

'THE SCARS YOU CAN'T SEE'

A Community Collaborative Project

From the Curator

And I walked along the concrete road, crossing a BSF camp that heads towards the village of Rangutia in Bamutia, Tripura, and eventually reaching my destination. The space where I had come to explore and experience... As per plan, I would conceive a project of visual arts (outdoor) and curate the same, collaborating with a group of practicing contemporary artists originating from Tripura. Rangutia struck me as a small village made up of numerous mud houses and a few cement structures (which were new). A surreal environment with man-made forests all around... In the course of time, I discovered that it was one of India's biggest rubber plantation sites, which was also the main source of livelihood for the villagers. I noticed this unconstructed road that leads into the forest to an unknown destination while wandering with the village and the villagers, listening to their daily acquisition of stories that made up their lives. I followed the path and walked ahead with a sudden sense of interest and tension. After reaching the end of the path, I discovered an endless curtain of barbed wire fences and gates, which were numbered. I realized it was where my country, India, ends and my neighboring country, Bangladesh, starts. **It was the 'BORDER'**. I was stoned for some time, became emotional, and yet was unable to express myself... That moment, I was dealing with my own frustrations and misery. A 'reality' I couldn't fathom from the time I was formally introduced to it initially by our educational system and later on more realistically through my own research and study about it...**And the 'reality' was 'PARTITION'..**

The land named 'INDIA' was suddenly divided into two and eventually three separate land masses. The land was suddenly broken up into fragments. As the 'intruders' ordered and the 'beholders' accepted and followed. Because self-made politics and greed for power and authority would not absolve us of our sins, a society was not brave and independent enough to oppose the order...as we gladly assisted the intruders fulfill their wicked wish.

Rather than foolishly pointing fingers at the throne, it is sometimes necessary to understand your own existence and retrospect. A society built on the foundations of truth and a clear stream of reason, a society striving for unity and equality, would not have accepted orders to dismantle itself under any circumstances... We have come a long way; it's the 21st century that we are living in, but I genuinely feel nothing has changed much. We continue to give in to the wicked wishes of our authorities, as well as to our own wicked selves, which live within us and decoy us towards inhumanity... We gladly 'SUBMIT' ourselves without any kind of independent conversations or realizations, and I strongly believe it comes from greed and a self-centric way of living. It would have been preferable if

our society had adopted the concept of "all" rather than "me." I fail to find that integrated outlook in our existential practice, whether it's personal or socio political, till now. It's only history repeating itself... **There are ancient wounds and scars on our bodies and souls that we tend to bypass. But in reality, they still live on.** It feels like we still live in a cage walled up by greed, dishonesty, selfishness, betrayal, disloyalty, cruelty, and so on.

There's a 'BORDER' 'made up of barbed wire and fences, which I saw with my own eyes at Rangutia, Tripura. There's a sense in me that tells me that there's another 'BORDER' that goes through our minds and hearts, which locks us in a trap. And we keep discovering ways to exist in it.

All this, which got triggered from my initial visit to Rangutia, became the narrative on which I desired to collaborate with my artists and work towards creating spaces of interactive discussion and dialogue with the local villagers, which may draw up an opportunity to construct a wider assimilation of voices and experiences driven from their past and the ongoing present. I assumed it could be a walk back in time, and perhaps the desired opportunity to express and expose the underlying scars and wounds that exist but do not have the ideal space to be expressed and dealt with for the villagers. Most of them had come from the other side of the border, either during the partition in 1947 or during the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971.

I thus conceived of this project as a community collaborative where the local villagers would narrate their stories and be the crucial thread, the chronicler, of the interactive space. From my initial reconnaissance visit, I realized that they could be a stellar source for the accumulation of a diverse range of discussions, dialogues, and memories.

We stayed at the village in Rangutia for 10 days, though by the end of our residency, we all felt that maybe 10 days were not enough. The journey and how the project was built holistically were the most fascinating ingredients for all of us. I had some intimate discussions with my participating artists, namely **Gopa Roy, Victor Hazra, Joydip Acharjee, Pranab Chakraborty, Debajit Rudra Paul, Anurag Mitra, and Chinmoy Deka**, about the narrative I had conceived as well as the design of the project I had imagined, both before arriving at the space and in regular sittings in the evenings during the residency to allow for the exchange of thoughts and ideas as well as discussing our daily experiences. It was important for the project that we all come on the same page and collectively think and relate, along with sharing the onsite ideas that were taking birth in the minds of each of us while interacting with the villagers. Artists had to create spaces for the villager's impromptu and casual sharing in order to create an environment in which they could explore and share their unsaid lives and pass over spaces in their lives while engaging with them and provoking them to communicate without any hindrances. All seven participating artists and I got immersed in a visual arts project that was not based on our usual practices. Working outside the box of convention and placing ourselves in a space where the artworks did not come from studios or any individual and regular practices was challenging but exciting... The works were the results of in-depth discussions and dialogue with the villagers, where artists were conceptualizing and designing a specific form, and

the work, along with its content, was mainly cooked and served by the village people...More than 200 villagers (mostly housewives) were directly involved in our project.

We experienced angst, pathos, and tears. Again, laughter, jokes, and **"PAAN"** making sessions, along with indigenous forms of poetry and song that came to us as performances while they were engaging themselves in the process of art making, like working on a **"KATHA,"** stitching experiences and memories about their pre-migration lives in Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan), drawing lines depicting 'border', and telling stories through songs (in 'Bangla' diction) from their childhood and collective domestic know-how... **I felt it was all motivated by the peace of sharing and, at times, an absolute need to share.**

Another very exciting aspect of the project was the involvement of the kids....Be it expressing how they felt about the concept of a 'border' by drawing on a piece of paper, or sometimes through innocent facial expressions and verbal submissions and exchanges that we had with them... Their vibrant energy and their curtained plea to engage them with the project only inspired newer thought spaces and relevant ideas and forms, like performances and acts, sometimes also in a playful manner. When they encouragingly performed and collaborated with us, it only enriched and broadened the landscape of our project. Villagers would also gladly share their domestic household objects with us like **"PIRI,"** as well as more emotionally charged objects that they had brought from the other side of the border such as **'LANGOL ER ICH', 'HAMAN DISTA,' "GAIRI PATIL," and "JOLER KOLOSH."** They extensively shared the various challenging encounters and confrontations along with the underlying stories of agony and anguish and the forceful migration caused by partition—**the pain of leaving one's own soil and coming to a new place, trying to adjust, and eventually coining it as their "home."** They overcame their apprehensions, sharing and discussing their lives and experiences with us.

I was deeply moved to experience how vocally an interactive space came to life when a community of people coexisted and collaborated to recognize and reveal the scars caused by the partition and, consequently, migration that they wouldn't see otherwise.

The intensity of involvement demonstrated by the residents of the village of Rangutia, Bamutia, Tripura, both creatively and psychologically, only demands more such activities, which would undoubtedly create ingenious spaces in their lives, resulting in expanding their horizons for innovation and sensitivity.

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Curator