

MEMOIRS OF PAIN

TAYEBA BEGUM LIPI's sculptures of blades represent the pathos-filled stories of patriarchy in the world of Muslim women of northern Bangladesh, says UMA NAIR

Belonging to a large family in northern, rural Bangladesh, Tayeba Begum Lipi, Bangladesh's most avant garde artist has an early memory of secretly witnessing her sister-in-law giving birth at home. Done under the care of a midwife, who cut the umbilical cord with a razor blade sterilised in boiling water. The 11th among the 12 children in her home, she says that she could still hear the water boiling. The blade is Lipi's metaphor. It is her message and a medium in the art of provenance.

The artist has taken over the art world with her sculptures that are created out of stainless steel blades. She says she loves places that have living memories and histories. Lipi's exhibition just opened at the Sundaram Tagore Gallery in New York to rave reviews and a host of curious gallery-goers.

Feminine everyday objects

Best known for her use of razor blades, Lipi employs them in sculptures of feminine everyday objects: handbags, dresses, bras, bathtubs, baby strollers, shoes and even a sewing machine.

The birthing event remains emblazoned on Lipi's mind. Reminiscent of Freud's 'primal scene,' the razor blade symbolises her recognition of her own entry into the world, entanglements of love, domesticity and physical pain. Her sculptures with glimmering chains of blades, expose matrimonial paradoxes in rural Bangladesh: pathos-filled stories of patriarchy in the world of Muslim women and also bring upon us images of all that is beautiful and inviting, but speak of pain and death and danger.

Bangladeshi Muslims

Lipi's work has been profoundly influenced by the September 11 attacks in New York in 2001 and the July 7, London bombings in 2005. Her countrymen's responses to these events and how



Unveiling womanhood



Not for me 2



Replicated

the world subsequently treats Bangladeshi Muslims. She recalls experiencing racial discrimination during travels in Europe prior to 2001 — where she participated in residencies, exhibitions and workshops — and it noticeably intensified afterward. As an artist, she also observed Bangladeshis at home and abroad suddenly questioning their own identity and felt compelled to announce their allegiance to their faith. "People felt that they had to stick to only one identity," Lipi noted and added, "So, they turned to religion."

Dissent and protest

I distinctly recall seeing the bikinis at the India Art Fair. There is a striking way in which these undergarments

REMINISCENT OF FREUD'S 'PRIMAL SCENE,' THE RAZOR BLADES SYMBOLISE THE RECOGNITION OF HER OWN ENTRY INTO THE WORLD, ENTANGLEMENTS OF LOVE, DOMESTICITY AND PHYSICAL PAIN

appear to be animated, despite the fact that no bodies inhabit them. The apparent fragility of *Comfy Bikinis* (2013) is belied by the realisation that the interlocking safety pins, which are used to create the piece, actually form a shield for the wearer. Upon realising that the objects we normally wear or sit on are forged from hazardous materials, Lipi's sculptures become sites of dissent and protest.

She wields razor blades to address violence against women — and this is what sets her apart as an artist. To draw attention to the excesses of violence against women is one of Lipi's primary goals. In doing so, she gives voice to the anonymous, often invisible, women of Bangladesh.

Fear and oppression

She crafts the likeness of commonplace items like handbags, bathtubs and strollers from the small, menacing strips of metal, mainly to address the culture of fear and oppression that defines daily lives in Bangladesh. "I did not even think about why I was choosing it. I was only looking for a sharp, violent readymade object that could express my reaction to the vulnerable political situation in both Bangladesh and Pakistan," the artist said. "At some point, I questioned why I was attracted to this object, and then I found my answer in a childhood memory," added she.

Perils of a society

Lipi fuses intimate subject matter

with aggressive materiality, reflecting on the personal and political perils of a stifling society. "My work always expresses a paradoxical human condition that a human being experiences in a country like Bangladesh," she explains. "Being in such a society, a woman's experience is completely different than the experience of a man."

She identifies a duality in her environment and translates it viscerally into the personal experiences of her work. When you glance at her sculptures, they make a statement — they are luminous yet delicate in a surreal way. They look uncanny from afar, but terribly painful-inducing from up close.

Photo: Sundaram Tagore Gallery, New York

Headgear for prosperity

VIRENDRA BANGROO's series of photographs, representing the culture and lifestyle of the Dard Aryans of Ladakh, combines history and calls for saving a dwindling tribe, says U NAIR

Not much is known about the Dard Aryans, one of the ancient peoples who are known to still live by age-old cultural practices and beliefs despite facing many odds. They are considered to be ever-vigilant soldiers defending our frontiers along with our Army. It is their spirit of deep valour and courage that needs to be saluted by common mortals like us.

Their life is captured in photographs by Virendra Bangroo at the India International Centre (IIC). The images combine history and the call for attention to a dwindling tribe that needs sustenance.



RICH CULTURAL LEGACY

The Aryan Valley of Ladakh boasts a colourful and rich legacy of the Dard Aryans inhabiting the area. According to Bangroo, the Dardic languages are a subgroup of the Indo-Aryan languages natively spoken in northern Pakistan's Gilgit Baltistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Jammu and Kashmir and eastern Afghanistan. They speak a distinct dialect of Dard-Shina, which is also known among the people of Ladakh as *Brokskat*. Interestingly, they have a dialect but no script.

