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⁵ A Tibetan dumpling that is a popular street food in India. The word momo is also used as a derogatory slang for people from Northeast.

⁶ In the wake of coronavirus pandemic in India, people from the northeast began to be called corona because of the similarity in their appearance with people from China, where coronavirus originated.

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