The role art plays in an environmentally fragile context like Bangladesh.

Tara Lasrado

Certificate of Advanced Studies: Arts and International Cooperation

Zürich University of the Arts

April 2020

Contents

Thank you!

To my dear friend and collaborator Sepake Angiama, for asking me to join her and Sanchayan Ghosh in organising the second edition of *under the mango tree* in Santiniketan, which sparked my interest in the region and ultimately, this thesis.

To Pro Helvetia New Delhi, Akshay Patak and Sadaf Raza, for making this research trip possible in the first place and the nice conversations we started together.

To the members of Santaran arts organisation - Tanjil Tushi, Sifat Udfowla, Meherun Akter Sumi, Rachit Mro, Satabdi Shome Pompa, Bivol Saha and Noor e Elahi - for welcoming me so warmly in Alikadam and Chittagong. It was an incredible experience to be able to spend time with you and members of the Mro indigenous community. Also to Shawon Akand and Polly Layla for accompanying me on this adventure to Bandarban - cherishing our conversations very much.

To all the members of Gidree Bawlee arts organisation and the Santal community for the much needed down-time we had together in Thakurgaon. It was so special to watch you perform in Dhaka and in front of your classmates in Balia. I thoroughly enjoyed daily village life with you.

To Monjur Ahmed, Salma Jamal Moushum and Kamruzzaman Shadhin whose pioneering work and never-ending commitment to their local communities I deeply respect. Thank you for your generosity in every way. You are a big source of inspiration to me and I'm so very glad that our paths crossed when they did, my friends.

To those who took the time to talk with me during my time at the Dhaka Art Summit, for giving me a better understanding of the Bangladeshi contemporary art landscape: Ashim Halder Sagor and Arpita Singha Lopa (Artpro), Kehkasha Sabah (Dhaka Art Summit Assistant Curator Collectives Platform), Tarana Halim (Shoni Mongol Adda), Tayeba Begum Lipi and Mahbubur Rahman (Britto Arts Trust), Sadya Mizan (Uronto Artist Community) and Shubho o Saha (Back Art Foundation).

To Clare, Vince, Abhijan, Priya, Sepake and Mijoo for the crazy adventure we shared from Santiniketan to Hotel 71. Couldn't have asked for a better crew to experience all that Dhaka offered us with!

To Inteza Shariar for the exciting field trip to the Arcadia Floating School that early Friday morning and your insights into the progressive architecture practice that is currently underway throughout Bangladesh.

To Mr. Raquibul Amin, country representative of IUCN Bangladesh, for the exemplary work you are doing together with artists and local communities around Bangladesh. I look forward to continuing the conversations we have started.

To Barbara Ellenberger for the ongoing exchange, your patience and interest in my research; and for mentoring this thesis.

And finally, to Marcel Bleuler, Dagmar Reichert and my CAS Arts and International Cooperation classmates from Zürich University of the Arts – thank you for your friendship and intellectual generosity this year. From Zürich to Beirut and back to Zürich – what a memorable journey together! You have left me enriched and energised for my future work.

Map of Bangladesh

● **Places I visited in February 2020**

City/Village, District	Organisation / Project
1: Santiniketan, West Bengal	under the mango tree
2: Dhaka, Dhaka District	Dhaka Art Summit
3: Alikadam, Bandarban	Santaran Arts Organisation
4: Chittagong, Chittagong District	Santaran Arts Organisation
5: Balia, Thakurgaon	Gidree Bawlee Arts Organisation

● **IUCN Projects (discussed in Chapter 6)**

Location	Project
6-7: Khulna to Sundarbans	Route of the Shushuk Mela (Dolphin Boat)
8: Kutupalong-Balukhali Refugee Camp	Biodiversity Conflict Mitigation in Cox Bazar

1. Introduction

In February 2020 I spent three weeks in West Bengal and Bangladesh on a research residency, exploring the regional artistic scene in relation to the natural environment, coinciding with *under the mango tree* and Dhaka Art Summit. *under the mango tree* is a self-organised gathering of unlearning, a project I co-organised with educator and curator Sepake Angiama and artist and professor Sanchayan Ghosh, hosted by Kala Bhavana, the art school in Santiniketan, West Bengal (refer to map p.2:1). Together with 20 contributors made up of small-scale artist-led initiatives, schools and libraries from the global south or with indigenous, land-based practices, we proposed an alternative curriculum for the arts, inspired by the Bengali poet, artist, musician Rabindranath Tagore. After our five-day gathering, some of the contributors and I travelled to Dhaka (refer to map p.2:2) for the fifth edition of Dhaka Art Summit – a bi-annual international research and exhibition platform for art and architecture related to South Asia and specifically, Bangladesh.

Following this, I visited the village Alikadam in Bandarban district (refer to map p.2:3), Chittagong city (refer to map p.2:4) and the village Balia in Thakurgaon district (refer to map p.2:5) with local artists. This experience gave me a deeper understanding of both the beauty and complexities of Bangladesh, especially in terms of its environmental diversity and fragility. My interest in this topic stems from the current collaboration I have with Crowther Lab, ETH Zürich - an interdisciplinary research lab generating a fundamental understanding of global ecology to understand and address the global threats of biodiversity loss and climate change - where I am currently developing projects at the intersection of climate science and contemporary art. Upon returning to Zürich, I started to reflect on my trip and the situation in Bangladesh, to try and grasp the role(s) art could play in an environmentally fragile context. This thesis is inspired by the numerous conversations, observations, exchanges and site-visits I had with artists, cultural workers and stakeholders from Bangladesh, both during and following my trip.

