
UNIT 17 THE LEGENDS OF PENSAM BY MAMANG DAI

Structure

- 17.0 Objectives
- 17.1 Introduction
 - 17.1.1 Locating North East India
 - 17.1.2 Locating Writing from the North East
 - 17.1.3 The Oral Tradition in Folklore and Literature from the North East
- 17.2 Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*
 - 17.2.1 Introducing the Author
 - 17.2.2 Introducing the Location
 - 17.2.3 The Text: Structure, Content and Analysis
- 17.3 Let Us Sum Up
- 17.4 References and Further Readings
- 17.5 Check Your Progress: Possible Questions

17.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to

- understand the unique position of the North East with respect to the rest of India;
- appreciate how the topographical, cultural and political distinctiveness generate a very unique kind of literature from this region;
- be able to understand the specificities of Arunachal Pradesh and locate Mamang Dai as a writer from Arunachal Pradesh and from the North East;
- comprehend how Mamang Dai is one of the writers from the North East who handles the existing realities in conjunction with the wealth of traditional oral literature that is present in Arunachal Pradesh; and
- realize that *The Legends of Pensam* is a modern response to an ancient and traditional culture that both particularizes and universalizes its extant reality.

17.1 INTRODUCTION

17.1.1 Locating North East India

We are all aware that the North East comprises the seven states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. It is a study in diversity:

The North-east ... is an extraordinarily rich and diverse region, in natural resources and beauty, in its peoples and their rich social and cultural inheritance, in the resonance of its complex politics and post-border ethnicities. But the place is also extraordinarily tragic in the range of the violence it has suffered and the blood that has been shed in the name of preserving national unity and upholding India's security. (Hazarika *Writing on the Wall* ix)

You will all agree that the image that the word North East conjures up for most Indians is of an entity distinct from the mainland and populated by people equally dissimilar – geographically, historically, racially and linguistically. One of the reasons for this perception is its geographical position, which makes the region almost detached from the mainland: “India’s Northeast is a misshapen strip of land, linked to the rest of the country by a narrow corridor just twenty kilometers wide at its slimmest which is referred to as the Chicken’s Neck” (Hazarika *Strangers of the Mist* xvi).

This is further accentuated by the fact that the Northeast India is located at the junction of four geographical areas: Central, South, South East and East Asia. There are international borders on almost all sides – Tibet and Bhutan to the north, Myanmar to the east, and Bangladesh to the south and west. The intersectional location of the region accounts for the fact that there are perceptible influences of China, Tibet, Myanmar, Bangladesh and even the South-east Asian region, which are seamlessly integrated into the local cultural structure and milieu, thus making it a “cultural treasure-trove” (Datta 3-4). Paradoxically, however, this identification with neighbouring countries in terms of cultures and physiognomies also makes the average North Easterner distinctive from the rest of the population of the country. Most of the people inhabiting the region are of Indo-Mongoloid origin, while many scholars have also discerned Austric, Aryan, Islamic and Dravidian affiliations (Datta 4). The diversity of the Northeast can be gauged from the fact that it is home to over two hundred ethnic groups which constitute 42% of the entire tribal population of the country. Vaishnavism, Buddhism and Christianity coexist with the animistic faith practiced by a large section of the tribal population, and there are “scores of different languages and dialects, most of them belonging to the Tibetan-Burman cluster of the Sino-Tibetan family ... [and] some languages with Austric affiliations” (Datta 5). Most of these languages have rich stores of oral literature and other folklore material.

The topography too is varied, and comprises lofty mountains and small hills, plateaus and river valleys and plains. The diversity of physical features is matched by an equally rich variety of flora and fauna, and weather and soil conditions. The topography and ecology have influenced every sphere of life in the region and these and other miscellaneous essentials account for the unique tapestry of material and socio-cultural diversity that is characteristic of the North East. However, this discussion does not just intend to give you a picture of how ‘different’ the North East is. We have to keep in mind the link between the particular and the universal, succinctly articulated by Mamang Dai herself:

The image of the North East region of the country is that it is a mosaic of tribal culture. That it is very remote. That it is full of trees and mountains and that it is a troubled place with lots of insurgency and army, and counter insurgency operations. All of this is true. Many people also associate the region with a beautiful landscape, a naturalist’s paradise, a land of big rivers and colourful festivals in worship of benevolent gods and goddesses. All this is equally true. So what have we got here then? There is conflict and there is tranquillity. This must be like everywhere else in the world. And like everywhere else, moving through this landscape, there is a band of people struggling with pen and paper ... to express their feelings. (“North East Poetry”, online article)

This brings us to the issue of creative writing from the North East, and we will discuss this in the ensuing section.

