

Artist Statement

NR1: Wadhvana Wetlands, Gujarat

Brief background:

Accorded the status of 'Wetland of National Importance' (Protected Area Update No.54, April 2005), the man-made reservoir at Wadhvana is a significant site of bio-diversity and attracts both indigenous and migratory species of birds. The Gujarat Government has earmarked the site for development as a tourist destination, and large numbers of people are expected to visit it in the near future.

Currently the area around the lake is mostly open, with fields, clumps of vegetation and trees growing in some areas. Some rare species are in decline or have disappeared altogether from the area.

Project:

From ground up : From sky down : Points of connection

An installation brought together via creative input and in collaboration is envisioned as becoming a valuable supporter of bio-diversity and local ecology of this wetland and a source of inspiration and knowledge, stressing on sustaining of the environment for future generations of all living beings.

And, in doing so it also sets out to capture the imagination and eye from different points of view – from that encountered on a walk around the lake, and as seen from the sky by our feathered friends.

The project brings together individuals and groups and is perceived as a 3-way collaboration between: art + community + science, focusing on transference of knowledge via activities that are locally focused and whose outcomes are both locally and globally relevant to the people and environment.

Through combined effort, the aim is to encourage and shore up local understanding and create awareness of the wealth inherent in the immediate environment. The effort is also aimed at instilling pride of this important site amongst the local residents, encouraging them to claim responsibility, tackle and interact with developments that take place here in future, including those related to the arrival of large groups of visitors that may result in noise and environmental pollution detrimental to the ecology of the place. In addition, members of the community are asked to volunteer and work alongside the Forestry department to not only take care of and nurture the plants and lead guided tours in future but also in decision-making process, thus fostering connections between the two that is currently lacking.

Marks left on site:

Underlining the concept of serving nature, to some extent the outcome is not set as one end result but left open-ended to allow the possibility to encounter the unexpected arising from inputs by the many who are involved in the process.

One proposal is to jointly create an on-site installation by planting trees and grasses, and at the same time make connections with migratory routes of the birds and other water bodies (national and international) that are significant in terms of their resting points, arrival destinations and travel paths.

The planting will take the form of bowers around the lake, introducing indigenous and rare trees/grasses and by placing logs and branches, with each spot forming a different kind of bower that has its own blueprint and identity in terms of diversity. These bowers become points that one can mentally and, to some extent, visually ring together.

The ring installation also refers to the globe, and the points where planting is done mark the migratory stopping/nesting grounds - hence forming links with other pertinent wetlands and water bodies.

The team:

Varsha Nair – artist and initiator of project

Dr Jitendra Gavali, Botanist. Co author of the book, “Trees of Gujarat”

Ms Asmita Raval, Architect and Environmentalist

Dr Shishir Raval, Eco Landscape Architect, advisor

(With input from Forestry Dept, members of local Birding group and eco developmental committee (EDC) members from the local community)

NR 2: Aastha Chauhan

Gharelu Nuskhe aur Muft ki Salah: Chamba, Tehri Garhwal

Interviewing over fifty people from seven different villages in the neighbourhood of Chamba I have collated a number of home remedies and health advice. The audio content is broken into 30 clips of 1 minute duration each, which will be broadcast over Radio Henvallvani 90.4Mhz as a campaign to address the depleting natural habitat and the endangered traditional knowledge in the valley.

While this belt is rich in biodiversity and many of the plants and herbs recommended are growing in plenty, → they are gradually losing their importance in the haze of middle class aspirations for products being sold on TV and people no longer have the time or the patience to wait for these herbal remedies to take effect, choosing instead the quick responding allopathic medicines.

Mass urban migration, dwindling natural resources, failing crops, inadequate rainfall, the Tehri Dam → are some of the issues that were repeated in almost all conversations and discussions. Working with the team at Henvallvani has been a mutually enriching experience. Learning new editing software, methods of conducting field interviews and most importantly the rooted, inspiring spirit of the team has made this residency a learning experience for me.

I was able to help them establish their first web presence in the form of a blog and facebook page, find free server space for them to upload some of their radio programmes and brainstorm on funding ideas. The team at the radio station is already training other

organizations in Chamba to blog and represent themselves instead of being spoken for by other people.

