



# WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



## In Conversation with Mamang Dai

Jaydeep Sarangi

*Mamang Dai is a significant Indian English poet from Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh. She was correspondent with the Hindustan Times, Telegraph and Sentinel newspapers and President, Arunachal Pradesh Union of Working Journalists. She also worked with World Wide Fund for nature in the Eastern Himalaya Biodiversity Hotspots programme. She has received the Verrier Elwin Award from the State government of Arunachal Pradesh (2003) and Padma Shri from the Government of India (2011).*

*Mamang Dai's books include: Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land (non-fiction, 2003/2009); The Legends of Pensam (novel, 2006); The Sky Queen and Once Upon a Moontime (illustrated folklore for young readers, 2003); Stupid Cupid (novel, 2008); Mountain Harvest: The Food of Arunachal (non-fiction, 2004); River Poems (2004); and The Black Hill (novel, 2014); Hambreelsai's Loom (2014); El bálsamo del tiempo/The balm of time (bilingual poetry edition, 2008); Midsummer Survival Lyrics (poetry, 2014).*

JS: Mamang, we want to know about your ancestors and roots in the land ...

MD: I belong to the Adi tribe. My hometown is a place called Pasighat. There is an ancestral village called Adi Pasi from where Adi elders are believed to have moved southward and crossed the Siang River to establish Pasighat in the foothills on the right bank of the river. The area was once known as the Abor Hills, and the Siang River is the main connecting channel between the Tsangpo of Tibet and the Brahmaputra river of Assam. Then it was Siang Division under the NEFA (North East Frontier Agency) and more recently bifurcated into East, West, Upper and Siang districts. Pasighat is the headquarters of East Siang District of Arunachal Pradesh.

JS: What is your first language?

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MD: Well, Adi is my mother tongue. It is a non-script language. I write in English.

JS: Did you face a dilemma in choosing a career?

MD: When I see the number of applicants and rush for admission into colleges I think our time was quite simple. Of course I thought about all sorts of fields – research, anthropology, and at various times longed to become a bit of everything – like an explorer-botanist – but with a degree in English the clear-cut career option was the civil service or taking up a lecturer post.

JS: You are a journalist, author, poet, and former civil servant, a personality with many hats. How do you manage so many facets of life?

MD: They are all kind of related, based on travel and writing. The support from family is also important.

JS: How about the literary heritage of Arunachal Pradesh ?

MD: Oral tradition. Except for the Buddhist communities the literature of the different communities of the state collectively known as the 'Tani' group is based on the belief that we are descended from a common ancestor called *Abo* (father) *Tani* (man), recorded in verse and memory. There is a body of literature that is a chanting performance recounting the history and migration of community, the birth of the universe, earth, sky and the creation of man.

JS: Did that oral tradition influence you as a writer?

MD: Well, the oral tradition is a way of life that nurtured us through the centuries. All our beliefs, rituals and customary practice have come to us via the oral tradition. About literature, very briefly, the classical literature of the Adi people consists of epic narratives originally transmitted in ritual language by a *Miri*, the shaman well versed in the different branches of evolutionary history. Collectively this literature is called *Aabang*. In its simplest meaning, the *Aabang* is a story or an act of storytelling for an audience. There are stories of fire, flood, lost civilisations, common enough themes, but the stories come down to us with many ramifications. Each branch of the story buds into another story. Today there is a new engagement with oral traditions with research and documentation. There are many *Aabangs* and an *Aabang* can have several parts. There are also categories of *Miri*: those who are able to communicate with the world of spirits, and those who are pure rhapsodists.

Certainly I am influenced by the oral narratives. Knowing the stories gives me a sense of identity. It inspires my writing – after all it is a world of myth, memory, and imagination. Oral narratives are generally perceived as a simple recounting of tales for a young audience but I think their significance lies in the symbols embedded in the stories about the sanctity of life, about what makes us human. My response to myth/stories is akin to a quest. It is a world view I am still exploring.

JS: Who are the writers you read as a school girl?

MD: Oh, so many books from Blyton to Louis L'amour, to Mills & Boon – Barbara Cartland, Oliver Strange & James Hadley Chase! Also comics – Archies, Marvel – and Edgar Rice Burroughs, Pearl S. Buck, Hemingway. Compulsory reading was Shakespeare, English novels – Charles Dickens, Kipling, Nicholas Monsarrat, George Eliot, etc.

JS: Mamang, you are one of my favourite poets. How did you learn to write so well in a language that is not our mother's tongue?

MD: There are so many Indian writers writing in English! How did it happen? – When we were growing up in Shillong, Meghalaya, all of us in English medium schools heard, read and spoke nothing but English.

