

**Celebrating Otherness of the Tribal Culture: Mohonto Panging's Keerook and Other Stories from North East India and Dayaram Verma's Siyang ke Us Paar**

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**Abstract**

The North East – an umbrella term used for the seven north eastern states of India – is a site of rich cultural diversity with hundreds of tribes cherishing their distinct identity, customs and traditions. While on one hand, these customs and rituals are so vital to tribals, the mainstream culture brushes them aside by simply terming them as tribal beliefs. Naturally then, these distinctive cultures have always been in a dyadic relationship with the mainstream culture wherein the mainstream culture represents the self while the tribal cultures form the other, hence marginal and insignificant.

Literature has always played a pivotal in triggering new concepts and ideas. The creative artist, with his highly imaginative and sensitive eye, is able to touch the finer nuances of such relationships, thereby broadening our mental horizon in the process. The present paper offers a study of two texts on the North East i.e. Mohonto Panging's Keerook and Other Stories from North East India and Dayaram Verma's Siyang ke Us Paar from the perspective of celebrating cultural diversity in all its sundry shades and contours. While the first text is written in English, the latter is written in Hindi with its title literally meaning "beyond the Siyang." The way both the authors seem to be advocating for the need to understand the otherness of the tribal culture and its celebration for its real integration with the mainstream culture, opens new apertures of hope for the otherwise politically fragile and volatile region. Further, the choice of a text authored by a North Indian and another by an insider makes the study more comprehensive and indispensable to see a mosaic of cultural diversity in India.

**Keywords:** Dyad, culture, diversity, folk beliefs, self-other .

The Contemporary shift in literary studies towards pluralism and multiculturalism has re-accentuated the need to include various ‘voices’ in the mainstream. In the Indian context, the representation of these ‘voices’ becomes all the more significant as they constitute the picturesque mosaic of the highly diverse Indian life and culture. Obviously then, this representation must be comprehensive and composite enough to incorporate all religions and all sections as also those who have been denied proper ‘space’ in the mainstream society.

The North East has been one such region that has been denied a proper space in the mainstream Indian culture. Despite the fact, that the region is highly rich in cultural diversity with hundreds of tribes holding their beliefs and customs, it has often been projected as the ‘volatile’ zone. As a result, the region has never been perceived as a rich treasure trove of multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic and multi-cultural identities. Obviously then, there is a need for exploring the region for a composite understanding of the concept. In recent past, there has been an overt change for the better in the approach towards the North-east. The government policies have also started focusing on the tremendous potential of the region in conceptualizing the Unity-in-Diversity of the country. The journey from Look North East Policy to the recent Act North East Policy is, in fact, a testimony to the fact that there has been an increased interest in the culturally rich North East. Highlighting the cultural diversity of the North East, Mamang Dai, a leading author from the North East, makes an important statement when she says: “North East India is a potpourri of numerous diverse ethnic and linguistic communities. While the shared environment has led to certain commonalities, each tribe and race still retain their distinct customs, language, and traditions” (“Foreword”, vii).

Here it is pertinent to note that there has been an objection to the homogenous representation of all tribes of the region under one umbrella term i.e. the North East. The proponents of this viewpoint underscore the need to recognize the distinctiveness of each tribe and its practices. Certainly, there is some point in the argument; however, for a broader understanding of the issue, the north east has been used as a single entity to put it vis-à-vis the mainstream Indian culture. This endeavour has its own limitations and challenges apart from the political undertones. The major one is that it leads to contestation of various positions as they are in dyadic relationship. In order to imbibe the spirit of true celebration of cultures, one must overcome the overt challenges of contestation and give in to the essence of human bonding. This is exactly what the two authors seem to be doing in the texts under discussion.

The collection “Keerook and Other Stories from North East India” offers simple and ‘cozy’ narratives, each providing a first-hand glimpse of life in the North East. These are, to quote Mamang Dai, “untold stories unique to North East India” (vii). Mohonto Panging exhibits a composite understanding of the cultural diversity by situating his narratives in such a manner as to allow a meaningful interaction between persons of different regions and classes. He advocates for the recognition of the otherness of the other person or group rather than attempting at a sweeping homogenization which automatically would lead to oppression of the marginal cultures at the hands of the dominant, mainstream culture. He says: “Different cultures are expected to have different lifestyle norms like dress sense, eating habits, music tastes etc” (135).