17.1.2 Locating Writings from the North East

The first thing that needs to be acknowledged while speaking of the North East, as the above discussion illustrates, is that it is a mosaic of cultures. There can be no overarching narrative that subsumes the whole region into a single entity, as that would risk “homogenize[ing] a location where no homogeneity can ever be imagined” (Satpathy, online article). In fact this would replicate the predicament that the region itself has experienced with respect to the larger nationalist narrative, a problem that Paolienlal Haokip of the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, New Delhi, succinctly summarizes in the following words:

Besides, the nationalist discourse, a dominant theme in most historical texts, which legitimizes nationhood, based on differences with ‘others’ tends to influence regional, ethnic and religious communities. Those on the periphery of a state whose heroes are not featured as heroes in the national historiography, whose cultures finds no mention in the national culture and whose religion is identified with ‘others’ and vilified are extremely vulnerable to the temptations of secessionism. Augmented by the lack of economic welfare and the collapse of governance, these disillusionments can give rise to revolts. This thesis fits the situation in North East India. (qtd. in Gupta Singh, online article)

The North East had always been placed outside the purview of studies in Indian culture and history, and till very recently, serious attempts to study this region in conjunction with the larger narratives of the nation have been few and far between.

The fact that a considerable majority of the population is tribal was one of the causes for the interest of colonial ethnographers and anthropologists in this region. They recorded the customs, manners, languages and everyday life of the people. The incursion of Christian missionaries began around the same time. Except for Assam, Tripura and Manipur, which had linkages with the Indic culture of South Asia, the rest of the North East had affiliations with Mongoloid South East Asia. However, as the British ensconced themselves in India, colonial political expediency led to the entire region being yoked together with India. The region was evidently a colonial construction as was the demarcation of borders, which were also imposed. This historical legacy was handed down to independent India as well, and the interests of the Indian nation state have been at odds with the reality and the aspirations of the people of this region. There is a history of resistance to both British as well as Indian attempts to administer the area, most of the issues being linked to cultural conflicts which translate into identity-based political agitations. However, the renewed political and academic interest in the region at the turn of the century holds promise for the generation of a proper perspective to understand the region and its variegated reality.

Historical exclusion is just one part of a larger picture, where, apart from freedom fighters, creative writers, thinkers, academics, artists and many others find no mention beyond the borders of the region in nationalist discourse. Writings from and about the North East tend to focus on these unresolved issues. Most of the literature from this region reflects the experience of change and the response to it. Identity, ethnicity, violence, marginalization and life lived amidst this volatility are, understandably, the content of creative and critical writings from this region. Urvashi Butalia of Zubaan, talking of creative writers and writings from the region, observes: “When publishing writers from the North East it is difficult not to look at the political nature of that writing. Virtually everyone writing from there is somehow or the other rooted and involved in the politics of the region” (qtd. in Borpujari).

However telling the story as it is just one part of the reality. There are narratives which chronicle change from a different perspective. Tilottoma Misra, who recently brought out the two-volume *Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India* observes:

An intense sense of awareness of the cultural loss and recovery that came with the negotiation with 'other' cultures is a recurrent feature of the literatures of the north-eastern states. Each small community or linguistic group has responded through its oral or written communication to the encounters with the majoritarian cultures from either mainland India or from outside the borders of the country, in its own distinctive manner. (qtd. in Borpujari)

It is this oral communicative tradition and its transliteration into the written that we will now talk about.