NR3: Frame Works Research and Media Collective

Negotiating Routes- Sikkim

As part of Negotiating Routes, we chose to look at narratives of changing ecology in the mountain state of Sikkim where dams are the new mantra of development. Our project was located at Chungthang in North Sikkim → the site of the largest dam in the State, the 1200 MW Teesta III Project. We also located ourselves in Dzongu → a 40 sq km protected area of the indigenous Lepchas, a tribe whose numbers are fast dwindling. The choice of these locations was deliberate. We wanted to document the transformation-physical and social- in an active damsite as embodied by Chungthang. Some projects are awaiting final clearance in Dzongu, the imminent entry of the dam into this landscape and the shades of opinion that existed around this were of interest to us. As of now, both these places present contrasting images, and hold up mirrors to each other- Chungthang was what Dzongu is and Dzongu will be what Chungthang is. Therefore, they became interesting points of contrast.

Our initial idea was to travel to these places and collect narratives of ecology-myths, practices, histories, associations or even material objects- from the area. The intention was to archive these in the form of a → green book→ that would be produced collaboratively with the people we were interacting with. But in the doing of our work, what surprised us was the preeminence the dam had taken in people→ s lives, especially in Chungthang. The general mood was that the dam was an opportunity for the area and the best had to be made of it. Coupled with this was the general absence of an ecological awareness in the area. It did not make sense looking for stories when none existed. Instead, we decided to try and capture the intangible changes that these places were undergoing as a consequence of these projects. There is a sense of unease and anxiety in these areas, almost as if people are unsure of what is exactly happening while they have to go on with their lives. Understanding this sense of anxiety has also become key to our intervention in the area.

We also collected tree saplings from some friends we made during our stay in Chungthang and Dzongu- individuals who feel strongly about the alterations taking place in their area. We planted these trees in Chorten monastery in Gangtok, a symbolic testimony to the turbulent change in the ecological landscape of North Sikkim. We are currently working on a → green→ book of images, texts, impressions and experiences about the place. Perhaps, the sense of anxiety and unease that characterises the place lie in the experience of the → outsider→ or the → visitor→ , and not so much in people who inhabit the place. They are experiencing a moment in history that does not lend itself to easy articulation. Perhaps, that is why we have decided to use ourselves as significant points of departure, as significant presences in the book.

Frame Works Research and Media Collective, New Delhi

Frame Works Research & Media Collective adopts interdisciplinary practices to explore development issues and social processes. They use varied research techniques and media

forms in their work → from ethnography and documentary film to public art and community media. Frame Works comprises Ruchika Negi, Subhashim Goswami and Amit Mahanti.

- Amit Mahanti specializes in audio-visual media productions. A graduate in English Literature from Hindu College in Delhi University, post-graduate in Mass Communication from the A.J.K. Mass Communication Research Centre, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, he has produced, directed and edited documentaries and audio-visuals on developmental concerns, communalism, environmental conservation, livelihood and identity.
- Ruchika Negi is interested in community-based communication and research. An alumna of St Stephen's College, she has undertaken a number of studies, interactive media exercises, ethnographic and secondary research studies for research institutes, International Non-Governmental Organizations as well as UN agencies. Community participation and media are her areas of interest. Using research and media, she has worked with various adolescent and children's groups in the field of non-formal alternative education.
- Subhashim Goswami has done his graduation from Hindu College and his Masters and M.Phil in Sociology from the Delhi School of Economics, specializing in visual representation. He has been working as a consultant/researcher on various research projects and has also assisted media productions with background research and scripts. He has published papers and book reviews on gender and masculinities.

NR4: Visual Arts collective & Maara

The Katte Project: Part of Khoj's Negotiating Routes

Maara has been interested in community media for over two years now. When we said community media, it was initially technology based media like community radio but we moved into arts and expression and initiatives & campaigns for gender, environment and tribal rights (more recently).