JS: Do you recall your first poem?

MD: The first published was in a national daily. It was – *'Tell me what time is it...'*

JS: In 'Small Towns and the River', you write,

Small towns always remind me of death.  
My hometown lies calmly amidst the trees.

What do you mean by these eloquent lines?

MD: The place is my hometown, Pasighat. My mother's younger sister had passed away in a clinic in New Delhi and her body was being brought home. It was a sad gathering, deeply mourned, because my aunt was beautiful and loved, and she died young.

JS: Rain and rivers give the vital dose to Pablo Neruda to overcome all kinds of solitude and anxiety. I read your poems in the light of this observation. Is it true?

MD: Oh yes, rain and rivers. Rainy weather is like a curtain, as if it's a holiday and I can revel in solitude.

JS: In the Introduction to your first collection of poetry, *River Poems*, Keki Daruwalla writes that you are a major voice in Indian English literature and literature from North East India. How do you read this statement?

MD: I think it's very generous. Keki's introduction definitely helped to draw attention to the book and to literature from North East India.

JS: You are also the author of *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land*. What are the basic propositions of this book?

MD: The book is based on travel notes. I was revisiting home territory after being away for quite a few years, and finding stories, storytellers and relatives willing to spend all day and night just

talking – gossiping about weather, food, beliefs, dreams, jokes. It was a patient, wonderful time and I carried the first print of the book back to my ancestral village.

JS: Your poems were also featured in Penguin's anthology of poetry from the northeast, *Dancing Earth* (2009) edited by Robin Singh Ngangom. How do you rate this anthology?

MD: It is a great anthology. Both Robin S. Ngangom and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih are renowned poets translating from Manipuri and Khasi respectively, into English, as well as writing in English, and this anthology was pathbreaking.

JS: You are a part of the Northeast Writers' Forum. Can you tell us what it's about?

MD: The Forum was started in the 90s with its head office in Guwahati, Assam, primarily to bring together writers of the Northeastern states writing in English. All the states have their local chapters. Annual General Meetings are hosted by rotation and consensus by any one of the member states, with voting for the president, secretary, executive committee members. The Forum also brings out a journal – *New Frontiers*, and translation projects in collaboration with publishing houses have been taken up. It's a lively, working forum for interaction between writers, poets and friends with membership open to all.

JS: Are you in favour of the term, seven sisters?

MD: It's okay though the term is a bit passé now. It was coined because of geography with the seven states linked together across the narrow Siliguri corridor from the rest of the country, though the term has also lumped the states together as a flat, homogenous region which is not the case. Each state is quite different from the other. It's eight, sisters/cousins, with Sikkim.

JS: Who are the promising poets (in English) from your part of the country?

MD: There are so many – writing in vernacular and English. Speaking of Arunachal, the *lingua franca* here was Assamese, so there are well known writers writing in Assamese, but the scenario is quite changed now with use of Hindi and English, and translations and writings in indigenous languages using the Roman script.

JS: Do you see any change in form and contents in Indian English poetry in last 40 years?

MD: Oh yes, poetry and writing is changing all the time, in style, form, content. This has to be if writing is witness to life and changing times, but at the same time I feel, especially with poetry, that at its heart poetry is changeless and changing, like the elements.

JS: You are avid lover of territorial peace and in-group fraternity. Will you please tell us your feeling and attachment with your own community?

MD: I feel attached to the land – its features, rivers, the stories and villages. I am also looking at our epic narratives and myths. I think there is a lot for me to learn. How to be patient, how to be good natured.

JS: Arunachal is in the news for territorial politics of the nation-state. How do you look at this conflict within a harmonious existence?

MD: I wish we could have the tri-junction along the international borders with China, Tibet and Myanmar demarcated as sanctuaries for Himalayan flora and fauna and as shared zones of peace where people can meet and exchange news, data and ideas. New geography, new science, literatures, medicine, knowledge.

JS: What is your idea behind portraying characters like Gimur (in *The Black Hill*) and Nenem (in *The Legends of Pensam*)? Do you call them new woman?

MD: Oh no. They are women of the tribe who protect family and clan. They are women who can also break tradition and are ready to pay the price. Women have always been doing this at different times throughout history.

JS: Your novels like *The Black Hill* and *The Legends of Pensam* are about cultural conflicts. How do you see these novels in the light of this observation?

MD: The conflicts were mainly punitive expeditions following raids from the hills into Assam, theft and kidnapping and cases of murder (most of it during the period of the British East India Company). My novel *The Black Hill* is about one such historical incident in the mid-nineteenth century. It concerns the disappearance of a French Jesuit priest, Fr. Nicolas Krick, from the Paris Foreign Missions, who was looking for a way into Tibet to set up a Mission there. It begins with his journey, which led him into Mishmi territory in Arunachal Pradesh.