17.1.3 The Oral Tradition in Folklore and Literature from the North East

Geographical seclusion and inaccessible terrain have helped the North East remain one of the few places in the world where some pockets of tribal life and its cultural traditions and institutions still remain almost untouched. The unique identities of various tribes, which have their basis in ethnic difference and in their distinct cultures, have not yet been run over by the process of globalization and its commodity culture that has erased the distinctive identities of many cultures. Though not completely untouched by these processes, the tribes' negotiation with the onward march of globalization and its discontents are still in evidence. And it is the folklore and the folk-life of the region which is the repository of their unique identities. It would be relevant if you go through what Mamang Dai, the author whom we will take up for discussion next, has to say about this in her essay, "Oral Narratives and Myth":

In the fast-paced global world of today, one may well ask what the worth of these old stories and legends is. The question of direction and destiny has become one of great complexity and soul searching. And the question is 'Where do we begin? What is the most important thing to start with?' Perhaps in this, myth and memory have their role too. How do we identify ourselves as members of a community belonging to a particular place, with a particular history? Some of the signs for this lie with our stories. We are here today as members of a community with a particular set of beliefs, by an act of faith, because we believed in the 'word' as composed in our myths and legends. It is here that we may find that peculiar, indefinable something by which we recognise each other, and make others see us as a group, a society, a people of a particular community. Today I might say that these stories of gods and demons have no basis in logic, but the storyteller will tell me that they were born out of reason, out of the minds of men. The stories did not come out of nowhere like a bolt of lightning. Life generated it in us, and the significance of songs and stories is that they demonstrate the complex nature of human faith founded on memory and the magic of words in the oral tradition. With time, the collection of myths developed into parables and a code of conduct that became the basis for daily customary practice as observed by the tribes. Everyone knows the stories, in one form or another, and it is this knowledge that links the individual to a group, a certain region and community, but most often the stories are inseparable from the routine of daily life that they are not even perceived as stories anymore. (5-6)

That is why, in these times of change, it is even more important to negotiate the content of these stories and keep them alive. It is these stories that give their people the sense of identity, and help people relate to and think about their culture.

17.2 MAMANG DAI'S *THE LEGENDS OF PENSAM*

17.2.1 Introducing the Author



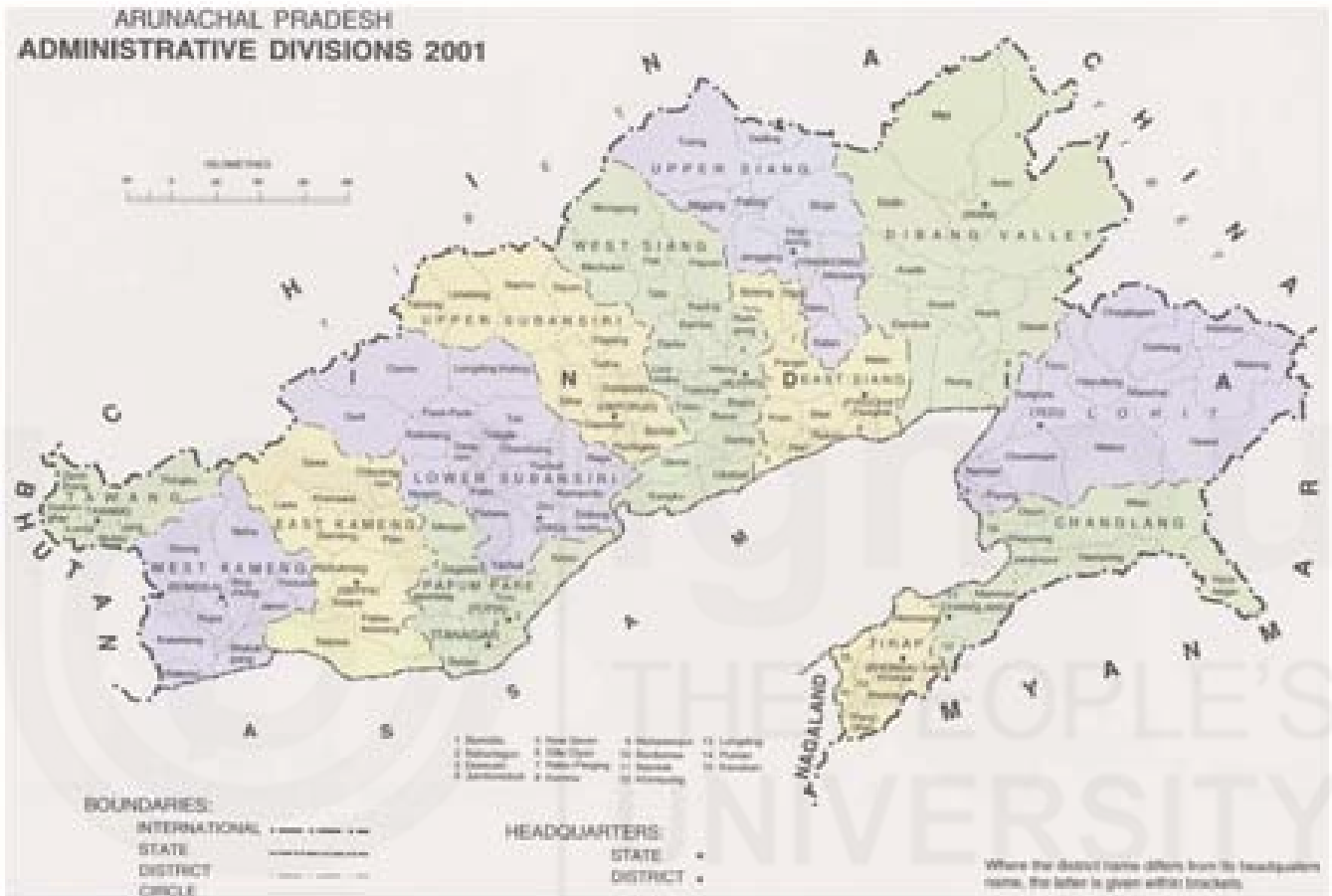
Dai (courtesy *Muse India* <http://www.museindia.com/authprofile.asp?id=244>)

