

“Peoplogue” - Papua as I saw n understood

In 2018 December I traveled to Indonesia. It was an amazing experience to see parts of that country still pristine and preserved but also a sad realization sets in when things are changing and not going to be same much longer. I traveled from Hyderabad to Jakarta, a bustling capital of a populous country. I did not get a direct flight hence took a transfer in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia). As the flight was descending into Kuala Lumpur the only green landscape for miles you see is that of Oil Palm. The unbelievably rich flora and fauna of Malaysia painfully destroyed to meet palm oil needs of the world and in the process causing a great ecological disaster!



Me not being a city person as such, is always in the rush to get out of there to the country side. From Jakarta I flew to Jogjakarta and saw the beautiful sunrise at Borobudur, the 9th century Mahayana Buddhist temple. Wonderful indeed!

I could hardly contain my excitement to go to Papua. Heard a lot about its rich forests, unique tribes and much more. Indonesia has the largest surviving rain forest in Asia and second largest in the world after Amazon. The island of Papua is divided into two, the east

is called Papua New Guinea, an independent country and west are the two provinces of Papua and West Papua which belong to Indonesia. Papua is just 200km north of Australia. The land has large mountainous interior, forest lowlands, large areas of coastal mangrove swamp and is surrounded by numerous small islands and coral reefs.

I flew 3463km from Jakarta to Timika in Papua. It was a very long flight, reached Timika in the morning. I will digress a little to create the context. When in Akshara, we had an Indonesian intern Ira Rambe. A warm, cheerful and full of life girl and continues to be so. Well, she is now studying in Germany but I connected with her family in Jogjakarta. What a wonderful, warm and loving family she has and what a wonderful place Jogjakarta is. Clean surroundings, friendly people and I will not think twice to go there again. When I was planning for my trip to Indonesia and discussed the same with Ira, I requested her to put me in touch with someone, anyone in Papua so I can spend time there. She made lot of efforts and finally put me in touch with a Doctor working there called Dr Kombodji. Another warm and loving person, I should say, I met in life.

So, when I landed in Timika, realization dawned upon me that I am venturing into some of the remotest parts of the world. I could not stop having goosebumps. Dr Komboji put me in touch with his friend in Timika. I could fresh up and get prepared to take a flight to Asmat region in Papua. Papua is home to 250 and odd tribal communities. The most prominent are Dani and Korowai in the mountain lands of Wamena and Asmat in the coastal areas of Asmat Regency. My trip was planned for Asmat. The adventure starts now because I have read before that at least 1 out of 10 flights to Asmat region consistently crashed. So, I knew I was taking a chance but in hind sight I can say that the chance was worth taking because it is simply unbelievable. The flight seated 20 people and never sure if it will take off because the area receives lot of rainfall. It was cloudy and yet the pilot decided the fly the bird..... OMG! were the first words I uttered, just 2 minutes after being airborne. You look down and it feels like the earth has just left the ice age and entered the Holocene epoch. From up above, all I could see is shiny thick forests crisscrossed by several rivers meandering and nothing else. Virgin land, virgin land indeed I thought. Unbelievably beautiful.

Reached Asmat and it is simply fantastic. Just pure and pristine. You suddenly see Melanesian people and feel awestruck. Long ago when pieces of earth were connected, they migrated from Africa. I felt like I am seeing Jarawas of Andamans. My journey did not end here. I should still meet Kombodji. He is much more interior and I can reach him only by boat. I had to stay a day in Asmat and took the boat next day to reach the village where Kombodji is at. BTW, all villages in Asmat are built on stilts because they are swamp lands. When I say villages are built, they are not the creation of the people of the land.

Yes, you guessed it right! They are built by the mainstream Indonesians who over a period of time came and settled there, unsettling the aboriginals. The story repeats everywhere in this world. It's no different here. This is the sad truth.

The boats in the open waters are amazing, very fast and also polluting because they are fuel driven unlike the aboriginals who paddle the hand made wooden boats.

I met Kombodji in the village where the boat stopped and he said, 'okay welcome but I live much more in the interior so we take another boat'. Wow! So here we go, hop on to another boat and the whole thing there is so mesmerizing that I did not feel even a bit tired, though the climate is very muggy being on the coast. Finally reached Kombodji's village and it was night, so could not make out much of anything except walking in the dark on the creaking stilts. Whatever I write, I will not be able to do justice to describe the place for you because for one, I am not a writer and two there are not enough words. So, I rest my description here.