The main limitation of this thesis is its size - it is such a complex topic with a wealth of perspectives and literature. For that reason, I decided to focus on the projects, places and people I visited. First, I summarise the factors that make Bangladesh an environmentally fragile context, including but not limited to the climate crisis, which could be useful for artists and cultural workers in preparation for working in a similar context in the future. Next, I shortly introduce the influence that nature has had on Bengali culture historically because during my trip I witnessed first-hand this strong connection, also in the contemporary art scene. Following this, the role that art can play within such a context is examined by presenting both small and large-scale projects and their intended impact. My hope is that NGOs, international organisations and scientists would consider collaborating with artists to address local environmental issues and the mitigation of climate change, especially in developing countries such as Bangladesh. When referring to artists, I would also like to open up these challenges to cultural workers and producers (like myself), who are equally equipped to facilitate such projects. In the conclusion I give insight into a future project of mine which this thesis has informed. Not all the conversations and ideas could be reflected in this thesis, but I see this as a starting point for my future work and ongoing research.

2. Summary of context in Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a country characterised by clay and water. It lays on the Earth's largest river delta which was created 50 million years ago when the Himalayas rose from the ongoing collision of the Indian subcontinent and Eurasian tectonic plates. Nearly the whole country sits at sea level, apart from a small hilly region (Chittagong Hill Tracts). Today, Bangladesh borders India (north, west and east), Myanmar (south east) and the Bay of Bengal (south). It is distinguished by the Ganges delta, which flows down to the Bay of Bengal, and the various river systems such as the Brahmaputra and Ganges river which is integral to both the livelihoods and culture of Bengali people.

Bangladesh is known as the land of six seasons - summer, rainy, early autumn, autumn, winter and spring - which not only regulates agriculture, economy, communication, trade and commerce; but also inspires the art, culture, festivities, spirituality and lifestyle of the entire population.

Bangladesh is a fascinating and complex country, at present finding itself somewhere in between being a developing and developed nation. Despite Bengali culture existing for over one thousand years, Bangladesh is a young and at times a vulnerable state. It first became a country in 1971 after declaring independence from Pakistan, who the British partitioned from India in 1947. What followed independence was a period of significant political and environmental instability which saw a deadly tropical cyclone, severe flooding, famine and a genocidal war all contributing to the creation of refugees and the destruction of millions of livelihoods, infrastructure, markets and institutions (Hossain 2015).

Today the current population of Bangladesh is 164.4 million (UN 2020), with 39.4% of the population being urban (approximately 64.8 million people in 2020). It is one of the most densely populated countries in the world and continues to face extreme population pressures. In this predominantly Bengali-speaking Muslim (85-90%) country there are 54 Indigenous communities who speak 35 Indigenous languages and practice traditional forms of spirituality often in combination with either Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity.

Bangladesh, for a number of factors, has been classified as a fragile context, despite seeing positive transformation in development the last two decades. Due to effective leadership choices and the allocation of international aid, a reduction in extreme poverty and an increase in self-sufficiency has occurred. Owing to, amongst others, the production of staple food crops, such as rice, and the booming textile and garment industry (Carment et. al 2015, UN Environment 2017). These examples contribute to the fact that Bangladesh is the fastest-growing economy in Asia with the likelihood to drop its 'least developed country' status by 2024 (Rooney 2019), as long as environmental challenges continue to be prioritised.

Over 72,480 families were affected by floodwaters in the Kurigram district in July 2019 © Zakir Hossain Chowdhury/Al Jazeera

3. Environmentally Fragile Contexts (Bangladesh)

According to a report prepared by the Bangladesh Forest Department, at least 4,589 trees were uprooted in the Sundarbans (refer to map p.2:7) by Cyclone Bulbul in November 2019 © Zakir Hossain Chowdhury/Al Jazeera

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) characterizes fragility as "the combination of exposure to risk and insufficient coping capacities of the state, system and/or communities to manage, absorb or mitigate those risks" (OECD 2020). In 2016, the OECD introduced its multidimensional fragility framework attempting to capture the diversity of those contexts affected by fragility. Five dimensions are included - economic, environmental, political, security and societal - and measured based on intensity from severe to minor. The environmental dimension aims to "capture the vulnerability to environmental climactic and health risks to citizens' lives and livelihoods. This includes exposure to natural disasters, pollution and disease epidemics" (OECD 2018). In terms of the environmental dimension, Bangladesh is experiencing high fragility due to government ineffectiveness, uprooted people, environmental health and natural hazard exposure. On the other hand, Bangladesh performs moderately to well in the indicators of rule of law, food security, core civil society index, prevalence of infectious disease and socio-economic vulnerability (OECD 2018).

Bangladesh faces numerous environmental issues including deforestation, biodiversity loss, pollution, groundwater metal contamination, increased groundwater salinity, cyclones and flooding, population pressure, and degradation of river and marine resources amongst others (Hasnat 2018). Some of these can be directly linked to industrial processes and human activity, while others, such as flooding and cyclones are naturally occurring events. Many of these issues are further exacerbated by the current climate crisis, including the increased extreme weather events and disasters, rising sea levels and coastal degradation, local resource competition, livelihood insecurity and migration; and water management (OECD 2018).