Mamang Dai is a poet, novelist and freelance reporter. She has worked as correspondent for various dailies like *Sentinel*, *The Telegraph* and *Hindustan Times*. She was the Project Officer in the Biodiversity Hotspots Conservation Programme of the WWF in Arunachal Pradesh. Dai, who was conferred the Padmashree in 2011 for Literature and Education, has also been associated with the Arunachal Pradesh Literary Society, Sahitya and Sangeet Natak Akademi, Raja Ram Mohun Roy Library Foundation and the North East Writers' Forum in various capacities. However, Dai is principally known as a creative writer and a historian who writes about Arunachal Pradesh. A one-time civil servant, she quit her job to devote herself to writing. She is the author of *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land*, a documentation of the culture and tradition of a state about which not much is known, and *Mountain Harvest: The Food of Arunachal Pradesh*. Her creative writing includes two novels, *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) and *Stupid Cupid* (2009), two volumes of poetry titled *The River Poems* (2004) and *El bálsamo del tiempo* (*The Balm of Time*, bilingual edition, 2008), and two illustrated books of folktales for children titled *Sky Queen* (2005) and *Once Upon a Moon Time* (2005). Mamang Dai talks of herself as an Itanagar-based writer.

17.2.2 Introducing the Location

I happened to visit Arunachal Pradesh in February 2014. As I was preparing for my journey, I tried to find a detailed map of the state on the internet, but the maps I came up with appeared curiously bare. I conjectured that probably, because of the sensitive and disputed nature of the region, complete geographical details might have been deliberately withheld from the public domain. However, just to cross-check on this idea that occurred to me, I tried an internet search about the data regarding the state. I found that Arunachal Pradesh is the largest of all the states which comprise the North East having an area of 83,743 sq. kms, and one of the

larger states in the country. However, it has a population density of 17 per sq. km., the lowest in India, as per the State Census of 2011. The maps that seemed blank and incomplete now made sense. The region is the most sparsely populated in India. It is only in the last decade or so that it has opened up for tourism and development. Earlier known as NEFA (North East Frontier Agency), it was accorded union territory status in 1972 and named Arunachal Pradesh, or the Land of the Dawn Lit Mountains. It was accorded statehood in 1987. The state shares its border with three countries – Bhutan to the west, Myanmar to the east, and China to the north and north east. The 1080 km. long international border with China is a site of incessant conflict, with Chinese incursions and claims of Arunachal Pradesh being a part of China being a regular occurrence.



(Map courtesy <http://eastkameng.nic.in/data/MAP/adminMap2001.htm>)

Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* talks about Arunachal Pradesh from the perspective of its original inhabitants, the tribal populace. In her "author's note", Dai says:

Arunachal Pradesh ... is one of the largest states in the country, and also one of the greenest. It is the homeland of twenty-six tribes with over one hundred and ten sub-clans, each with a different language or dialect. Part of the Eastern Himalaya, the land is criss-crossed by rivers and high mountain ranges running north-south that divide it into five river valleys. The mightiest of its rivers is the Siang, known as the Tsangpo in Tibet, and the Siang valley, stretching northwards to the Tsangpo gorge where the river enters India, is the territory of the Adi tribe who are the subject of this book.

