

# JHAVERI CONTEMPORARY

## ESSAY

### JOYDEB ROAJA

14 July – 20 August 2022

#### Blowing Up Belittlement

A woman pierces us with her stare as she stands tall in the center of Joydeb Roaja's 36th drawing from the series *Generation Wish Yielding Trees and Atomic Tree*. While the background of the work is devoid of any physical topography that might help us imagine where on the planet she might be holding her ground, the cascading lines on her shawl seem to weave together hills that harbor a *jum* house on the right side of the garment, a motif linking the eleven different ethnic groups associated with the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, through their use of a shifting slash-and-burn form of agriculture known as *jum* farming.

The *jum* house in this drawing serves as an emblem, bestowing upon this woman the power to unite different languages and cultures as a leader of the *jumma* people of Bangladesh.<sup>1</sup> The military surrounding her are reduced to the scale of toy soldiers, attentively waiting to execute any command she might dictate. In art, anything is possible, and artists such as Joydeb Roaja are able to refute and reverse problematic power dynamics they encounter in life through their artistic practice. Case in point: the woman in Roaja's drawing described above is Kalpana Chakma, the vocal human rights activist battling for *jumma* and feminist causes who is now presumed dead after being abducted by the Bangladeshi army in 1996, whose force was too large for her to fight.

Joydeb Roaja (b. 1973) is a member of the Tripura community of Bangladesh and he has spent his entire (artistic) life trying to claim space and dignity for his identity within a Bengali majority country. As Katya Garcia Antón aptly observed when convening the 2018 Critical Writing Ensemble at the Dhaka Art Summit with a focus on indigenous art, curation, and criticism: "The country of Bangladesh upheld the premise of 'One language' (Bengali) and 'One people' (Bengali) following its independence from Pakistan in 1971. This constitutional negligence of languages and identities other than Bengali adds to the complexity

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<sup>1</sup> This essay follows terminology spelled out by Naeem Mohaiemen in a previous catalog essay for Roaja: "The indigenous people of Chittagong Hill Tracts are identified by various names, and this nomenclature has changed over time. "Pahari" (hill people) is perhaps the most widespread, while "Adivasi" (indigenous) is a term popularized by NGO activities and rights discourse. I have consciously chosen "Jumma" (people of Jum cultivation) which is a more politically assertive term that is linked to the idea of united 'Jumma Land.'"

of the notion of Indigeniety.” Part of the nation building process of Bangladesh was to firmly associate Bengali, Bangla-speaking people as the people of the land, even within the very name of the country which translates to “land of Bangla speakers,” therefore actively refuting the application of the terminology ‘indigenous’ to cultures currently resigned to the Chittagong Hill Tracts, such as Roaja’s Tripura community.

Roaja came to art as a form of expression as early as his childhood days, when he would struggle to learn from a Bengali curriculum, as a *Kokborok* (Tripura language) speaker. He could not understand most of his text books but he was fascinated with the Hashem Khan (b. 1941) illustrations adorning his school books with visual stories of rural life in Bangladesh. Artists and writers, both historical and contemporary, tended to romanticize the nature-entangled lives of *jumma* people as peaceful; Roaja was one of the first artists to show the violent struggle necessary to maintain a *jumma* way of life in the face of confidence-crushing military occupation. Bangladeshi writer Prashanta Tripura, who comes from the same community as Roaja, poignantly expresses the following when thinking about art and indigeneity in Bangladesh: “An artist who identifies with ‘Indigenous peoples’ thus needs to ask herself: will my artistic creation make the audience reflect on and identify with the crises faced by Indigenous people? Or will my artwork end up in the collections of Individuals or groups that are directly responsible for the denial of rights of Indigenous peoples?”

Roaja first started creating artworks that re-scaled the relationship between *jumma* people and the military forces swarming the landscape of the Chittagong Hill Tracts in 1998, a year after the 1997 Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord was signed into being. Unlike the works we experience in this exhibition, the early drawings were made secretly, hidden in a corner of the artist’s house, and destroyed out of fear before any photos could be taken. He picked up making these confrontational works again in 2009, a year before the Bangladeshi government coined the term ‘*khudro nrigoshithi*’ (‘small ethnic group’) to replace the term ‘tribal’ when describing *jumma* people. This terminology served to further belittle *jumma* people as part of ensuring that Bengalis be the true “adibashis” of the country, an ongoing process of shrinking the agency of *jumma* people even before this new terminology came into use.

The Tongan-Fijian writer Epeli Hau’ofa described how external belittling can often be internalized and self-perpetuated as part of a chain of toxic colonial dynamics: “...*I make a statement of the obvious- that views held by those in dominant positions about their subordinates could have significant consequences for people's self-image and for the ways they cope with their situations. Such views, which are often derogatory and belittling, are integral to most relationships of dominance and subordination, wherein superiors behave in ways or say things that are accepted by their inferiors, who in turn behave in ways that serve to perpetuate the relationships.*”

Roaja’s practice is not limited to two dimensions on a sheet of paper; his drawings often become performances, and his performances often become drawings, where his body claims the power and agency that his rendering of Kalpana Chakma does. For example, some of the works in the *Generation Wish Yielding Trees and Atomic Tree* series include imagery of Roaja and his young children navigating space with forms of military tanks on their heads. These drawn depictions relate to a performance series he executed with his children on a beach as part of instilling confidence in them that similarly to tanks, their bodies and presence have power, too. Works such as *Go Back to Roots 36* (2021) and *Go Back to Roots 37* (2021) posit scenarios that appear historical in terms of *jumma* people entangled in the love they hold for each other and their land, but they are actually futuristic since these sorts of scenes would necessitate that Roaja’s “wish yielding”

demilitarize the Chittagong Hill Tracts and allow for their way of life to rebalance with nature. His practice is an exercise in blasting away at fatalist attitudes through a playful imagining of other futures that could allow his people to cultivate and thrive from their cultural roots.

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