People frequently lose their homes in the Sundarbans (refer to map p.2:7). © Zakir Hossain Chowdhury/Al Jazeera

Crops in the Khulna district (refer to map p.2:6) destroyed by Cyclone Bulbul, which hit Bangladesh in November 2019. © Zakir Hossain Chowdhury/Al Jazeera

As climate change is the "ultimate threat multiplier" (OECD 2018, trend 11) it usually interacts with other existing fragilities - be it political, humanitarian or economic - that can have devastating effects on the security and livelihoods of the most vulnerable in society. For example, a three-foot (91cm) rise in sea level would submerge almost 20 percent of the country and displace more than 30 million people - and the actual rise by 2100 could be significantly more, perhaps 50 million people if a five-six (152 - 183cm) foot rise would occur (Glennon 2017). To put it in perspective, the ongoing crisis in Syria has caused approximately 5.6 million people to flee for safety as refugees, with a further 6.2 million displaced within the country since 2011 (UNHCR 2020). It must be highlighted here that many of the climate change effects happening *to* the people of Bangladesh, are not caused *by* them - Bangladesh emits only 0.3 percent of the emissions producing climate change (Glennon 2017). To compare - the average European citizen emits as much carbon in 11 days as the average Bangladeshi in an entire year, yet it is the government and the people of Bangladesh who are expected to pay for the escalating costs and suffer from the dire effects (UN 2014).

In an environmentally fragile context such as Bangladesh, greater education and awareness, of the impact developed countries are having on least developed countries (LDCs) and rural communities at the frontlines of climate change, is needed. Since the climate crisis remains a future-scenario, or one that's happening to "exotic" people and landscapes that most in the developed world have never encountered, it often remains difficult to grasp. This led me to think about *how artists could change these perceptions? How art can foster empathy and a sense of global solidarity? How artworks or artistic interventions could inspire action?* In addition to this, the greater involvement of local communities regarding the on-ground environmental issues they face daily, is necessary. *How can artists work together with the most affected or vulnerable communities to address local environmental issues in order to inspire participation and action? How could policy makers, NGOs, governmental organisations, international corporations and artists learn from local and indigenous knowledge about the environment that exists in rural communities?*

4. Historical context of art and the environment in Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a fascinating context in which to examine art and culture due to the fact it has historically been so ingrained in the natural environment. The Bengal Delta and the diverse environmental features of the country have undoubtedly influenced Bengali culture over the last thousand years as well as the contemporary artistic scene of the country, which have both been in constant dialogue with nature's unavoidable natural conditions and rhythms (Scotto 2018).

Bengali culture - including poetry, novels, short stories, music, alpana (painting) and embroidery techniques, as well as architecture - has been heavily influenced, inspired and adapted to the flourishing biodiversity and unique environmental context which each region of the country offers. From the six seasons of Bangladesh, to the triumphs and struggles of fisher communities and agricultural farmers, to nature as a metaphor for spirituality, to patriotic feelings linked to the natural environment, to descriptions of pure beauty and solitude of rural Bangladesh – aesthetic narratives, until recently, were predominantly based on spiritual and romantic connotations. Even in times of crisis, such as during the liberation war in 1971, the rivers, forests, flora and fauna of Bangladesh were referred to in songs and poetry as a way to inspire and encourage freedom fighters to raise awareness of the mass (Iqbal 2007: p.66). Although the people of Bangladesh have always appreciated and respected nature, because it is at the core of their agricultural livelihoods, historically the vulnerabilities and scientific facts around have been less at the focus of artistic practices.
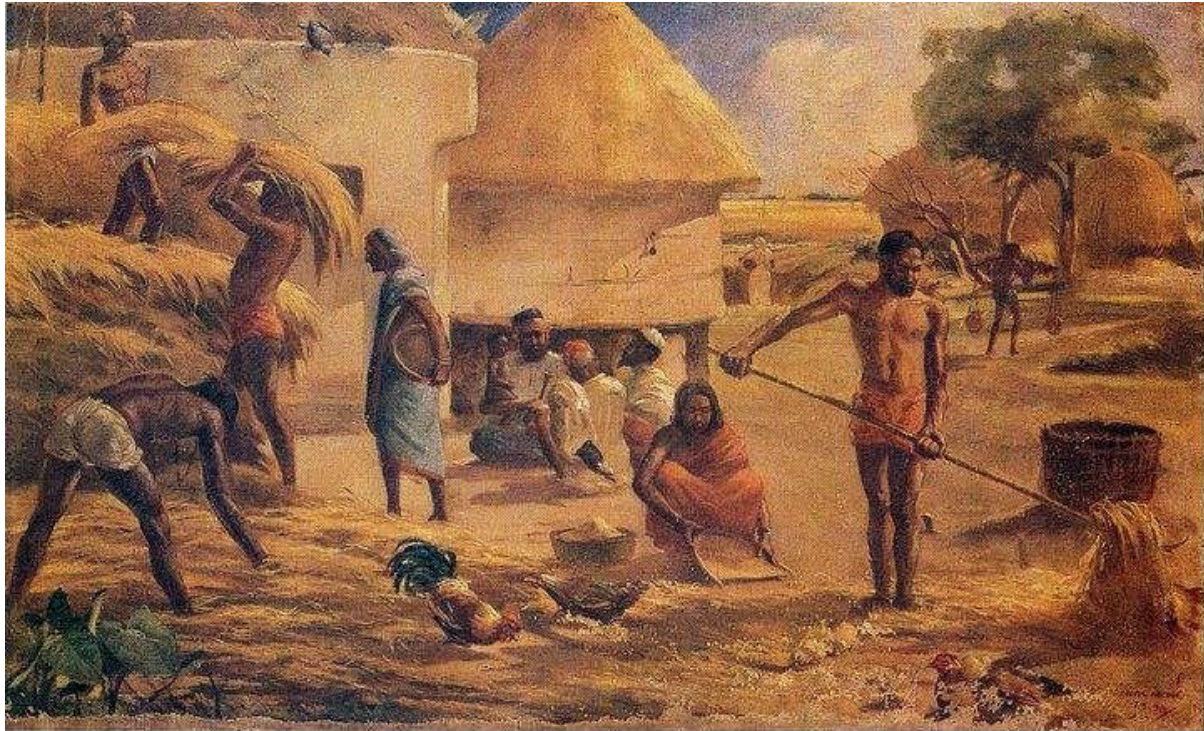
Harvest, 1934, oil on canvas. By Zainul Abedin, considered to be the founding father of modern art in Bangladesh.