Like the majority of the tribes inhabiting the central belt of Arunachal, the Adis practice an animistic faith that is woven around forest ecology and co-existence

with the natural world. There are few road links in their territory. Travel to the distant villages still entails cumbersome river crossings, elephant rides, and long foot marches through dense forest or over high mountain passes. (xi)

It is this land that Dai talks of as an Arunachalee and an Adi: a land of “pristine forests and rich bio-diversity” whose beauty makes you “forget your aches and pains” (xi-xii). *The Legends of Pensam* is “an intricate web of stories, images and the history of a tribe” set in the territory of the Adis nestled in the mountains of Arunachal Pradesh, the ‘pensam’, or ‘in-between’ place:

In our language, the language of the Adis, the word ‘pensam’ means ‘in-between’. It suggests the middle, or middle ground, but it may also be interpreted as the hidden spaces of the heart where a secret garden grows. It is the small world where anything can happen and everything can be lived; where the narrow boat that we call life sails along somehow in calm or stormy weather; where the life of a man can be measured in the span of a song. (Epigraph, vi)

17.2.3 The Text: Structure, Content and Analysis

The Legends of Pensam is a series of interconnected stories divided into four sections titled “a diary of the world”, “song of the rhapsodist”, “daughters of the village” and “a matter of time”. The first issue that I would like to draw your attention to is that there are some standard features of narrative fiction which are not followed in this work:

- 1) The title of the book, the titles of the four sections and of the stories within them are in lower case. This conscious stylistic differentiation is probably meant to foreground the movement away from universality and towards indeterminacy and fluidity as suggested in the word *Pensam*.
- 2) Instead of a single protagonist around whom the story of a novel usually revolves, the focus here is on an entire community, the Adis. This shift of focus from individual to community is also part of the same attempt to position the text in an in-between space, away from the markers which are the standard interpretative apparatus of narrative fiction.
- 3) The absence of an overarching narrative focusing on the protagonist is also noticeable. Instead, there are a series of stories that are disparate, yet interconnected.

What seems to be the primary focus of the author is her desire to chronicle how an entire way of life changed when it came in contact with the colonial regime in the late 19th and early 20th century. The stories relate not just to the location called Pensam, but also metaphorically to the issue of how the Adi are negotiating this change, and how they are in an “in-between” position. The structure of the work may be interpreted as reflecting this indeterminacy.

The Legends of Pensam begins with a “prologue” which frames the narration. The prologue talks of a group of six people including the narrator flying from Assam to Arunachal Pradesh. As the helicopter in which they are travelling leaves the plains behind and approaches the hills and mountains, the narrator reminisces her childhood and the stories which sustained the dream-like quality of the early years of her life. Now as she traverses the path which takes her back to the land of her birth, she attempts to bridge the disconnect between her past and her present, the stories that nourished her childhood and the realities that sustain her in her adult life.

The book begins with a description of the narrator's return to Gurdum town, where she lived before she moved to the "big city". From there she, along with her friend Mona, travelled together to Duyang, "the village of widows", which was also the ancestral village of the narrator's mother (12). The homecoming was in major part occasioned by the fact that Mona, proprietor and editor of a glossy magazine called *Diary of the World*, was always on the lookout for "unusual true-life stories" (16-17). Mona is of Arab-Greek extraction and her husband Jules, a famous development scientist, is French. Theirs was a "mobile lifestyle" that entailed a lot of travel across countries and continents, and they were on a brief posting in New Delhi at that time.

The first section, "a diary of the world" opens with the story of Hoxo, "the boy who fell from the sky" and was found in the forest by Lutor, famous chief of the Ida clan of the Adis, who brought him home. When asked about the child, Rakut's father, who was with Lutor, replied: "There was a great noise and fire in the sky and then our son fell to earth" (40). Hoxo was brought up by Lutor and his wife as their own child. Lutor was later killed in a hunting accident, an event portended by his sighting of the water-serpent named Birbik:

Anyone studying the signs could understand that something unnatural was bound to happen ... now that Hoxo's father had seen the serpent. ... So no one was surprised when Hoxo's father was killed in a hunting accident shortly afterwards. A tragedy was expected. (10)

Hoxo grew up and married Losi, a warm and innocent girl who was born to the river woman. Their house was a warm and happy place full of people: there were his two sons, their five children, and friends, brothers, sisters and relatives who came and went at any time, and there were visitors. "Day or night, the fire was always burning and the enormous pots and pans with heavy lids were full of food or contained enough leftovers to feed another ten people" (12).

