

# ART & DEAL



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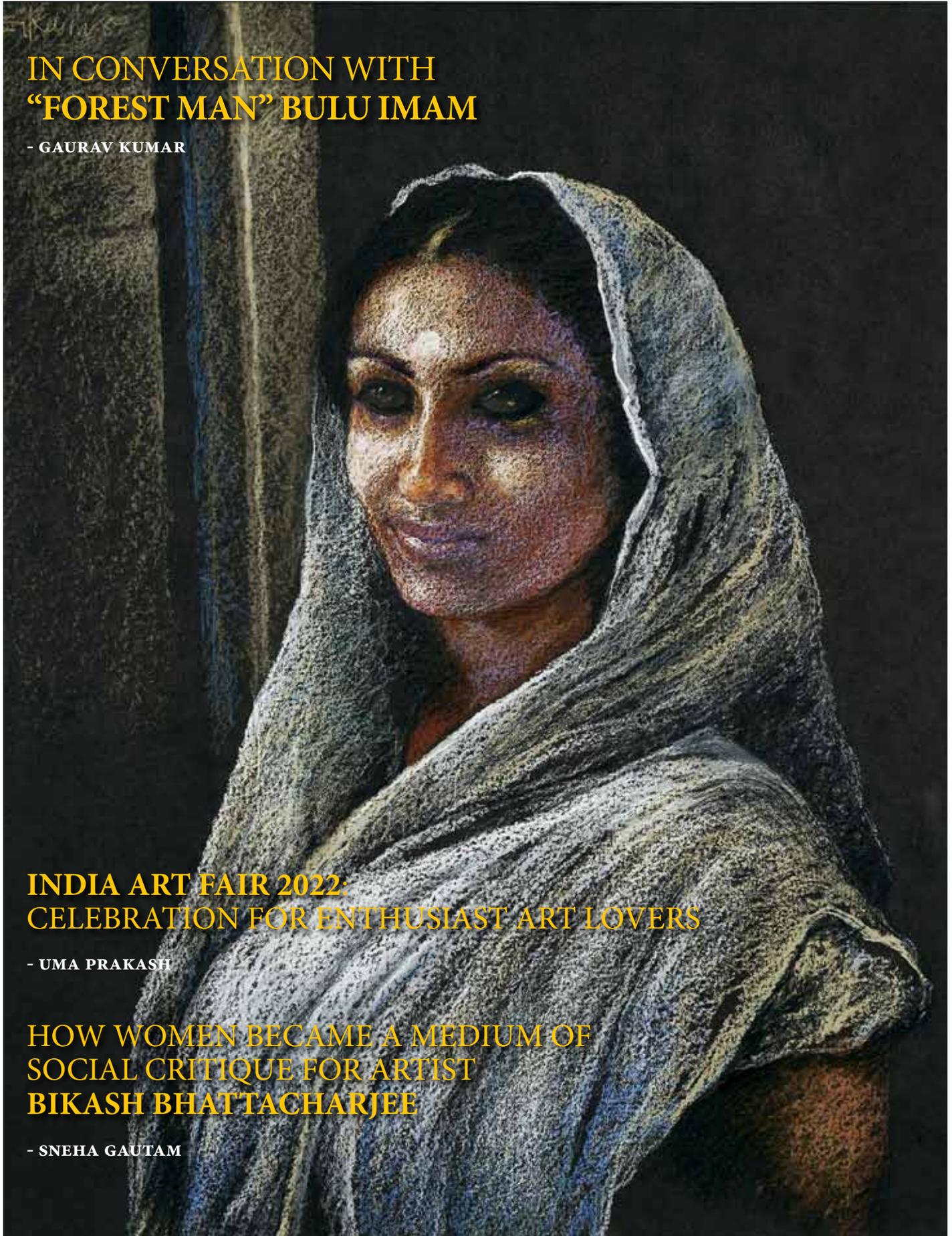
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## IN CONVERSATION WITH “FOREST MAN” BULU IMAM

- GAURAV KUMAR

**P**adma Shri Bulu Imam is a gem that many people are unaware of. He is an archaeologist, a revivalist of tribal paintings, and the recipient of the Gandhi Foundation's International Peace Award for his humanitarian efforts. He is a big-game hunter turned environmentalist, as well as an archaeologist, and a revivalist of tribal paintings. He currently manages 'The Sanskriti Centre,' a museum and art gallery, alongside his son Gustav Imam.

Bulu's life has been a fascinating one. Imam hunted 19 elephants and numerous man-eating tigers as a big-game hunter in the 1960s and 1970s. He comes from one of India's most distinguished families, which has produced a constant stream of intellectuals over the previous two centuries. In the late 1800s, the British designated his great grandfather, Nawab Syed Imdad Imam, Shams-ul-Ulema or Poet Laureate, and his grandpa, Syed Hasan Imam, was elected President of the Indian National Congress in 1918. His early life was spent organising tiger hunts with his father in the region of Jharkhand, earlier southern Bihar. He was then also closely associated with the forest as well the tribals. In 1979, while travelling throughout the state with British traveller-writer Mark Shand and his elephant, he witnessed the state's

^ Bulu Imam portrait by Subbrata Biswas, 2013

< Bulu Imam, Padma Shri Award Ceremony, 2019, Image Courtesy: Rashtrapati Bhavan, New Delhi



Bulu Imam with Sunderlal Bahuguna in Sanskriti, Hazaribagh, 1989, Image Courtesy: Sanskriti Museum Archives

devastation of dense forest for coal mining. "This land of coalfield bed has been the home of millions of tribal people who have lived there for ages," he said in an interview. Coal mining resulted in not just environmental degradation and tribe dislocation, but also cultural loss. Apart from their livelihood, people worship sacred rocks there, which are also megaliths, some of which date back before 2000 BC. He therefore stopped hunting in order to conserve the tribal culture, which was disappearing due to coal mining.

