



CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF AVLOK LANGERS 'IN PURSUIT OF CONFLICT'

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KEYWORDS :

"I envision a homeland, a place where we as a people can live comfortably with our values and traditions."

Northeast India is the most unpredictable and insurgency affected place in the country after Kashmir. It is the easternmost part of India. The region is composed of eight states viz. - Meghalaya, Manipur, Assam, Mizoram, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Sikkim. Northeast bonds with five countries - Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and China. The region connects to India only through a fine and fragile land corridor measuring merely 22 kilometres.

For the tribal communities here, their land is a part of pride and dignity. Their demands range from autonomy within the provisions of the Indian constitution to outright secession. Resistance for them is a life-and-death problem. They believe that this kind of resistance is only possible through self-determination. The levels of harmony between the northeast and government of India are not excessive. The area has also received little consideration from either the national or the international media. It is in this context that Avlok Langer, a young conflict journalist tries to expose the political picture of the region through his book 'in pursuit of conflict. And what he is trying to establish is to look into the ideological construction of these so called 'tribal-cultures' by looking into apparatus of representation like archaeology, history, and ethnography, political theory and social commentary used by Indian/foreign powers to talk about the northeast in a certain way and how these contributed to the political/military power and domination of the 'mainland' over these regions.

The sense of identity related to culture comes from the knowledge about the culture which the individual acquires from his life either through his own experiences or from the intentional inculcation of the idea in mind by someone else. This collective feeling of "culture" creates a romanticized notion of a society which can be called 'own' in individuals mind and he positions himself within a framework thus in a sense limiting himself to a fragmented view of the world. Thus in pursuit of conflict is a book that maps northeast from various cultures. This work is politically momentous because it generates and disseminates ideas about those particular cultures. North-east is the land of riots and chaos. Avlok in this work points out nearly 25 groups/ organizations and many of them (separatist), attempts to interview many leaders from these underground groups because he thought it as a call to the world to wake up and take note of what is possibly one of the most geopolitically significant parts of India.

As he was interviewing 'General' Phunthing Shimray, the commander-and-chief of the Northeast's most prominent underground group, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland or NSCN (IM, the 'Isak-Muivah' group), he was concerned about his own identity. He is confused about the moral correctness of what he was doing. He defines himself as a journalist who was the son of a serving Indian army general who had shaken hands with underground leader. This guilt comes in to play many times in this work. Yet he believes that his dual identity would define his Northeast experience and will give a better understanding of heterogeneous cultures he

comes across in his expedition. When General Phunthing Shimray, explains why Nagas are where they exactly are at this time and space the Marxist ideology of class conflict and emancipation, Hegel's spirit of history and Freud's repressive psychology manifests itself. He says, "You are a man without a home; your ancestors didn't fight for their homes, and today you are a man without land. We Naga's don't want that, we don't want to lose our land. So we fight. "This resistance against the mainland and despise towards the Indian government which adapts a step motherly attitude towards the Northeast, pushed these tribal communities into a resistance mode and a general feeling of incredulity towards the administration of Indian government. There is no credibility left because the government revealed themselves to be oppressing and homogenising. While the government takes a totalizing stand, they fail to see the small, local, heterogeneous and marginalized communities/tribes. Here General Phunthing Shimray shares the idea of Benedict Anderson when he says that Nations aren't just born, they are created by people coming together ... it is about the aspirations of the people and their right to choose. Thus, the nation becomes a collective that exists in the imagination and thinking, which is more of a fantasy than reality. In another words nation is 'a powerful imaginative idea.'

Despite talking about the tribal conflicts of northeast, the author is also going through a sort of identity crisis. His lack of 'home', a singular root, was something he was acutely aware of. For what are you? questions, given his complex lineage, military-induced nomadic life- style and a Buddhist name, he was confused about who he was, and answered, "I am a homosapien, with a set of complex, interrelated emotions, ideas and thoughts based on my environment and upbringing, who happens to be born in India". He was aware that he can't and will never be able to define himself in a more streamlined, community based existence as a Bengali, Jat, Bihari or Tamilian because race as a category is not scientifically demonstrable. This is exactly why throughout the emotive words of underground leaders about 'their' land he remains unaffected, because the idea of collective tribes of northeast is somewhat of a recent phenomenon. And why this idea of one's own land? Because that's an idea that gives them a root in history and a narrative of their own in this vast interplay of narrations.

At some point in the text General Thenoselie Keyho says that the treatment of Indian government towards Nagas didn't scare then because they were not criminals or savages, but tribals who are fighting for their rights. This feeling of 'anger over fear' is a recurring theme amongst the Northeast. This feeling emerge from a strong sense of tribal identity. The self- here is connected with thought which is true about any cultures. Thus, it can be said that the sense/view of self is existing within discourse. And can consider the context in which the self is in dynamic, constant relation , politics. The tribal self is a territory constantly fought over by the draconian forces of mainland. The sidelining as primitive, savage, underdeveloped, criminal, poor and weak generates in to actual administrative manifestations. Reasonable student of mankind should express an interest in epistemological

enquiry of cultures, especially dominant, subversive cultures. Such inquiries will elevate us from imaginative representations of the 'tribal'. Ideas of figures such as Frantz Fanon hold a considerable amount of credibility if we try to read the northeast along with his theories. As he points out 'rejection' indeed leads to alienation and violence. The use of tribal identity as a means of forging a national identity alienated large sections of Northeast. Gradually anti-Indianism of tribal cultures of Northeast, very easily swerved into intolerance, xenophobia, nativism and tribalism. This tribalized cultural nationalism and anti-Indian thoughts form the basis of mainland vs. Northeast narrative.

Avlok Langer mentions Tripura phenomenon, which in short can be defined as the shifting of political power from tribal to non-tribal that resulted in the erosion of tribal land reserves and culture, including their language, as the main driving force behind the insurgencies in Tripura. This deterritorialization, for tribes, which are limited, self-contained and closed pose a threat. Because such usurpations of spaces intrude upon the current, breaks continuity and affects the present by bringing a future in the context and constantly reminds of losing a huge part of culture and identity.

Talking about Garo Hills in western Meghalaya, he says that the place had been the epicentre of insurgency for decades. He was interviewing Torik Hanging Marak who was the spokesperson of the Achik National Volunteers Council (ANVC). According to Toric they are far behind other parts of the state in terms of education, development and economics. They have been neglected for too long. Their idea was never to challenge the state but to knock on government's door and be heard. Here we can see that the tribal cultures are trying to negotiate with the economic conditions. What Avlok is trying to make us understand is that identity is in constant dynamic relation with the economy, where economic base determine the cultural form. Thus insurgency/resistance is a text, a cultural form in itself where the self-seek a chance to narrate itself amidst of dominant culture/mainland discourses.

In 'In pursuit of conflict' Avlok traced the Northeastern society, especially the race struggles and tribal resistance in Meghalaya, Nagaland and Tripura, giving considerable importance to economic and political culture and seeks to situate and interpret the northeastern practices within the institutional structures. From Lyotard to Spivak and Aijaz Ahmad, from postmodernism to recent critical race studies this work invites multitude of readings. The northeast issue should be understood not with deliberately held political ideologies, but with cultural systems that heralded it, out of which it came into being.