The narrator and Mona climbed the hill to reach the village of Duyong, and to meet Hoxo and his family. They were welcomed by Losi, and soon Hoxo's mother also emerged from the house. Her presence induced a spell on her two visitors. The narrator told Hoxo's mother about Mona's interest in the stories of the village. Hoxo's mother remembered that her grandson Bodak had an interesting story to tell, the story of "the strange case of kalen, the hunter". One day Bodak and his friends decided to set off for a hunt. They were joined by Kalen who had been ill with malaria for the past one month. Sighting a band of monkeys, the hunters decided to follow them. However, Kalen went off by himself. The weather changed suddenly and the band of monkeys also disappeared. All this augured some evil. Loma, one of the members of the party, fired at what he thought was a monkey, but it turned out that his shot killed Kalen. On the way back, just as Bodak and Loma crossed the bridge to the village with the dead body of Kalen, the lashings of the rope bridge came undone, and the rest of the party toppled into the stream below. Bodak observed that it was a cursed afternoon, and that the men "had come back from the realm of malevolent spirits" (15). Kalen's widow, Omum "carried on with her life without stopping to pine or utter recriminations" and "[t]he village, too, carried on" (15).

As the narrator and Mona sat sipping rice beer brought for them by Hoxo's mother, waiting for the feast that Losi was preparing for them, Mona narrated how her daughter Adela had been diagnosed with autism, and how she and her husband had to leave Adela in a school for autistic children. Hoxo, who was listening to the story, narrated an incident that occurred in the neighbouring village of Yagbo around

the same time that Adela was diagnosed with autism. Kepi, the two-year old son of Karyon Togum, had high fever, and after that he could cry, eat and sleep, but couldn't move. The parents went to the hospital in Pigo, and consulted many famous shamans. Almost a year later, someone remembered that Togum had shot a python and maybe it was the spirit of a snake that had coiled itself around the child. In "the silence of adela and kepi", Hoxo tells Mona and the narrator that it fell upon him to perform the snake ritual that would free the child, but it was too late, and "the spirits had moved away to a place beyond recall" (24).

The next story, titled "pinyar, the widow" tells of the tragic tale of Pinyar, who fell in love with Orka, a member of a different clan, and bore him a child out of wedlock. Within a year, Orka left Pinyar and took the child with him. After some years Pinyar was married to Lekon, but tragedy struck again when Lekon was killed in a hunting accident. Soon after, her house caught fire and as was the custom, she was banished to live on the outskirts of the village. However, this was not the end. Pinyar's son, Kamur, who had grown up into an able-bodied young man, cut down two of his children with a dao in a fit of madness. Pinyar did all she could to save him, and in the end she was able to secure his release from the authorities. The tribespeople could not understand the meaning of the incident, but as always, "the community rallied to restore sense and order" and things gradually returned to normal (31).

The animistic faith of the Adis, who believe in spirits and supernatural powers, was a faith of coexistence. The characters, steeped in traditional beliefs, could coexist peacefully. But the times when people negotiated the space between the lived world and the world of the supernatural in a way that allowed them to exist harmoniously with each other and with nature changed in the 1800s with the advent of the first white priests, surveyors and soldiers. It is this time of change that is talked of in "small histories recalled in the season of rain", when Lutor and Rakut's father go to work on the infamous Stillwell Road being built by the Bee-ree-tiss (British) and American migluns.