The Asmat people as I said above are of negrito racial characteristics. They speak their native language but gradually forced to learn Bahasa, the language of the Indonesian mainstream people. Why is the doctor working in such a remote land I wonder? Hmm, the Christian missionaries have put him and whole battalion of nurses and other healthcare persons there, so people can get healthcare plus religion. For now, the conversion is happening at a fast pace; the old Asmat are with their traditions, the middle Asmat are doing a combination of old and new found Christianity while the young are completely converted. So, in time, the Asmat culture will disappear as did many cultures in this world to the dominant religions – Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism etc.

Traditionally the Asmat lived off of fishing and Tapioca cultivation. To cultivate Tapioca, they disappear into the forests for 3 to 4 months, sow, grow and harvest Tapioca and come back to the coast. The older generation and some youngsters still do disappear. Prior to the mainstream population entering Asmat, the tribe had access to rich food (when growing Tapioca, they could collect lot of other food in the forests, hunt game and eat) and lived larger life. I always wonder that calculating life expectancy is the madness of modernization. Should one live longer life or larger life?!?

For the humid climate there, the Asmat are appropriately dressed – bare chested, just covering their genitals with woven tapioca grass. But with mainstream people coming in and donating clothes (the madness of mainstream empathy), today we see women wearing shorts, adidas, UNICEF, Save the Children T shirts, Victoria secret underwire bras etc. But when you start wearing clothes you need to clean them. But for Asmat cleaning cloths is a new concept. So many of them wear clothes without changing for days, and

also wear damp cloths because they get in and out of sea water. I also saw some children and younger women suffering from scabies. This is because they stopped jumping into the sea, don't take explicit bath and don't change clothes and don't catch fish and live off of government provided food and food coupons.

A disturbing scene is that all the shops there are owned by mainstream Indonesians; doctors, nurses, hoteliers and workers are all mainstream people. Serious concrete construction works happening everywhere in Asmat Regency. So where do the Asmat fit in, in all this madness? They use government issued food coupons to buy cigarettes and liquor, young children buy Lays chips and colas and ice candies. This the Asmat say is greatly affecting their teeth. Traditionally the Asmat keep chewing mustard sticks that grow off betel creeper, dip it in lime and eat with areca nut. Their teeth are stained in red colour. Modern doctors say it is increasingly causing oral cancer among them. We really do not know because most south Indians used to consume betel leaf, lime and nut and some still do. So where does the truth lie? I do not know.

The sight of an intoxicated Asmat begging in front of shops, and on the street is a common scene. They do not beg for food. They want cash. The Asmat pregnant and lactating women get free cooked meal from the government (similar to ICDS in India) and they literally reduced this community from being forest dwellers, hunter gatherers to beggars. They are not going into the forest anymore; they are not working their body out. However, when some do, the government complains that there comes a break in eating cooked meal and therefore negatively impacting the health of Asmat women and their children. I find this as a sad joke. The doctor was very open in saying that malnutrition set in only after the mainstream entered Asmat region. HIV is very prevalent among the Asmat, a Thai soldier apparently during his brief stopover gave this gift to the Asmat. I am sure sexual exploitation of the Asmat by the other mainstreamers is also causing this.

While all the mainstreamers and "modernized" Asmat live in properly built houses, the others live in broken, shabby tin-roofed structures. Most of the time, I saw them sitting in the middle of the street and chatting and children playing around. Their open spaces are occupied. The soft grass and forest brush that seated them comfortably have painfully got shaped into hard and hot CC roads.

So, basically "DEVELOPMENT" has turned food rich, nutrition rich, environment rich, happy and healthy Asmat into losers. I cannot find a more classic example of modern day "DEVELOPOMENT" than this.

Some Asmat that got on to the bandwagon of "education" got into some government positions in the Regency and I had an opportunity to meet the Regency head there. He

speaks English and his wife appears to be more mainstreamed than him. So, children of these kind, are rapidly converted and studying in missionary schools, preparing themselves to join the working class.....

The Asmat are amazing wood carvers. One should lookup online for Asmat wooden art. And they make beautiful bags from Tapioca grass. Again, all these are introduced to the outside world by the mainstream people and the Asmat now know cash, they want more cash and more cash, something unwanted and unheard of few decades back.

They were never in the race, we put them in. Now they can never catch up with our speed, we will also never allow them to rest, we want them to run, run only enough to benefit us but not catch up with us. Another happy tribe, losing it...

I wanted to visit Wamena region to meet Dani and Korowai tribes, but that region was going through a struggle to separate from Indonesia and merge into Papua New Guinea. The government decided to dump loads of army into Wamena and they said outsiders are not allowed for some time.

Hence after few days, I said my farewell to Kombodji and others and headed to Sorong in West Papua.

Read this for more insights into their struggle–

<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/blog/environment/west-papuans-an-indigenous-people-that-the-world-forgot-62914>

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