With the changing climate, so too has the aesthetic diversity in creative expression changed, as well as social modes of interaction and processes of cultural reproduction. The climate crisis poses a potential threat to social and cultural continuity – to season-based agriculture and those cultural festivals which focus on planting and harvesting. Traditional practices around the country are disrupted – "What will happen to traditional winter celebration festivals — *Pousha Mela* and *Pousha Shonkranti* — when the traditional six seasons of Bengal no longer exist? And how will the spiritual beliefs and practices of Baul musicians alter as the climate changes, particularly when so much of their inspiration arises from nature?" ask the youth of Dhaka at an art and climate symposium (ICCCAD 2018). Where historically more aesthetic representations of the natural environment were found in Bengali culture, today the natural environment is a departure point and source of inspiration for local artists to engage in participatory, community-based artistic projects which educate, raise awareness and act on environmental topics, such as climate change, together with local communities.

5. A social contract

In Bangladesh I saw many proactive approaches from artists who come from towns or villages around the country who are on the frontlines of these adverse environmental changes. Where previously climate change in Bangladesh was mostly being addressed by the development industry (ICCCAD 2018) and environmental issues addressed by scientists or governmental organisations, today artists are proving instrumental in considering those voices that are otherwise excluded in such discussions - often those communities who are the most affected by the changing climate and environment.

As the OECD Fragility Report (2018) highlighted, keeping people at the centre of development is vital if they are to flourish as individuals, which also should extend to environmental policy and climate change mitigation. Some rural communities are less resilient and equipped to deal with climate change impacts. The OECD calls for the effective management of fragility with "informed and flexible strategies" (2018: p.59) and Carment (2015) too observes the need to move beyond large-scale understandings of fragility, to "strategically timed and fairly narrow interventions" when addressing the climate crisis. Here, approaches to better understand the specific conditions and contextual factors of rural communities are favoured, leaving a window of opportunity for artists to collaborate with these communities on local environmental challenges.

Balia community in Thakurgaon, all hands on deck, preparing for a performance by members of Gidree Bawlee. © Tara Lasrado (2020)

As the OECD Fragility Report raised in its trends overview - "the social contract is the glue of resilient and peaceful societies. It depends on the ability of groups to work together and find collective purpose; it defines how people build relationships; and, in places that have experienced conflict, it helps to repair fractured relationships" (UNDP 2018: p.9). The UN/World Bank goes on to say that the importance of development and the future of a society depends on the agency of people in that society and the decisions they take (UN/World Bank 2018). The country representative of the IUCN in Bangladesh Mr. Raquibul Amin, whom I interviewed, explained that contrary to popular belief "disaster management in rural areas functions rather well due to the strength of existing social structures in place – a social capital based on friendship and solidarity that is not often found in urban areas".

I believe that another form of solidarity is needed here - cross-border or global solidarity - where citizens of developed countries become better aware of the impact their decisions are having on the livelihoods of vulnerable communities around the world who, in the end, are the most affected by environmental changes. Artists have the ability to embed themselves within communities, to form relationships and foster participation and engagement through their artistic practice. This leads to social cohesion and a collective purpose - essential factors to build the community resilience and agency needed to tackle environmental issues that will continue to face them.

In the text "Environment and Culture" (2007) historian and professor Iftekhar Iqbal notes that a better human approach and response to ecological problems needs to urgently be documented, in order to be considered in policy debates. "Man's place and voice, integral to his cultural understanding of the world, have been minimised in this discourse - because of scientific categorisation of nature and its crisis in view of achieving "sustainable development"" (Iqbal 2007, p.76). It's evident that a gap exists between policy makers, international corporations and organisations, NGOs and scientists; and the local cultural and social dynamics at the ground level. Iqbal (2007) calls for the repositioning of ecological issues into a broader social and cultural framework, which I believe needs to be integrated politically and economically both locally and globally as well, for productive, systemic action to be achieved.

6. Contemporary Approaches

Following my trip to Bangladesh in February 2020, it was evident that many artists and organisations are proactively addressing the climate crisis on both a small and large scale. Such artistic projects are generally diverse and play different roles. For example, art can be used for **storytelling** (as in the case of *Storytelling with Saris* a project by artist and activist Monica Jahan Bose), **disaster risk mitigation** (*Biodiversity Conflict Mitigation in Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar District* by the IUCN, UNHCR; and artist Kamruzzaman Shadhin), **education** (*Shushuk Mela* project by IUCN, UNDP, MOEFCC; and artist Kamruzzaman Shadhin), **raising local awareness** (*In-site* and *Horith* environmental art camps in Alikadam and Balia villages), **raising international awareness** (Dhaka Art Summit), **including a plurality of voices** (Gidree Bawlee children's puppet theatre group) or **training and development** (Santaran's traditional art and crafts program). The majority of the projects I encountered during my trip had one common denominator - the activation, participation, engagement and collaboration *with local communities*.

I want to reflect on two organisations I visited on my trip **Santaran** and **Gidree Bawlee**, who are both at the forefront of this change-making practice and work with rural or indigenous communities to address the changing local environment; and on **Dhaka Art Summit** as one example of how we could better foster global solidarity. Then two artistic interventions, which were created to raise awareness and mitigate local environmental problems, will be presented based on a conversation I had with the country representative of the IUCN, **International Union for Conservation of Nature** in Bangladesh, Mr. Raquibul Amin.

