

## Indian Tribal Narratives: Retracing History and Culture

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### Abstract

Culture, a term with abstract meanings, can highlight Eastern culture's perceived spirituality over Western culture. Indian culture, with a 5000-year history, is captivating, blending adaptability and indigenous values. This paper focuses on ethnic life representation in Indian literature, especially through tribal communities. Novels by tribal authors serve as a platform, analysing ethnicity in socio-cultural and historical contexts. Literature offers insight into lives, experiences, and teachings, shedding light on marginalized indigenous populations seeking recognition. Emerging literature lets indigenous ethnicities represent dynamic cultures and reclaim hidden histories. The paper's primary objective is to discuss the socio-political and cultural significance of tribal literature. It accomplishes this by analysing tribal

narratives from Kerala and Arunachal Pradesh, featuring works by authors like Narayan and Mamang Dai. These narratives delve into tribal identity and their struggles within the mainstream system. The paper provides an insightful examination of tribal life and society in these regions, as portrayed by these authors.

**Keywords:** Culture, Indigenous, Ethnicity, Marginalised, Tribal Literature

The term "culture" is often associated with notions of good taste and refined manners in its simpler sense. However, it takes on a broader meaning when considering the material embodiments of good taste and refinement. According to S. AbidHussain, culture can also have a more abstract connotation, referring to a system of ultimate ends or norms of life. For example, when people debate whether Eastern culture is more spiritual than Western culture, they are invoking this abstract sense of the term. But when it comes to Indian culture, it holds a unique and captivating place.

Indian culture boasts a long and continuous history, spanning over 5000 years. India has developed a way of life that it has modified and adapted as it encountered external influences. However, this way of life has remained aligned with indigenous doctrines and ideas, which has allowed Indian culture to endure and shape the lives of its people over centuries. India stands as a country with an incredibly diverse mixture of traditions and cultures, making it truly unique. As Martin Luther King Jr. once expressed during his visit to India, "To other countries, I may go as a tourist, but to India, I come as a pilgrim." Yet, what truly sets India apart is the presence of its unique tribal cultures.

The customs, traditions, rites, and rituals of India's tribes find expression in various novels written by authors, some of whom belong to these tribal communities themselves. This research proposal aims to delve into selected Indian novels that represent the ethnic life of different communities across the country. It seeks to conduct a comparative study by placing each of these literary works within their socio-cultural and historical contexts. The

primary focus of this analysis revolves around the issues of ethnicity portrayed in the fiction, offering insights into the ethnic worlds of various communities.

Literature serves as an indispensable record of human experiences, observations, and teachings. It acts as a powerful instrument for self-expression by capturing the nuances of human life. Notably, indigenous people often find themselves relegated to the margins, living outside the limelight of mainstream society.

In contemporary times, marginalized indigenous ethnicities are actively seeking global attention to establish their own identity or, at the very least, make others aware of their existence and unique cultural heritage. This proposal acknowledges that Northeast India is a region characterized by its diverse ethnic groups, each with its own rich tapestry of cultures, languages, and religions. It is often regarded as a melting pot of diverse races, castes, and cultures, yet paradoxically, it remains one of the most under-represented regions of India.

The region's troubled political atmosphere, combined with its scenic landscapes and the confluence of various ethnic groups, has given rise to a distinct body of literary works that stand apart from the rest of India. Emerging literatures from Northeast India serve as a platform for the varied indigenous ethnicities to represent their dynamic cultures, re-establish their ethnic identities, and uncover their hidden histories within the linear narrative of history.

This study seeks to explore the socio-political and cultural relevance of tribal literature by analyzing select tribal narratives authored by writers from Kerala, Arunachal Pradesh, and Assam. The chosen narratives include Narayan's "Kocharethi: The Araya Woman, and " Mamang Dai's "The Legends of Pensam". These narratives delve into the lives and struggles of tribal communities such as the Malayarayarand Adi tribes addressing issues of tribal identity and their representation in mainstream discourse. Moreover, these narratives overtly expose the oppressive mainstream systems that often marginalize these indigenous communities. Consequently, this research endeavor aims to provide an in-depth examination

of tribal life and society in Kerala and Arunachal Pradesh as depicted in the literature of Narayan and Mamang Dai

In the pursuit of understanding the interplay between literature and the culture of a particular period, this research proposal will employ the framework of New Historicism. New Historicism is a form of literary theory that seeks to comprehend intellectual history through literature and literature through its cultural context. This approach concerns itself with the collective beliefs, social practices, and cultural discourses that shape literary works. Given its focus on contextualizing literature within its cultural and historical milieu, New Historicism presents itself as a suitable tool for analyzing the selected works of the four aforementioned authors.