Again, it is through this recognition of the otherness that cultural diversity can be celebrated and propagated effectively. Now, this recognition can be experienced at two levels. One, the recognition is practical level i.e. the need to tap the natural as well as human resources of a particular region to promote national, ideological interests; while on the other hand, it follows spontaneously after the fundamental understanding of the human ethos – the simple and basic humanitarian principles. Panging clearly advocates for the second level which, to him, is more sustainable. That is why he effects a healthy interplay between his characters, primarily based on honest and innocent feelings. He brings them together, allows them to jostle with one another and feel the difference and thus, changes their perspective for the better.

By and large, it is the tribals who impress upon the mainlanders with their qualities. Simplicity, Sincerity and Steadfastness appear to be the leading principles of the tribal life. The life is simple and therefore, it is full of peace and contentment. The villagers live in perfect harmony with nature and practice deep ecology without being overtly conscious of the ecological issues. The tribals continue to preserve natural resources simply by cherishing their age-old traditions and culture. However, their efforts are viewed as orthodox and impractical and therefore, remain a binary of those by the mainstream academia and government agencies. In “Keerook” – the title story – Mohonto Panging underscores the need to perceive the essence of the tribal culture that shows respect to all natural phenomena, living or non living, as against the fallacious and myopic viewpoint of the government agencies who claim to be the sole ‘custodians’ of the ecosystem.

The tribals have their own beliefs, customs, traditions and superstitions which they follow in all earnestness. As such, there are hardly any disputes. If any, they are resolved amicably at the Kebang – the meeting of the village elders. With their limited needs and desires, they live life fully. It may be surprising, and to some shocking, that they are not aware of the concept of a ‘country’. However, their vision may be limited but not narrow. These are simple people and yet, by no means ordinary. They adhere to the basic, fundamental principles of life. There are several instances where the sheer simple gestures present a counter perspective to that of the so-called civilized and educated.

Rigio feels it when he fondly recalls that “Before starting on the journey, his Ayu had ensured that he had a full meal consisting of rice, boiled Potto and kopi vegetables and his favourite Dinho. His Abu always told him that a man should always start the day on a full stomach, for it was never sure when the next meal would be” (64). Similarly, the wisdom of Dutta attains philosophical tones when he justifies telling lies thus: “That’s right...one should not lie...but occasionally...to protect somebody...for human brotherhood...a lie may be better than the truth...” (78).

In the story “Tribal Living and High Thinking”, a group of urban, educated, young men and women working for an NGO visits the interior parts of Arunachal Pradesh to collect data for a project on tribal children. These people find themselves struck at a remote village following a technical snag in their vehicle. Left with no other option, the group spends three days with the villagers and is deeply influenced by the simple and affable behaviour of the

tribals. The group members become a part of the tribal life and leave the village satisfied. It is only after some days of tranquil reflection that they are able to grasp the real, intrinsic worth of their stay:

During the discussions, it emerged that their three days stay at the village and the interaction with the villagers had a profound impact on all the group members. They were all impacted by the few fundamental questions about lives and livelihoods. The villagers lived a simplistic life style without any modern amenities. Even without electricity and the associated amenities of modern life... they lived a peaceful and contented life. The maddening lifestyle of the metros where everyone seemed to be in a rush to satisfy life's basic needs seemed exactly the opposite...The fundamental question in their minds was had civilization and modern education complicated their lives for the worse? (162-63)

Similarly, sincerity – the second principle of their life – governs all the actions and reactions of the tribals. The genuineness of their emotions is beyond doubt. There is absolutely no guile in their moves. If one loves, one loves with all sincerity and dedication. In the story, “Bhoyamor Suwali”, Rokom belongs to a remote village in Arunachal Pradesh whereas Moyna belongs to a comparatively urban area. They fall in love with each other and due to hostility by Moyna's family, they elope. Their elopement shows a pure and simple act of mutual love, trust and commitment. There are no betrayals, no ideological maneuverings, no breach of trust. The lovers stand in solidarity with each other and face the world together. Again, the reaction of the families afterwards fizzles out with the passage of time as their reaction was only under the given circumstances. There are no instances of long-cherished grudges and malice against the lovers. Therefore, there are no such instances in the stories where the lovers face the brunt of the family in the form of honour killings and such gory acts of violence. A similar instance is noticed in the story “Odyssey to Thoubal”, wherein “Tiken was a Manipuri Meitei from Thoubal, about forty kilometres ahead of Imphal and Thingachon was a Tangkhul Naga from Ukhrul in Manipur... Being a Manipuri Meitei boy and a Tangkhul Naga girl, there was stiff opposition from parents, relatives and friends on both sides” (46). Obviously, the traditions do not allow “inter community and inter religion marriage” (ibid) within or without the North East. The families do not accept the love affairs but once the marriage takes place and the moment passes, they accept and welcome the ‘rebels’ into the family with open heart, holding no grudge as such.