6:1 Santaran (meaning "swimming" in Bengali) was established in 1998, by visual artists Monjur Ahmed, Bivol Saha, Noor E Elahi, Nasir Uddin and Satabdi Shome, with its main activities based in Chittagong (refer to map p.2:4) and Alikadam, Bandarban (refer to map 2:3). Alikadam is a hilly region, part of the Chittagong Hill Tracts where 12 ethnic minorities live. Santaran has a long-standing relationship with the indigenous Mro community (the only community who still maintains its remote lifestyle and does not receive any government support), focusing many of their activities on the empowerment and advancement of them.

Santaran has been active in creating public awareness in the area for the prevention of destructive activities in and around Alikadam village, which was once renowned in Bangladesh for its reserve forests and mountains. There is a severe water crisis in Alikadam due to deforestation and in recent years, tobacco fields have been added, causing a great threat to the local biodiversity as well as for the local communities, who are lured into exploitative labour conditions on tobacco fields for a quick income. Santaran founded the *Kendrabindu* program at Srijan Prangan (Santaran's multidisciplinary art space), a training program based on product design, development, marketing, research and preservation of the traditional art and crafts (handloom weaving, jewelry, bamboo) of the Mro indigenous community. It also runs the *Kalpapuri School of Arts and Crafts* for both Bengali and Pahari (of hill areas) children, who otherwise would not have any interaction with one another, offering eco-friendly artistic training to promote social cohesion and education about local resources. Santaran also hosts the *Horith Environmental Art Camp* annually for international and Bangladeshi artists to work with the local Mro community in order to better understand local environmental issues from their experience and knowledge of the land.

Santaran offered great insights into what is possible in terms of cultural production and collaboration, when working long-term together with local ethnic communities who have a great knowledge of the natural environment and its development. Santaran's work in the region is admirable and much respected by the local municipality as well as the local communities – who, thanks to their activities, have had access to training and education regardless of their ethnic background.

Santaran activities (L-R clockwise):
Blue Earth is a symbol of pain (2013), performance by Monjur Ahmed for Horith Environmental Art Camp in Alikadam © Monjur Ahmed
Mro village © Tara Lasrado
Students of the Kalpapuri School of Arts and Crafts in Alikadam, Bandarban © Tara Lasrado

6:2 Gidree Bawlee is a non-profit organisation, run by artist Kamruzzaman Shadhin and Salma Jamal Moushum, in Balia, a village in the Thakurgaon district in the northwest of Bangladesh (refer to map p.2:5). Since 2001 Gidree Bawlee has been working to create cultural and artistic exchanges between artists and rural/indigenous communities through collaborative approaches. The majority of the projects they initiate are created through public participation and are exhibited in public spaces where the audiences are general public and surrounding communities.

Shadhin grew up in Thakurgaon and consequently Gidree Bawlee has developed long-term personal and professional relationships with the indigenous Santal community. He has experienced the gradual changes to their lifestyles - the shift from a hunter-gatherer lifestyle to a modern agrarian one. Along with this, the natural environment has also changed. One example relates to "hybrid crops and the excessive use of insecticides and pesticides which have driven away foxes, owls, eagles and many other animals that helped maintain the biodiversity and ecosystem of the region" said Shadhin. The changing environment was reflected in the performance *Golpota Shobar (The Story is Everyone's)* commissioned for Dhaka Art Summit 2020 which presented the living and non-living beings of Thakurgaon, as imagined by a theatre company of children who live there. Children made handmade puppets, with found materials, which tell stories of small incidents in the village that connect to long histories of waves of migration through to recent south to north movements of climate change refugees. The performance presents the 'beings' – animals, birds, and other supernatural beings that lived in the old trees in the past – who have now vanished with the gradual cutting down of trees in the region. Now the children only hear about these beings in stories told by their elders. They imagined those beings still prancing around the village and portrayed them in the performance.

Another project Gidree Bawlee facilitates is *In-Site* – which started in 2016 as collaborative artist residencies bringing together contemporary art practitioners from Dhaka to the village of Balia to collaborate with the community artists from the village. Exploring the indigenous traditional and ritualistic practices, *In-Site* attempts to find a solution of local environmental crisis through creating a balance of traditional and modern knowledge, creating site-specific work that responds to the surrounding ecological history and its changes. One project produced referred to the over planting of eucalyptus trees all over the village due to its fast-growth meaning it's a quick source of income for the community. However, in a region where water is scarce, eucalyptus is actually deadly because of the amount of water it sucks from the cultivated land. Through a collaborative performance and installation initiated by artists together with the community, they started a mutual conversation. In the long run the community believes more in the importance of such issues and in this case, cultivated less eucalyptus trees in favour of local fruit trees. As Moushum stated "what we want to do is look at the ways the local people used to preserve nature in the past, and how they gradually shifted from those practices, what enforced those shifts, and how can a new solution can be devised in this changed situation. So, we do want transfer of information, but it's not a one-way process".

Gidree Bawlee fosters a culture where artists and the community people both learn from each other, and thus, through a balance of information, a collective solution might or might not appear. *In-site* brings change, but slowly through knowledge-sharing, and through devising long-term interventions based on those found knowledge. It is predicted that the northern region of Bangladesh, where Gidree Bawlee works, will be hit by droughts that will lead the region towards desertification. Moushum explains that they "can already see the signs of gradually declining ground-water availability. As such, the long-term goal of *In-site* is to prepare the locality for the impacts of climate change that will hit them hard and find solutions through community actions and knowledge-sharing – all by community engagement through art". The work of Gidree Bawlee aims to change the mindset of all involved in their projects – both the artists and the community people - to generate new thought through mutual learning.