Narayan, a tribal writer from South India, penned the groundbreaking novel "Kocharethi," marking the first instance of a Malayalam novel authored by a member of a tribal community, shedding light on his people's experiences and culture. His writing serves as a channel for expressing his concerns, anxieties, and anguishes, all revolving around questions like, "Who are we? What is our culture? What is our history?" These inquiries form the core of Narayan's quest for the identity of his community. In his literary journey, he embarks on an exploration of the past while simultaneously grappling with the struggles of preserving his culture for the future.

In "Kocharethi," Narayan undertakes a remarkable historical intervention where, rather than remaining passive objects of history, the tribal population becomes its active subjects. The novel skillfully weaves together the threads of the past, present, and future, offering an ethno-historian's delight as it delves into the unique beliefs and rituals of a community closely attuned to nature. However, the latter half of the novel takes a poignant turn, narrating personal losses and hardships. It stands as the first fictional attempt to reconstruct the history of the tribal community's encounter with the forces of modernity in

Kerala. Within the pages of this novel, Narayan unravels a tapestry of fifty or sixty years intimately entwined with his own life experiences. Through his adept storytelling, he challenges the biased representations of tribals prevalent in contemporary cinema, television, and publications, ultimately offering a powerful testament to the resilience and rich cultural heritage of his people.

According to Narayan, Kerala is home to thirty-two distinct tribal groups, each with its own unique identity. Narayan himself belongs to the group known as the Malayarayers. The name "Malayarayar" can be broken down into two parts: "Mala," which means hill in Malayalam, and "arayar," which refers to rulers or archers. This suggests that the Malayarayers may have historically held influence or authority over the western slopes of the Western Ghats.

In the novel, Narayan delves into the transformation of culture, emphasizing its connection across past, present, and future as it evolves through the assimilation of new advancements and influences. He accomplishes this exploration by portraying the lives of three generations within the Malayarayers tribe, a particular indigenous community. The first generation is represented by Ityadi Arayan, the patriarch of the family. The second generation features his son, daughter, and daughter-in-law: Kunjadichan, Kunjipennu, and Kochuraman. Lastly, the third generation is embodied by Parvathi, the daughter of Kunjipennu and Kochuraman.

Throughout the narrative, Narayan illustrates how the culture of the Malayarayers undergoes changes, particularly in their approach to medical treatment. In the past, the Arayar tribe relied on a treatment system deeply rooted in religious and natural beliefs. As the story progresses, Narayan sheds light on how this traditional system evolves in response to new influences, reflecting the dynamic nature of cultural change within the community.

The Arayans, as depicted in the novel, find their identity deeply intertwined with their connection to nature and the land. They identify themselves through geographical markers like trees and stones, such as Varikkamakkil and Elanjimootil. This strong sense of place reflects their harmony with their environment. When they engage in agricultural activities like reaping, their spiritual connection with nature is evident as they offer prayers, seeking forgiveness for the act of cutting crops.

Education, in the context of the novel, assumes a pivotal role in instigating social change. It holds the potential to serve as a bridge between preserving traditions and culture while also producing intellectual individuals capable of documenting the history and cultural practices of the community. In this narrative, education emerges as an agent of change, propelling the community toward new values and practices. It kindles hope for a brighter future, encouraging the adoption of new customs and the acquisition of different languages, ultimately leading to a transformative shift in their way of life.

The primary focus of Narayan's novel is to delve into the intricate connection between the emergence of an Adivasi identity and their evolving cultural consciousness, a topic that in contemporary times is fraught with significant political implications. While it's evident that Narayan doesn't seek to burden his narrative with overtly disruptive questions, it's essential to note that various perspectives and values are subtly woven throughout the novel. Instead of overtly taking sides or actively intervening, Narayan's narrative often seems to maintain a studied silence regarding the pressing issues facing the Adivasis. This apparent detachment from such concerns may give the impression that he is indifferent to them.