The environment campaign Maara was involved in (2009) was against the cutting of trees for road widening or for metro projects in the city of Bangalore and was initiated by Hasiru Usiru, a Bangalore based collective for urban green. While engaging in the campaign, maara made posters, creative slogans, used props and costumes and added energy through performance and song. These small changes in → protest → brought our activist-on-the-street identity a lot more attention and public engagement. While we worked on the campaign, we also realised that many wanted to express and voice their thoughts about the loss of trees but not enough space was available to allow people to speak about the changing city, infrastructural changes and loss of urban environment that was so a part of everyone's memory of the urbanscape.

Maara was also working with the city's urban artists to build a community, foster exchange and collaborations and encourage more usage and imagination of public spaces like parks. While working with local artists, we also realised that we were getting a travelling artist crowd interested in collaborations and in public space. Salon Emmer, a Vienna based participative community art group led by Elisabeth Lengheimer (Lisa) and Tanja Dinter got in touch with us expressing interest to collaborate. Around the same time, Khoj had announced a community/social art project which could be pitted as an alternative to the

Indian State's imagination of development in the country- the National Highways project all around the country that was leading to unimaginative development and loss of more trees along our national highways. [Negotiating Routes](#), ecologies of the byways aimed at an alternative cultural drawing out of urban cities and its ecological/cultural value. Suresh Jayaram's [1Shantiroad gallery](#) in Bangalore was already interested and involved in urban ecological-cultural concepts and worked as another great resource partner in the negotiating routes proposal.

With Lisa and Tanja from Salon Emmer housed at 1Shantiroad, Deepak from Maraa worked closely with them on understanding 1Shantiroad's connect to its local neighbourhood and the possibilities of creating alternate landmarks for the neighbourhood of Shanthinagar, Bangalore. What were people's perceptions of alternate spaces, alternate routes, → spaces of pause → as Lisa would call it? Did a park like the Lalbagh, (the city's heritage botanical park which was a significant landmark in the neighbourhood) constitute → space for pause → ? Did individual trees or clusters offer such a space or were cultural centers, old and new, providing such contexts?

Thus emerged the concept of the Katte or traditional community centers around trees; these spaces that had worked as spaces of pause, communication and connection to the social, cultural and the ecological. Activities, workshops done as a part of the Maraa-Salon Emmer collaborations were thus called the Katte project. Reflections are housed at katte-beingathome.blogspot.com

To reflect on two primary activities of the residency,

1. 81 Maps of Shantinagar rose out of a series of walks and interactions with the surrounding areas of 1Shantiroad. Suresh Jayaram, visual artist and historian took the artists on a neighbourhood walk and a tour of the Lalbagh gardens. Been provided with this context of the visible Shantinagar and its landmarks, the attempt was to trace → invisible parts → of the neighbourhood and get residents from different urban classes in the area to participate in a collective process of mapping. While trying to identify willing and participative community members, local school children seemed interested in the exercise. An art and mapping workshop with the school led to different types of maps and perspectives being shared and the trends of invisible and sudden geo- cultural change.
2. The residency had hoped to work with more activists and engage both the activist and the artist through a series of workshops. These workshops would work towards alternate and creative modes of "protest" or expression of dissent against the disappearing urban ecology. This would also allow for participative dialogue with the public on the streets rather than alienation and fatigue usually seen with protest. A series of meetings, workshops and dialogue led to the rootless rituals activity where we went out to specific sites which has lost trees to infrastructural development and demonstrated our dissent through movement, visual triggers and facilitated dialogue. Rachel, an intern at Maraa writes about her experience and reflections of rootless rituals [here](#).

Rootless Rituals happened in several locations to initiate dialogue and to mourn the increasing loss of green-space in the city. On March 17, 2010 a small group headed down near Minsk Circle, Race Course Road, Sheshadri Road, where massive tree-cutting had taken place. The group performed proposed rituals artists and activists wanted to, as a response to tree felling. From yogic postures and salutations to silent protests holding paper images of

tear drops and being roadside substitute trees, all forms of performance and protest generated a spectacle and cause for pause and dialogue. Pedestrians stopped to look curiously and bikers reduced their pace. Many spoke of the difficulties with heat and lack of shade, as well as the inaccessibility for pedestrians because of digging and construction. They were willing to share and seemed excited to have a simple venue where they could voice their opinions and concerns. This form of participative protest that we had done seemed to generate more public enthusiasm, interest and need for action.