Image on following page: Gidree Bawlee children's theater group experimenting with new styles of performance (2019) © Umme Aklima Alam.

6.3 Dhaka Art Summit (DAS). I came to know about the work of Gidree Bawlee as they participated in DAS in February 2020**,** which confirms the importance of international platforms for presenting local environmental issues, which in turn can raise awareness and foster global solidarity. DAS was founded in 2012 by the Samdani Art Foundation and is currently organised every two years at the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy in collaboration with the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Bangladesh. Under the direction of chief curator Diana Campbell Betancourt and together with international curators, artists and thinkers, DAS's interdisciplinary program focuses on the advancement and promotion of South Asia's contemporary and historic creative communities.

There were many local rural and urban perspectives from around the world in the DAS exhibition which was intended for mainly local audiences, though had an interesting international resonance. From the changing soil layers of Santiniketan in The Otholith Group's film *O Horizon* to Marlon de Azambuja's concrete installation capturing the city of Dhaka as dense and precarious as the result of climate-change migration. From Clarissa Tossin's installation which addressed the impact of the Amazon fires on indigenous communities and the need to consider native people as part of the ecology, to the changing the landscapes of Arunachal Pradesh presented by Minam Apang, where the sea lays siege to the mountain, the same as how the Himalayas, which were once underwater, now have melting glaciers. From Vasantha Yogananthan's photographs of *SECMOL's moving Ice Stupa* project in Ladkh to *Landversation* by Otobong Nkanga who activated interpersonal networks around Bangladesh and offered a platform to reflect, exchange, share and heal from nature beyond soil, territories and earth - the urgency of the climate crisis and both local and global environmental issues were an integral part of the program.

Other interesting organisational elements of DAS were the concept of the exhibition design and catalogue. The exhibition design was the result of the research done for *Srijan-Abartan*, an international, cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural project which aimed to develop new tools and methodologies for creating culturally rooted, ecologically sustainable and socially responsible exhibition displays. Taking sustainability as its main concern, recyclable or biodegradable materials from around Bangladesh were used, working with the building instead of against it (making use of the natural light and ventilation it provided), opting for local labour and materials for production; and making improvements to the venue as a lasting collective resource, were just some of the refreshing strategies employed and felt throughout the exhibition. It was also useful that the catalogue was made available online for free allowing for greater engagement and attention to the content, by international audiences, even beyond the exhibition.

(L-R clockwise):
1.O Horizon (2018). Still from video (90mins). The Otholith Group
© The Otholith Group.
2.Landversation (2020). Installation at Dhaka Art Summit by Otobong Nkanga © Tara Lasrado.
3.Golpota Shobar (The Story is Everyone's). Members of Gidree Bawlee at Dhaka Art Summit (2020)
© Tara Lasrado.

6:4 IUCN, International Union for Conservation of Nature

Two successful projects initiated by the IUCN involving artist Kamruzzaman Shadhin show both the role of artistic interventions in mitigating and raising awareness about different environmental issues; and the potential of such collaborations (between international organisations, local artists and affected communities).

Kutupalong-Balukhali Refugee Camp Cox Bazar district (2018) © IUCN

6.4a: The Biodiversity Conflict Mitigation around the Refugee Camp of Cox's Bazar District was a project initiated by the IUCN, with financial support from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and realised together with the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC), Deputy Commissioner of Cox's Bazar, and the Bangladesh Forest Department.

The Cox Bazar district (refer to map p.2:8) is located in between Myanmar (to the east) and the Bay of Bengal (to the west). It has been sheltering more than a million Rohingya refugees forcibly displaced due to ethnic clashes in Myanmar. The sudden influx of more than 700,000 refugees at the end of 2017 resulted in the clearing of nearly 6,000 acres of forest to build shelters. The deforestation continued as the refugees turned to the surrounding forest for firewood which is having a significant impact on the forest biodiversity, resources of the area, and consequent landslides (IUCN 2018). The largest site, Kutupalong-Balukhali, which shelters more than 600,000 people is set up within reserved forest areas which is both the core habitat for the Asian elephants in Bangladesh - a critically endangered species - as well as an active corridor the elephants use to migrate between their habitats in Bangladesh and Myanmar. The communities living in these camps have been susceptible to elephant encounters, attacks and accidents, resulting in damage to the camps as well as human casualties (twelve people died within seven months of establishing the camps).

Life-size elephants in Kutupalong-Balukhali Refugee Camp, Cox Bazar district (2018) © IUCN

Mr. Raquibul Amin, country representative for IUCN in Bangladesh, explained that his team wanted to instil a message of respect and co-existence, working directly with the displaced population to train them in how to repel elephants if they entered the camps. IUCN created fifty 'tusk teams' with more than 600 volunteers from Rohingya and host communities to guard the edge of the camps from 93 watchtowers. The tasks of the 'tusk teams' were to detect any approaching elephant, form human chains and gently push the elephant back to the forest. Knowing conventional training methods would not be effective due to language barriers, Mr. Amin collaborated with artist Kamruzzaman Shadhin, turning to live demonstrations to both communicate technical knowledge to 'tusk team' members on how to handle elephants, and also to convey assuring messages to the traumatized Rohingya refugees that elephants are not an enemy.

