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Songs Of the Sea: Artist Captures Ephemeral Multiplicity Of Sundarbans

Ishita Chakraborty's solo exhibition 'Sleeping in the Bed of Salt' is an open-ended take on the interconnectedness of environmental, social and political justice in the Sundarbans of West Bengal and highlights the region's complex migration histories.

Rakhi Bose

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*"Have a look dear Dukhi, I am your mother
I live in the forest but you do not know me"*

- (Folk song devoted to Bonobibi, the guardian of the Sundarbans forests)

As they weave the textiles with which they stitch their sarees and Kathas (blankets) in their remote island homes on Satjelia island amid the chirping of crickets, Sudharani, Sabitri and Meena Gayen sing songs of Bonobibi - the mythical spirit goddess that transcends all other deities in the Sundarbans. She is a goddess of the forest, the keeper of this great bounty and the restorer of the delicate balance between man and nature.

The Sundarbans in West Bengal have been losing land. In the last two decades, an estimated 110 square kilometres of mangroves have been lost to global warming and climate change. The lives of the people living in these parts have further been ravaged by a series of cyclones that have wrecked the farmlands and destroyed several homes. Islands like Ghoramara have almost disappeared, leaving tens of thousands uprooted.

Living on these islands that are swiftly being gobbled up by the sea, women like Sudharani, Sabitri and Meena live invisible lives on the frontiers of climate change. They fish, they row, they till, they farm. They raise cattle and children while their husbands look for work in cities.

This is the spirit that artist Ishita Chakraborty perhaps tries to capture in her solo exhibition 'Sleeping in the Bed of Salt', on display at Delhi's Gallery Escape studio till the end of September. Through teal, blue, and cerulean cyanotypes representing the shifting tides of the Bay of Bengal and handwoven textiles co-created by the artist with women like Sudharani and Sabitri, Ishita's show makes an attempt to explore the "ecological crisis in the Sundarbans, its humanitarian fallout and cultural specificities".

"Sundarbans really interests me because of the multiplicity and dynamism it represents," Chakraborty states.



Ishita Chakraborty with her artwork at Delhi's Gallery Escape studio

Having grown up in West Bengal before moving to Europe for her art education, Ishita states that she developed an interest in migration and movement patterns. “In Sundarbans, everything is always on the move,” says Ishita. “There are many migration histories of people from colonial times. But it’s not just the people that are moving. The landscape is shifting as well. The mangroves are moving, the fish are moving away, the water is shifting, rising. And all these movements are interconnected”.

To her, the Bonobibi feels like a metaphor for this diverse yet unified multiplicity.

Philosophers, psychoanalysts, and poets like Édouard Glissant, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari among others have written about the “rhizome”, a part of certain plants that grow horizontally and unlike roots, is unending.



Artist Ishita Chakraborty's artworks on display at Delhi's Gallery Escape

In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari write that “unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point with any other point, and each of its features does not necessarily refer to features of the same nature, it brings into play very different regimes of signs and even states of non-signs. The rhizome cannot be reduced to either the 'One' or the multiple...It is not made of units, but of dimensions, or rather of moving directions. It has no beginning or end, but always a middle, through which it grows and overflows. It constitutes linear multiplicities in n dimensions, without subject or object, spreadable on a plane of consistency”.

Ishita feels that the Sundarbans and its mangroves represent such a rhizome.

“Rhizomes depict multiplicity and inclusivity. Glissant likens it to a form or a model for future societies that are shaped like rhizomes, allowing the interconnected of multi-origins and multiple groups of people and beings. That's what Sundarbans is. My work looks at the subject through the lens of poetry, literature, metaphors, songs, history, livelihoods, and lived experiences, all interconnected to each other,” she states.



Artist Ishita Chakraborty's artworks, part of her solo exhibition titled 'Sleeping in the Bed of Salt' Delhi's Gallery Escape

And Bonobibi, in that sense, is perhaps the best metaphor of the multiplicity and movement.

Bonobibi is worshipped by Hindus, Muslims, and Christians alike. But she is not a local deity. In fact, legend has it that Bonobibi and her brother Shah Jangali, migrated all the way from Egypt or Mecca to the land of the eighteen tides (Sundarbans) where they defeated the demon king Dakkhin Rai (King of the South), who can take the form of tigers and attack humans. To this day, the name of Bonobibi is chanted, and men in Sundarbans - irrespective of their religion - offer her prayers before entering the forests to collect honey or timbre. And yet, Bonobibi is not just a nature spirit. She is a woman and her

struggles are every woman's struggles in Sundarbans. Whether in Hindu or in Muslim depictions, Bonobibi is always depicted with a young boy on her lap, presumably Dukhi, a young shepherd who was saved from being eaten by Dakkhin Rai in his tiger form by the fearless Bonobibi.

In the Sundarbans, many women have been widowed by tigers that prowl across the marshy forests. Bonobibi's story is perhaps an ancient tale that serves as a reminder of the hard lives women live in these parts, fighting with and prevailing over the forces of nature.

"I wanted to capture that connection and the invisibility of women in these areas despite their constant ecofeminism," Ishita states. The hand-woven Kanthas depict the sinking islands of Sundarbans, its people, and its deeply syncretic philosophy and everybody and everything is connected in continuous movement, like the tides of the sea.

The movement is not just expressed in theory but also Chakraborty's art practice which places high value on physical movement. Her cyanotypes, for instance, were created not inside the comfort of her studio but in the rigorous terrains of the island delta. "Instead of plucking things out of nature and bringing them back to the studio to print and wash, I went to the source instead. I immersed myself," she explains. With a laugh, she adds that perhaps the need to explore comes from growing up as an Indian woman in a deeply patriarchal society. "As an Indian woman, I've always been told what to do. So I don't want to be a replica of these dos and don'ts. Moving and travelling deeply to the core of any place or people thus comes naturally to me".

Ishita's art, while pointing out the alarming pace of the "climate emergency" as she calls it, unfolding in the Sundarbans delta, is also an attempt to document the distinct culture of Sundarbans and its people. Be it through the cyanotypes made on-site and on the move or the Kathas that were co-created with locals or depicting their images, Ishita's deceptively simple artworks capture several forms of movements and migrations. They nudge one to think of Sundarbans, not just as a culmination of climate adversities, but as a living system of interconnected beliefs and lifestyles that survive off of the environment while in turn impacting it.