HILLSIDE PEOPLE

Bangroo, an assistant professor at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), says "The word *Dard* itself comes from *Daradas*, which roughly translates into people who live on the hillsides." Bangroo, who has spent years studying this community, states that the people of this ethnic community are also linguistically and culturally different from those living in other parts of Ladakh. His images have a poignancy that we cannot miss.

The photographer gives us cluster of images that speak of the ethnicity and rich symbolism in clothes, jewellery and distinctive and colourful head gears. "A *Brokpa* tribal is identified by a colourful head gear called *Tepi* that has various colourful props attached, embellished with berry flowers," says Bangroo. The *Tepi*, they believe, wards off the evil eye. The women wear heavy metal, gold and silver jewellery along with full-length sheep skin capes and sheep wool *pherans*. While it might look heavy, it also looks exotic and vintage in terms of design and allure. What entices are the old metal coins which are a compulsory part of the accessories.

METAL TO PREVENT SICKNESS

The men too have their own



unique customs in costume, they mostly wear maroon gowns with cummerbunds. There is a belief that metal worn on the body prevents sickness.

With absolutely no medical facilities in the past being far removed from urban settlements, it seems that their head gears are worn for intrinsic meaning — each prop on the head gear has a significant medicinal purpose.

The seven-coloured ribbons ward off any ailments caused by the sun or sudden kinds of sickness that are related to the eclipses. The silver brooches ward off planetary influences and the peacock feathers ward off paralyses.

BUDDHIST LEANINGS

Many of them converted to Buddhism nearly two centuries ago, the Dards as a group are followers of the Drigung Kagyu lineage of Mahayana Buddhism. Bangroo's research also states that some members of the community, particularly those on the other side of the Line of Control (LOC), are primarily Shia Muslims. What is deeply stirring is their belief in living in harmony with nature. Also, the fact that they still follow age-old, traditional customs of worshipping rivers, trees and mountains and also practice a form of animism, a tradition which, according to some, hails from as far as 5,000 years ago.

Bangroo belongs to the group of scholars at the IGNC, which has had an immensely vital contribution in the mapping of intangible cultural heritage of our country. Bangroo, has in his research, traversed the length and breadth of the Himalayas and worked for the preservation of ethnic cultural pockets which have seen leaps and bounds in connectivity.

His work for this community in creating awareness about the rich cultural diversity of the region becomes a boon and a lifeline of sorts. Through his works, we see two community museums in the Aryan Valley, which have become role model institutions for safeguarding the cultural heritage and sustainable development in the region.

(The show runs till 13 May.)



Opposites attract

An exhibition aims at showcasing how threatened trees and demolished houses in the city strive to co-exist amidst urbanisation

An exhibition of photographs by Juhi Saklani showcases the demolished houses of Delhi's Sarojini Nagar and Netaji Nagar, juxtaposed with the banyan, peepul, neem and semal trees of these areas. It is currently open at the Delhi Photo Company's new gallery here.

The show, titled *Human/Nature*, focusses on the loss of Delhi's trees as the city's old housing colonies undergo redevelopment. It was previously on public view at the *Photosphere* at the India Habitat Centre (IHC) here. "In my photographs, these threatened trees and demolished houses are still trying to co-exist," said the artist, for whom Delhi's redevelopment means loss of a quality of life that was full of trees, birds, cleaner air, and a gentler pace of living. "In our cities, faced with critical levels of air pollution and severe depletion of groundwater, the only smart city planning is to integrate old standing trees into our project designs. To cut trees and compensate by planting saplings elsewhere, or to transplant the trees into alien soil where they slowly die, is no solution," she added.

There are no people in the photographs to mirror the absence of people from the planning processes and decision making, said Saklani. The



ruined houses and trees glowing in evening light create a surreal effect, framed in old, broken window frames of the kind used in government housing. The exhibition will run till June 2 at Janpath's DPC Gallery. —JANS

WATCH OUT



Art Explore Gallery presents *Visual Aural*, a show inspired by ambient sounds of daily life, featuring works by artists Abhijit Pathak and Rajesh Srivastava. **WHEN:** May 16 to 30 **TIME:** (Monday to Saturday) 11 am to 6 pm **WHERE:** Art Explore, 23 Lakeside, Hauz Khas village.



Silent Conflicts is a group show by 12 contemporary artists who use varied media such as staple pins, wood, bronze, video, photographs, canvas and more to create deeply personal and political works that delve into the inner conflicts that we need to conquer in an ever-changing, evolving world. **WHEN:** May 8 **TIME:** 7 pm **WHERE:** Visual Arts Gallery, India Habitat Centre.



AIFACS Art Gallery presents *The Tryst With Nature*, a solo exhibition of paintings by artist Sanjukta Barik who showcases her passion of art and how she uses it as a medium of expressing her life journeys and emotions. **WHEN:** May 10 to 16 **WHERE:** AIFACS Gallery.



Microcosm: Macrocasm, an art exhibition at Artist MPlayground, aims to explore the continuity of time, space and energy, celebrating the living world. **TIME:** All day **WHEN:** Till May 17 **WHERE:** Lower ground floor, Pullman New Delhi, Aerocity.



Korean Cultural Centre presents *Impressions: a Journey backwards*, an exhibition with a view to bring the spirit of South Korea to Delhi. With 31 art works on display, the show will have calligraphy, pottery ink paintings and photographs. **WHEN:** Till May 31 **TIME:** 9 am to 5 pm **WHERE:** Korean Cultural Centre, Lajpat Nagar - IV.