However, upon closer examination, it becomes clear that Narayan, as a creative writer, assumes the role of an observer and representative rather than a direct intervener. His approach involves keen discernment, detection, and observation of the complexities at play. Through his storytelling, he aims to shed light on these intricate issues, leaving the

interpretation and assessment of these matters to the readers, thus allowing for a more nuanced and contemplative engagement with the subject matter.

The Northeast region of India is often stereotypically seen as a conflict-ridden area, marked by identity issues, violence, ethnic tensions, and militancy. This perception is also reflected in English literature from the region. However, it's important to note that these aren't the sole defining themes of this literature. Instead, it draws from the rich cultural heritage, the stunning natural landscape, and the complex political environment of the region. This unique blend has given rise to a distinct style of writing that sets it apart from mainland narratives in several ways.

Mamang Dai, a poet, journalist, and former civil servant from Arunachal Pradesh, skillfully explores the myths, folktales, history, and ethnic life of the Adis in her novel "The Legends of Pensam" (2006). As a native of the region, Dai draws upon her personal knowledge to offer a vivid depiction of the Adis of the Siang valley. Through her stories, she beautifully portrays the Adi tribe's deep connection with the natural world, emphasizing their reverence for primitive customs, beliefs, and legends. As a member of the Adi community, Mamang Dai possesses firsthand experience and knowledge of the age-old customs, belief systems, legends, myths, and fables of her people. In an interview with *The Hindu*, Dai expressed her primary intention for writing as the preservation and safeguarding of these valuable tales, emphasizing the importance of protecting and preserving her community's heritage and legacy.

In "The Legends of Pensam", Mamang Dai masterfully combines tradition and primordial customs with the history and myths of the Adi community, employing her unique narrative style to achieve this. The novel is divided into four sections, each containing a collection of nineteen stories. These sections are titled "a diary of the world," "songs of the rhapsodist," "daughters of the village," and "a matter of time." Through these narratives, Dai

vividly depicts the transformation of the Adi people from their primitive society to the modern world. Her storytelling portrays their deep sense of loss for their traditions and ethnic way of life while also highlighting their determined efforts to adapt to the challenging and changing contemporary environment.

The Adi community's society is rooted in animism and supernatural beliefs, closely tied to the land's ecology. In their belief system, "shamans" communicate with spirits, reflecting their coexistence with the natural and supernatural realms. However, government infrastructure projects connecting their land to the outside world are disrupting the ecological balance and eroding their traditional way of life. In "The Legends of Pensam," Dai explores the Adi tribe's collective consciousness and shared memory by delving into their belief system, myths, and profound connection to their land. For the Adis, their forest habitat is not just their true identity but also their sacred consciousness, a theme vividly depicted throughout the novel. Dai employs a visionary narrative style to describe natural phenomena. She metaphorically uses elements such as rivers, mountains, animals, and forests to emphasize the Adis' cultural identity. The Adis express love, reverence, and fear for the non-human world while maintaining ecological balance. Their sustainable connection with nature is a recurring theme in "The Legends of Pensam."

In "The Legends of Pensam," Dai treats nature as a living entity rather than a mere backdrop. She intentionally gives it a central role, making it a dynamic character in the narrative. Nature's influence is profound, shaping the lives, beliefs, and actions of the Adi community. Dai's portrayal of nature goes beyond convention, infusing it with energy that enriches the story. This approach elevates nature to a significant position, resonating with the Adis' love, reverence, and fear, enhancing the overall narrative and offering readers a unique and immersive experience.

In conclusion, this research paper provides an in-depth exploration of tribal narratives, their cultural significance, and their capacity to shine a light on the unique identities and histories of indigenous communities. It underscores the power of literature as a medium for self-expression and the role of fiction in addressing socio-cultural and historical issues. Through the lens of New Historicism, this research seeks to offer fresh insights into tribal narratives from Kerala and Arunachal Pradesh ultimately contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse tapestry of Indian culture and history.

**Conflict of Interest:** The corresponding author, on behalf of all authors, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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