Siyang ke Us Paar is again an interesting study of the celebration of cultural diversity. The protagonist who gets appointed at the forward post of Indian Air Force in Arunachal Pradesh easily gets mixed in the all-inclusive culture of the tribals. Not only does he develop friendly relations with Myong didi, Dey, Mansi Madam and others, he effortlessly falls in love with a girl of Memba tribe. The best part is that the localites approve of the affair without creating any fuss. It is not that the tribals do not have a sense of identity or respect for their customs and traditions, they are basically guided by their instincts and humanitarian principles. That way, the environment in the novel is relatively more liberal in comparison to the story quoted above wherein the love affair between a North Indian and a Memba girl

causes no uproar. This holds true to both the love stories i.e. Debang and Mini; and Vikram and Nismi.

Another aspect of this interplay is that it is not unidirectional in nature. In other words, it is a two way process. If on one hand, people from the urban areas get influenced by the simplicity of the tribals and are totally mesmerized, the tribals also get to know the ‘outsiders’ better. In the story, “Trip to Borgang...” Rigio, the young boy from Arunachal Pradesh, feels the inner goodness of the ‘outsider’ Dutta when he is not only saved by the latter from the threatening group of local bikers but also offered cordial hospitality. When Rigio offers to leave after the potential threat of the bikers subsides, Dutta simply turns down his request: “That’s not possible, my friend...you have to watch the Bhawna...have Bhaat with us and spend the night here. There is no way you can go back like this...no one goes back from our village without having Bhaat...and that is a friendly order” (75). Here Dutta exhibits the basic human tendency of fellow feeling for Rigio and this gesture makes his vision towards life broader. When Rigio thanks him for his timely help and shelter, Dutta says: “You are welcome, Rigio...we all are brothers...aren’t we?” (77). His warmth and cordiality leaves Rigio completely rapt who now comes to realize the essence of human bonding to rise above the narrow mental barriers:

He let out a silent laugh on the thought that what a fool they all had been by carrying wrong impressions of the Harings...about being untrustworthy and suspicious! In his case, without the Harings protection he might have landed up in deep trouble. He realized that this had been a lesson for him on human bonding (77).

Similarly, in “Exodus to the North East” the locals from Hyderabad actively help save the North East group from the violent mob. They thus further strengthen the universal bond of humanity. The steadfastness of the people is seen in the story when “Small groups of people like Manoj, Ista, Rocket, Pari, Kevisa, Zonunsanga, Govind, Rumi, Jennifer elected to stay back in their respective adopted cities risking their lives in solidarity with the true essence of India” (91).

Naturally, both the authors, Mohonto Panging and Dayaram Verma, take a balanced stance towards the issue in “leanings towards unity in diversity” at both levels i.e. within and without North East. While on one hand, they seem to be calling for more interaction among the various tribes within North East India, they also stand for a meaningful amalgamation and interaction with other Indian states. Ista-Arun, Dutta-Rigio, Vikram-Nimsi, Debang-Mini are good examples of emotional bonding across the barriers of region and culture at Pan India level. Instead of weighing the pros and cons along the dyadic plane i.e. the mainstream-marginal, insider-outsider positions, both the authors seem to be suggesting that the real celebration of diversity comes by embracing not the political ideology but the basic humanitarian ideology. The following lines from Panging’s narrative “Tribal Living, High Thinking” clearly present this approach towards the celebration of cultural diversity wherein he uses the rainbow metaphor to put forth his concept of diversity: “Any modern, healthy and thriving country must encompass equality of all religions, races, castes and tribes. Like the

multi-colored rainbow, diverse races, castes and tribes add to the vibrancy of any important nation” (144).

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