The first four stories in the first section are independent stories and thus not really in continuity except for the fact that some characters are common. They are logically untenable, unreal and open ended. They do not yield to any attempt at rational interpretation. But they are sustained by the community's unshakeable belief in the stories and how they generate an understanding of the world. As Pinyar the widow says: "Faith is everything" (Dai 35). However, the last story in this section opens up a further dimension. On the one hand the narrator tells us how the spirit of the place and its people "had this quality of absorbing visitors into a forgotten newness of things... a feeling of how things might have been" (37); on the other, it tells us how the incursion of the migluns brought them face to face with change. Hoxo puts it succinctly when he says:

We saw a strange new glimmer in the distance. Our footsteps led us down unknown paths. We wanted more. Suddenly we knew more. There was more beyond our poor huts and cracked hearths where we once eased our dreams with murmured words and a good draft of home brew. (43)

The changes were plenty. People who practiced animistic faith in community oriented setups suddenly came face-to-face with the realities of Western modernity, the Christian religion and individualism as a way of existence. All that followed was inevitable.

The second section, "songs of the rhapsodist", comprises four parts – "travel the road", "the heart of the insect", "the case of the travelling vessel" and "farewell to

jules and mona". The first three narrate, through myth and memory, stories of the lives of the ancestors in the form of the ritualistic song and dance performances of the ponung dancers. The rhapsodist is the miri, the great shaman, dressed in a ga-le (traditional lower garment worn by women) and wearing a dumling (intricate hair ornament). He is the narrator of these stories. In "travel the road", Jules, Mona, Rakut and the narrator travel to Komsing, "the village where the migluns had gone". There the miri, with the help of the Ponung dancers, narrates the story of the killing of Noel Williamson. It was in Komsing that a series of confusions led to the unfortunate death of Noel Williamson in 1911, along with Dr. Gregorson and forty-seven coolies and sepoy. Williamson had been working in the region for almost two decades, and when he was killed he was exploring the course of the Siang river. This led to the punitive Abor expedition of 1912, intended to catch the culprits and send them to the Andamans. A memorial stone for Williamson was also erected in Komsing.

A story relating to another aspect of Adi life is recounted by a rhapsodist in "the heart of the insect", in which we have a glimpse of the Adis' annual ritual of travelling to the snow-mountains to harvest the root of the deadly aconitum which is used to poison arrows.

In "the case of the travelling vessel", the headman of Komsing recounts the story of a fabulous vessel called a danki which was owned by the Lotang family of the Migu clan. The vessel was cherished by family as an auspicious gift from the gods which was responsible for the good fortune of the clan. One day, the vessel was found split into two and this was followed by a decline in the fortune of the clan. The clan decided to perform an elaborate ritual and a miri was called from a neighbouring village. The miri decamped with a bag full of stolen coins and a number of heavy necklaces of precious stone. A maternal uncle of the Migu clan gave chase, and when he finally managed to locate two women to whom the miri had given the necklaces, he killed them in a fit of rage, and also killed an onlooker. After the incident, he did not return to his village. He married and settled down in Sirum village of the Duyang group. He returned back to his own village after fourteen years, but a link had been established between the Migu and the people of Sirum. All history, the headman concluded, was a history of connections:

There are many stories that link clans. Sometimes we forget how these connections were made, but everything is interconnected. Sometimes a connection is born in the middle of war. Sometimes it is through a woman, sometimes land, and sometimes it is through an object out of the past. (61)

The headman explains to Jules that these histories are recorded by the shamans and rhapsodists, and in times of crisis, "all the remembered links of kinship are called up and word is sent to clan members to come to the aid of their brethren" (65).

The section concluded with Jules and Mona being given a traditional sendoff from Duyang village. The entire village came to see them off. As they were leaving, Hoxo and Losi bade them goodbye: "You who travel, may you not tire on the way" (69).

The section called "daughters of the village" comprises five parts. The first two parts, "the words of women" and "a homecoming" describe how the narrator, who had left her village and settled down far away, eventually comes back and settles down in Gurdum town. The section discusses her relationship with her mother, her experiences of love and the lives of the village women in general. Old Me-me puts it succinctly when she admonishes Arsi who complains about her life and dreams of a freer existence:

‘You waste your life thinking useless things,’ she was telling Arsi now. ‘What is the use? And where is the time to think, tell me. In this one life it is enough work just trying to keep body and soul together. You must marry. A woman’s marriage beads and the obligations she fulfils as wife and mother are the true measure of her worth.’ (76)

The lives of the village women continued in this strain, their unhappiness and rage both ineffectual. Folk wisdom helps them come to terms with the inexorable laws of nature and society.