Shadhin created life-size elephant structures that could be used to train the volunteers of 'tusk team' on how to ward off the elephants without harming them, collaborating with people living in the camp through participatory art practices. He worked for several months to instil trust and a connection with them through making the elephants together. The community men built the elephant frames from bamboo while the women turned torn clothes from the camps into patchwork quilts used to cover the elephants. New clothes were exchanged for the torn clothes. As Shadhin reflects "This project was an attempt to weave art, community practices, migrant experiences, trauma, and hope in a "kantha" (an embroidered quilt) which embodies the struggles of the stateless, be it human or animal, all over the world". In terms of impact, the project had a 100% success rate - to date elephants have passed through the camp 143 times without any additional deaths inside camp, showing the astounding potential for artistic interventions in reducing psychosocial trauma of war-torn refugee population and creating hope and self-confidence to address local environmental challenges.

This approach of combining art and conservation science as a humanitarian response drew a lot of attention from both international and national media. This helped to portray a message of positivity for a very complex problem and attain empathy for the refugees as well the elephants. In addition, the IUCN-UNHCR sponsored Shadhin's participation in the 18th Asian Art Biennale 2018 in Dhaka, where he exhibited the elephants and received an Honorable Mention Award for the project. Presenting the elephants in such a context further helped to reach out to the urban elites and urban mass who are disconnected with the realities or plight of both local communities, refugees or elephants.

6.4b: The second project, **Shushuk Mela (Dolphin Fair) and Golpata Dolphin Boat** were a combined art education project aimed at outreach and capacity building, bringing together art and conservation in an effort to save Bangladesh's river dolphins. It was initiated by the IUCN Bangladesh, Bangladesh Forest Department with support from a UNDP-GEF grant of Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC). Its focus was in the Sundarbans region (refer to map p.2:7), in the south west of Bangladesh, which is the biggest mangrove forest in the world. It is home to Asia's last two remaining freshwater dolphins — the Irrawaddy dolphin and the Ganges River dolphin — which are both globally endangered (it's also the only place in the world where the two dolphins share the same habitat). Fishermen in Bangladesh usually don't harm the dolphins intentionally, but as everywhere in the world, dolphins too get tangled in fishing nets.

Golpata Dolphin Boat (2018) © IUCN

As part of the conservation plan, the Bangladesh Forest Department trained six dolphin conservation teams involving around 100 local community members, who are some of the most vulnerable to climate change due to the effect of the sea-rise on their livelihood. In terms of the artistic intervention, artist Kamruzzaman Shadhin collaborated with "chowais" (people who work with the mangrove palm - "golpata" - in the Sundarbans), to turn the traditional golpata boat into one that resembled a river dolphin. The boat sailed from Khulna down to the Sundarbans (refer to map p.2: 6-7), making stops at villages where artists, puppeteers and conservationists conducted workshops, exhibitions and

interventions for local children to promote and raise awareness on the importance of saving dolphins. As opposed to the traditional flyers and posters NGOs usually spread in villages to disseminate environmental information, the dolphin boat intended to capture imagination and stir awe and curiosity by its pure scale and use of natural and well-known local materials. In terms of impact, with the introduction of the conservation teams, fishing declined by 70% in the dolphin sanctuaries and the number of freshwater dolphins in the area also increased. This was due to the ongoing education of other local fishermen about the dangers of fishing in the protected areas. For this project, Shadhin saw his artwork as an agent – "an agent of conservation for dolphins".

6.4c: Mr. Amin explained that for him personally, art is a very strong universal language to engage wide publics and to communicate science: "art disseminates language, builds capacity, educates and raises awareness". He continues to influence other IUCN programs to follow the example of Bangladesh and implement artistic collaborations in their countries. But he reinforces that it really depends on the orientation of the program lead, if they have a connection with the artistic community (as he did) and the ability to create an art-science-policy interface. His hope (like mine) is that more people will work at this interface, and that NGOs and governmental organisations will start to realise the potential of such collaborations in addressing environmental issues and mitigating climate change.

7. Conclusion

As this thesis has established, Bangladesh is an environmentally fragile context for a number of reasons, one being the climate crisis, whereby vulnerable (often rural) communities are the most affected, even though they are the least included in wider discussions around it. A gap exists between the science, international corporations and organisations, NGOs, governmental organisations and policy makers; and what actually happens on ground in terms of the social and cultural dynamics and structures of smaller communities. There also lies great power and potential within these communities to utilize existing local or indigenous knowledge on ecological issues.

In terms of art, environmental-related artistic projects are generally diverse and can play different roles - from storytelling, education, raising awareness, including a plurality of voices; to disaster risk mitigation and training and development. Art produces reflective individuals, engaged citizens, empowered communities, healing after disaster, regeneration of cities or villages, economic benefits; and contributes to improved health and wellbeing. Most impressively, art can play a role in mutual learning, the mitigation of climate change effects; the promotion of peaceful coexistence of communities with their natural environment.

I found there to be two equally important roles that art should play in an environmentally fragile context, after my research in Bangladesh. The first is at a local level where artists - who are already from or embedded within rural communities - create participatory artistic projects that both educate and raise awareness about local environmental issues. Here the focus is on mutual learning, where local artists understand the local context and where the community understands the local environment - as seen with the activities of Santaran and Gidree Bawlee. While the people of Bangladesh have proven to be resilient to the disasters and change that has occurred to their natural environment – this story also needs to be placed in a wider context.

Therefore, the second role I see for art is positioned at global level - to raise awareness on the detrimental impact developed countries are having on least developed countries, including Bangladesh. Since there is so much impressive work already being done at a local level, I find it interesting to explore how we can further accelerate this to build awareness, solidarity and action on a global level. There is a great potential for development organisations and NGOs working on environmental issues to establish relationships with local artistic communities, who in most cases already have established connections

Khelaram Khele Ja (2011) by Kamruzzaman Shadhin. Collaborative performance with Traditional Ghatu performer of Netrokona.'Prantike Prakritajan' organized by Britto Arts Trust at Durgapur, Netrokona, Bangladesh © Kamruzzaman Shadhin.

with the rural communities, which is who the NGOs target in their policy and development work. The resources - experience, network, capacity and financial - of organisations such as IUCN or for example the International Centre for Climate Change and Development in Bangladesh (ICCCAD) - coupled with both an artists' creativity and ability to build trust and connections with and within local communities, could be an immensely powerful collaboration.