It was a solitary journey during the period 1852-55, before the Sepoy mutiny and before the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873, that drew up 'protected areas' and prohibited 'British subjects' to travel beyond this line without a permit. This is prevailing today as the Inner Line Permit (ILP) that is the official travel document required for inward travel of Indian citizens (and foreign nationals with a different Permit) into some states of Northeastern India.

JS: At times, North-East people talk about the step-motherly attitude of the Central Government. It gives a new feeling on nationalism and nationality. How do you look at this?

MD: There are issues relating to Centre–State, but most of the time I feel issues are raised and used and turned into political rhetoric.

JS: Why did you portray Mishmi people across the international border in China's Tibet in *The Black Hill*?

MD: There are Mishmi people in Arunachal Pradesh and Mishmi across the border in Nyingchi prefecture of Tibet Autonomous region. When Fr. Krick travelled through the region there was no McMahon line. He travelled back and forth from Assam through Mishmi territory twice before he reached Tibet. In the book the Mishmi chief who allegedly killed the priest also travels freely through these porous borderlands. The lines of demarcation were drawn up much later, following

on the British punitive expedition that penetrated deep into Mishmi territory to nab the culprits. The Mishmi chief was captured and sentenced to death by hanging in Dibrugarh (Assam) jail.

JS: How would you locate the cultural hegemony in the context of Assamese and Hindi languages in Arunachal society?

MD: Today urban Arunachal society is quite multilingual. We grew up hearing Nepali, Bengali, Assamese, English, Hindi. Everyone can speak a bit of everything. We were talking about the 'seven sisters' states being perceived as homogenous, but the truth is that even within a single state there are different communities who speak different languages. So in Arunachal Assamese was once the *lingua franca*. With satellite TV there is a patois Hindi that is used as the common language between the different communities today.

JS: Do you think that North-East literature should be read separately?

MD: Separately – from? Harking back to the question of homogeneity, 'North-East Literature' has a homogenous ring to it, but it's a misnomer. Literature from the North East is as diverse as the writers with their different expressions and literature is literature. I have never heard terms like North West or South east or west coast literature, etc., to define literature from other parts of the country.

JS: P.B. Shelley said, 'Poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted.' Do you subscribe to this dictum?

MD: Well, this is in defence of poetry and I am wary of dictums. No doubt poetry is emotion and expression but what makes great poetry remains indefinable to me.

JS: What according to you is 'cultural memories'? How did you inherit this particular trend in your writing?

MD: In my first book of fiction *The Legends of Pensam* I began by trying to create a place that could be anywhere – somewhere, there ... without identifiable cultural markers. Place names were changed. I put in names with double meanings, as if leaving a door open that only I would be able to recognise (in case I wanted to re-enter that place). Of course all this changed as the writing progressed. If there is a particular trend it must be something that seeps in without our knowing until one day, maybe in some far off place you hear rain, or see the slant of sunlight and suddenly memory stirs surprising you with such vast remembrance. Something like that.

JS: One last question: How is the poetry scenario in India now? Do you think that the literary festivals at different places have power to frame literary standard in India? Will that be good and healthy for Indian poetry in English?

MD: I don't think literary festivals can frame literary standards in India. They are occasions where people can meet and readers and writers can give and take away what is necessary or meaningful to them from such meetings. Poetry will find its own expression. Hopefully publishers will give it

more space - we talk about it enough with publisher friends. It is like water, air. Sustenance. We'll always be in need of poetry.

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*Jaydeep Sarangi is a bilingual writer, editor, interviewer, translator, author of a number of publications on postcolonial issues, Indian writing in English, Australian Literature, marginal literatures and creative writing in reputed journals and magazines in India and abroad. He is a senior faculty member of the English Department, Jogesh Chandra Chaudhuri College(CU), Kolkata. He is in the editorial board of several refereed journals in different continents. Widely anthologised and reviewed as a poet and a critic on marginal writings, he has authored five poetry collections in English and one in Bengali. With Rob Harle, he has authored five anthologies of poems from India and Australia. Recently, with Angana Dutta, he has transliterated and edited Surviving in My World: Growing up Dalit in Bengal (2015). Another pioneering anthology*

*(with Usha Kishore), Home Thoughts: Poems of the British Indian Diaspora, is in press. He may be reached at: [jaydeepsarangi@gmail.com](mailto:jaydeepsarangi@gmail.com)*

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