

Stories from the Ground

by Lipika Bansal

Amritah Sen, Paula Sengupta, Nobina Gupta and Sarbajit Sen, artists and activists, find inspiration for their work from the ground.

Whereas Sen connects with people across the Indian subcontinent and finds common grounds in their stories and cultures, Sengupta gathers stories to address socio-environmental issues. Gupta and Sen dwell in their city to close the gap between the Kolkata city and the periphery and to find stories of their childhood memories respectively.

For five years, **Amritah Sen** went on a quest to collect stories about fear in India's neighboring countries. The culmination of this quest, *Fear Books*, speaks to how the emotion of fear strengthens cross-cultural bonds and connections to the past.

Sen, on her identity. "Others have all these cross-cultural identities, but I am just a Bengali. Once, I was conversing with a post-graduate student with this beautiful identity: father is Bangladeshi, mother is Sri Lankan, brought up in the Middle East and studied Art in India. She told me: 'you are trying to find your larger identity. You feel good connecting to all these different people. At first you think they are foreigners, but then you suddenly realize that the mythologies match, the stories match, the folklore and the music too: there is so much common ground'."

In her work, **Paula Sengupta** addresses various contemporary socio-environmental issues, as well as the conservation of cultures, communities, and ecologies.

Sengupta, about her practice: "I'm a bit of a gatherer: I gather objects that range across crafts and textiles and I gather stories and narratives. Eventually, they all find their way into my work. I gather, and then I make specific choices about the material and medium I use. It's a considered choice, because the narratives are embedded in the medium. For instance, when I work with textiles, I embrace layering. I honor the narrative that is embedded in the textile, and then I overlay my own."



Nobina Gupta's work centers around the uniqueness and diversity of the East Kolkata Wetlands (EKW), which are essential to the wellbeing of the city and its dwellers. She founded *Disappearing Dialogues Collectives*, a group of local practitioners, youth, and organizations that work together for the conservation of the EKW.

"Together, we started thinking of how to spread the word about the value of the wetlands, of a message that the community and its children would understand; we needed an engaging visual language. That is why we collaborated with artist Mamoni Chitrakar. She used traditional storytelling and a folk song that children became a part of. We also collaborated with local musicians who used bamboo to make instruments. The added value, here, is that the community becomes part of the art. The art is bridging different gaps between the city and the periphery, between different generations and between different traditions, skills and practitioners."



In his autobiographical novel, **Sarbajit Sen** maps significant socio-political moments in Kolkata.

Sen explains: "I start with my lived reality, my own household, my memories. They all seem to be like stray pages from my personal experiences. But the personal often tends to be something beyond the personal. I look back at my characters and they are all real; many of them are still living. That's my only disclaimer: nothing here is fictitious.

Unless the story is coming from your lived reality, there is no story, and authenticity is lost. This is all about history, in a sense; contemporary history unfolding. I'm not a sociopolitical historian, but then again, who knows what history is all about? It's not a big, monolithic kind of thing. History is open and in between, it is in each and every corner. History is constantly being created; out of our kitchen - with the passage of a water snake, and through the sudden ripening of our fruit."