This research has informed an upcoming project I am currently developing in collaboration with the Crowther Lab – a platform for artists and scientists to jointly shape ecological action and inspire a wider public on the informed restoration of the Earth's ecosystems. Thanks to this thesis, I now intend to form an interdisciplinary working group made up of artists, cultural workers, climate scientists and members of organisations, such as the IUCN or ICCCAD, to try and find a more inclusive, participatory approach or model for addressing local environmental issues on a global scale, through artistic collaborations. Till now, the knowledge of local communities and the critical and creative inputs from artists and cultural workers have not been adequately included in either local and global environmental discourse. I look forward to further investigating, together with artists and cultural workers, how existing indigenous practices and knowledge can be combined with modern scientific approaches to address the climate crisis moving forward.

It's no longer about individuals or nations, urban or rural communities and "us or them" mentalities when we speak about environmental issues – the science has proven we're all going to be significantly affected by the climate crisis eventually, unless we act now, ambitiously, and as a global community. It's a matter of global solidarity and collective action and I believe that artists have an incredible opportunity to be at the centre of this constellation. As we've seen with the climate, so too can people and policy makers change their approaches - it just takes time, commitment and a mutual understanding of local social and cultural dynamics. For a country like Bangladesh, it's not just about building infrastructure or providing funds to climate-vulnerable communities, but actually coming to terms with what it means *culturally* to live in a changing natural environment.

8. Bibliography

Carment, D, J. Landry, Y. Samy & S.Shaw (2015). *Towards a theory of fragile state transitions: evidence from Yemen, Bangladesh and Laos.* Third World Quarterly, 36:7, 1316-1332.

Chowdury, Z.H (2019). *In Pictures: Bangladesh on the frontline of climate crisis.* Al Jazeera: https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/inpictures/pictures-bangladesh-front-lines-climate-crisis-191203102447517.html

Dhaka Art Summit (2020). *Dhaka Art Summit catalogue: Seismic Movements.* Samdani Art Foundation. Sun Press.

Glennon, R (2017). *The Unfolding Tragedy of Climate Change in Bangladesh.* Scientific American: https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/guest-blog/the-unfolding-tragedy-of-climate-change-in-bangladesh/

Hasnat G.N.T., Kabir M.A., Hossain M.A. (2018). *Major Environmental Issues and Problems of South Asia, Particularly Bangladesh.* In: Hussain C. (eds) Handbook of Environmental Materials Management. Springer, Cham.

Hossain, N (2015). *The perfect storm and the final famine.* Himal South Asian: https://www.himalmag.com/the-perfect-storm-and-the-final-famine/

ICCCAD (2018). *Climate Culture and Art Symposium for Youth in Bangladesh 2018.* International Center for Climate Change and Development: http://www.icccad.net/event/climate-culture-and-art-symposium/

Iqbal, I. (2007). *Environment and Culture [From prehistoric time to the present].* In: Mohsin, K.M. and Ahmed, Sharif uddin (eds.) Cultural Survey of Bangladesh (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh), 44-72.

IUCN (2019). The *Biodiversity Conflict Mitigation around the Refugee Camp of Cox's Bazar District.* International Union for Conservation of Nature: https://www.iucn.org/asia/countries/bangladesh/human-elephant-conflict-mitigation-around-refugee-camp-coxs-bazar-phase-2-2019

OECD (2018). *States of Fragility 2018*, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Publishing, Paris: https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264302075-en.

Rooney, K (2019). *Here's what you need to know about Bangladesh's rocketing Economy.* World Economic Forum: https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/11/bangladesh-gdp-economy-asia/

Scotto, G (2018). *Review: Bengal Stream: The Vibrant Architecture Scene of Bangladesh.* Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians. Vol. 77 No. 3: 363-365.

UN (2020). *Bangladesh Population.* Worldometer: https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/bangladesh-population/

UN (2017). *Bangladesh Leads the Way in the NAP Process.* UN Environment: https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/resilience-bangladesh-leads-way-national-adaptation-plan-nap-process

UN (2014). *Bangladesh Uncovers the Crippling Cost of Climate Change Adaptation.* UN Environment: https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/press-release/bangladesh-uncovers-crippling-cost-climate-change-adaptation

UNDP (2018). *Forging Resilient Social Contracts: A Pathway to Preventing Violent Conflict and Sustaining Peace.* United Nations Development Programme: https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/democratic-governance/oslo_governance_centre/forging-resilient-social-contracts--preventing-violent-conflict-.html

UNHCR (2020). *Syria Emergency.* The UN Refugee Agency: https://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html

UN/World Bank (2018). *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict.* World Bank, Washington, DC: http://dx.doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-1162-3.

Further links to artists, organisations and projects visited or mentioned:

Arcadia Floating School https://arcadiaprojects.org/this-school-could-change-the-way-we-think-about-buildings-in-bangladesh-the-secret-it-floats/

Dhaka Art Summit https://www.dhakaartsummit.org/ (full catalogue available here)

Gidree Bawlee arts organisation https://www.facebook.com/GidreeBawlee/

Kamrzuzzaman Shadhin https://kamruzzamanshadhin.com/

Santaran arts organisation https://www.facebook.com/santaranart/

Storytelling with Saris http://storytellingwithsaris.com/