



Title of the book: THE LEGEND OF PENSAM

Author: *Mamang Dai*
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Mamang Dai is the most eminent writer of Arunachal Pradesh writing in English. She is a former civil servant, journalist, poet, and novelist. Her book "The Legend of Pensam" is an interesting record of Myths and legends of the Adi tribe; one of the major Tani groups dominating East Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh. In a way, it is telling the world that Arunachal has lots of myths and folklores to share with the world in the sense that it is only about one tribe when there are 26 major tribes and more than 100 subtribes living in these regions with their specific traditions, cultures, folklores, and ethnicity.

The word 'Pensam' in Adi means 'in-between'. The author herself has stated, "*It suggests the middle or middle ground, but it may be interpreted as the hidden spaces of the heart where a secret garden grows.*"

Metaphorically it might represent in between 'the real' and 'the mythical world', or in between 'the uninhabited high mountains' and 'the plains', or it might also suggest in between the 'old world' and 'modern world.'

The book is divided into four major sections; subdivided into chapters. Each section deals with episodic narratives. In the first section "diary of the world" gives an insight into the superstitious nature of the tribe. They are simple beings having animistic beliefs. They believe in spiritual existence even in inanimate objects. Every mishap taking place in their area happens because of harmful spirits: - a man died because he saw a serpent with horn on his head, Hoxo's father died in a hunting expedition soon after he had seen the water serpent, Biribik, Kepi's illness was because his father Togum killed a python, Kamur hacked his wife and children because he was haunted by an evil spirit. These beliefs of the villagers help them in peaceful co-existence with forest ecology and their surroundings.

The second section "songs of rhapsodists" presents the intrusion of some foreigners who were brutally massacred. We get a picture-perfect knowledge about festivities and myths connected with them, from invocations and songs sung by the Shaman. We also come to know how shaman, or the miri is an integral part of the life of these villagers. They are called upon to perform rituals to ward off evil spirit, dangers, illness; and

in a way, they are recorders of histories: *"Such are the histories recorded by our shamans and rhapsodists,..."*(p.63)

The third section, "daughters of the village" portrays the women of the village doing their daily chores. It depicts their wants and their desires, their failures in love, their losses, and how time heals all the wounded hearts. Then, there is a beautiful description of a love affair which blossoms between the local girl Nemen and the white man David. Their love didn't reach its destination, but she overcame this failure and moved on with her life: - marrying Kao, bearing a girl child Losi, and enjoyed her life until one fine day she passed away silently.

The last section "a matter of time" depicts that 'change is unavoidable'. Awareness of education sets in -people traveled to far off places for education in difficult situations, in search of better opportunities. New roads are being constructed to connect the villages, but some villagers do not approve the development as granary doors are broken open and all the precious beads and jewels are stolen for the first time in their history:

"The village had moved to its own quite rhythm for centuries, with old certainties and beliefs, but the road was changing all that." (p.148)

T.V and telephones have reached the villages. The portrayal of Sirsiri is vivid and powerful: - a good gambler, with great temper, always with a litany of complaints but a very good singer; in the last chapter when she sings, she casts a spell on the audience. Even in the climax, a mythological story is performed on the stage where the actor sees a microphone for the first time and wonders, *"...if any true emotion could be communicated through the cold metal pitted with holes and fitted to so many cables and wire."* (p. 187) But for people like Rakut he understands that 'change is inevitable' and therefore he says: - *"Why should we be afraid of change?... Change is a wonderful thing! It is a simple matter of rearrangement, a moment of great possibilities! Why should we be so afraid?..."*(p.191)

The stories in 'The legend of Pensam' refers to historical development in these areas. In 1911, Noel Williamson, a political officer set out to explore the course of river Siang and he was brutally murdered along with 48 sepoys and coolies in the village of Komsing. Though the real reason for his murder is not known, many assumptions were made and one of them is that he was killed because of the seduction and romance that developed between a local woman and a British official. The man who struck the first blow was banished to black waters. To this day a memorial stone tablet stands in honor of Noel Williamson in Komsing. Another historical event recorded is the great earthquake of 1950 which shook for days and created fears in the minds of the villagers. Landforms changed and floods came and devastated the villages.

The book takes us on a journey to the land of mountains and hills, lush green trees and bamboos, deep gorges, big stones, caves infested with bats, rivers and incessant rains. It is an interesting and lyrical narration of the routine life of tribal communities and their simplistic beliefs and innocence. Mamang Dai has realistically painted the canvas of Adis from the primitive to the transitory period. It is mesmerizing how well the author has penned down in words the depiction of simple village folks: - working in their fields, carrying firewood, selling fruits, and dancing and singing in festivities.

What appeals to me most in the book is that though written in English language, the local essence is not lost: - usage of localized words like *miglun, aying, si-ye, ga-le, tapon*, etc and reference of all the myths and legends which were handed down to us from generation to generation in the form of oral literature has been interwoven creatively and artistically with the characters to give us a complete understanding of the Adi tribe. This book is a must-read and must-have book if the reader is interested in the tribal people of India.