The other stories in the third section – “river woman”, “the scent of orange blossom” and “rites of love” – deal with story of Nenem and her daughter Losi. Nenem was a young girl of legendary beauty, a woman who could be as calm or as impulsive and unpredictable as the river. Her beauty attracts David, a young British officer posted in the region and soon, an enigmatic romance blossoms between the tribal girl and the miglun, an unheard of occurrence in those days. However, when David is transferred to some other place and wants to take Nenem with him, she is unable to let go of her roots – her land and her people. She stays back: “No one dies of love. I loved him, and now I am enough on my own” (109). After some years, Nenem gets married to Kao and has a child, Losi. She comes to terms with the pangs of her aborted relationship and draws contentment from her present life. However, when she has to leave her village and settle in some other place when her village is destroyed in the flood following the earthquake, she cannot tolerate the pain and passes away.

Nenem’s life and death epitomize the pangs of transition from one way of life to another, and Mamang Dai’s movingly poetic description of the tenderness of love and the pain of separation that characterizes the relationship of David and Nenem, and later, the relationship between Nenem and Kao exemplify the middle ground between polarities that characterized the region at that time.

The last part is titled “a matter of time” and comprises five parts. It talks of how change has affected the individual and the community. The road becomes a symbol for encroachment into the pristine lands in the name of progress and development, a symbol of injury to the land:

The village had moved to its own quiet rhythm for centuries, with old certainties and beliefs, but the road was changing all that ... 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 people did not know what to make of the developments that were taking place in the name of progress. The old life was lost, and there was nothing tangible occurring yet:

The old days of war and valour had vanished. They had surrendered their lands to the government and now the road and the things that came with it seemed to be strangling them and threatening to steal their identity like a thief creeping into their villages and fields. (157)

The four parts of the work trace the history of the evolution and growth of the region. The first part deals with the generation that existed before the colonizers came in. The second part outlines the coming of the colonizers and the changes that were occasioned due to this. The third part outlines the lives and experiences of the generation that grows up after the advent of the migluns, as their world opens up

and they have access to education and professional opportunities. The last part outlines the effect of modernity on contemporary society. Standing face-to-face with the changes that have engulfed the traditional tribal societies, the author is apprehensive about what would happen next and that all these musings might lead nowhere. Rakut puts it succinctly when he says: 'We are peripheral people. We are not politicians, scientists or builders of empires. Not even the well-known citizens or the outrageous one. Just peripheral people, thinking out our thoughts' (190). However, Rakut further argues that one need not be afraid of change as the resilience of the Adi people will see them through these upheavals as well:

'Why should we be afraid of change?' Rakut was arguing. 'Change is a wonderful thing! It is simply a matter of rearrangement, a moment of great possibilities! Why should we be so afraid? We all want to be happy, but happiness eludes us as we keep thinking about it all the time. Sleepless nights. Sad, bereft mornings. Then suddenly, for no reason, the blood hums and a feeling of elation carries us through another day! This is how it has always been. We have nothing to fear.' (190-1)

17.3 LET US SUM UP

Mamang Dai uses the ancient myths and rich tribal folklore in a framework of past historical events and contemporary reality to build up a complex document that celebrates both the commonplace and the mystic in nature and life. Her description of the surroundings, the relationships and the lives of people is lyrical and draws the reader into the spirit of the region. A whole way of life is brought alive from the times of its origin through the appearance of the colonizers to the present day. The concerns articulated by another powerful voice from the North-East, Temsula Ao, make it clear that *The Legends of Pensam* is a work which is relevant in the contemporary turmoil of change:

The cultures of North East India are already facing tremendous challenges from education and modernization. In the evolution of such cultures and the identities that they embody, the loss of distinctive identity markers does not bode well for the tribes of the region. If the trend is allowed to continue in an indiscriminate and mindless manner, globalization will create a market in which Naga, Khasi or Mizo communities will become mere brand names and commodity markers stripped of all human significance and which will definitely mutate the ethnic and symbolic identities of a proud people. Globalization in this sense will eventually reduce identity to anonymity. (Ao 7)

17.4 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS

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17.5 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Note: Your answers should be in about 300 words.

1) How do writings from the North-East reflect the concerns of the region?

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2) Describe briefly the locale in which *The Legends of Pensam* is set.

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3) How does *The Legends of Pensam* give voice to a whole way of life that is caught in the throes of transition?

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4) What is the relevance of a text like *The Legends of Pensam* in a world that is fast being globalized?

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