As a result, faced with the extinction of this civilization, he committed his life to its preservation. In the North Karanpura Valley, he became a powerful advocate for tribals and animals against open cast mining. He also emphasised the need of safeguarding corridors for elephants and tigers to have unique habitats.

Bulu embarked on an examination of Adivasi identity in order to validate his advocacy. In response to his efforts to save natural and cultural assets, he was appointed regional convenor for INTACH in 1987. Bulu discovered the first Mesolithic rock art at Isco (Hazaribagh) three years later, in 1991, and eventually identified a dozen prehistoric rock art sites dating back more than 5,000 years in the North Karanpura Valley. He also discovered palaeoarchaeology sites linked to Mesolithic rock art, ancient megaliths, and Buddhist archaeological sites. The Archaeological Survey of India recognised these sites, strengthening the region's cultural legacy.

Bulu Imam made an incomparable contribution to rock art. In 1993, he brought to light the Khovar art, followed by the Sohrai (harvest) murals painted on the walls of the Hazaribagh villagers' mud huts. (In 1993, ancient cave art going back to 10000 BC was unearthed in the ancient caverns of Isco, a settlement in the Hazaribagh area. The caves are believed to have served as bridal chambers). Jharkhand's Adivasi women paint their mud homes inside and out twice

a year to commemorate harvest and marriage. In a ceremonial tradition, these paintings celebrate these women's creative and artistic abilities. By 1995, he had established the Sanskriti Museum & Art Gallery in Hazaribagh, which, in collaboration with the Tribal Women Artists Cooperative (TWAC), had promoted tribal art in the region, adding value to their work. Bulu has been putting these paintings on canvas and cloth and exhibiting them all over the world. He has travelled the world with the artists, displaying their work and raising funds. Over 50 worldwide exhibits of Sohrai and Khovar paintings have been held in Australia, Europe, and the United



Bulu Imam recording Birhor songs in the Demotand Tanda, 1987, Image Courtesy: Sanskriti Museum Archives

Kingdom. Bulu's sons, Gustav and Justin Bulu, have also dedicated their lives to carrying on their father's heritage of cultural preservation. Gustav is a museum studies postgraduate student at the University of East Anglia (UEA) in Norwich, and he formerly worked at the Cambridge Museum. " He is presently the curator of the Sanskriti Museum." Justin established the Virasat Trust in 2012 to empower women via various programmes.

Furthermore, he has produced numerous documentaries on Jharkhand's tribal art and culture, including *The One-eared Elephant* - from Hazaribagh on tribal art, 2005, directed by Susanne Gupta, and *In Search for the First Dog* with National Geographic, which received the Explorer Club Award in New York in 2005. He is a researcher and expert in archaeology, tribal and rock art, vernacular folklore, and history. He is the author of the book *Bridal Caves, Antiquarian Remains of Jharkhand*, written monographs on tribes like the Birhors and the Santhals.

He spent his adolescence writing, poetry, drawing, and researching in order to preserve Jharkhand's tribal art and deep woods. He is currently 79 years old and resides with his family at his Sanskriti Centre in Hazaribagh, Jharkhand, nestled amid a wilderness of tall trees and lush vegetation. In 2011, he received the Gandhi Shanti Puraskar, an international peace



*My own study of the symbols is the best work on them done so far to my knowledge and in my study Which took nearly ten years to complete I have given the local vernacular significance of each of the thousands of symbols as well as a relative study of its prevalence in other places. It is through this in-depth study that I researched the prehistoric and contemporary traditions as well as their place in migrations and came to the conclusion that they are connected to the contemporary village house paintings of this region These are found evidenced in the great Khovar marriage murals and Sohrai harvest murals painted seasonally every year on the walls of the muddy village houses and their color and vivacity is sensational and has been celebrated in exhibitions both in India and overseas widely.*

^ Malo Devi, Khovar, Hazaribagh Tribal Painting, Natural Pigment on Canvas, 42 x 60 inches, 2019

award, from the Gandhi Foundation in London, and in 2019, he received the Padma Shri.

Bulu Imam's discovery of Sohrai and Khovar art, deep mysticism love towards the nature and environment, and dedication to the Hazaribagh tribal people piqued my interest in learning more about him as a person and an environmentalist, so we agreed to discuss his journey.

**GAURAV KUMAR:** Describe briefly your journey from hunting animals to being involved in community advocacy.

**BULU IMAM:** I was a big game hunter that like Jim Corbett hunted dangerous man-killing animals for ridding the villagers of them and this was accompanied by my writing of these experiences into articles I used to publish successfully during the 1980s. Being born in 1942 in the pleasant hilly town of Hazaribagh in Jharkhand from my youth I was devoted to writing poetry and anything that could be called literature as well as painting seriously for exhibition works in oils on canvas. My hunting life continued through the 1960s and 1970s when I was involved in hunting down dangerous man-killing animals like man-eating tigers and leopards as well as officially declared rogue elephants notified by the Forest Department.



Of course, I hunted in Jharkhand but also in other states of Orissa, Chhatisgarh, Garhwal, and Assam. The areas in which I hunted also were places where the most primitive forest tribes lived and this gave me the opportunity of living close to these tribes and afforded a deep insight into their intimate knowledge of the jungle, their belief and cultural systems, their arts and crafts and above all their mindset. I also began to document their folklore and songs as well their knowledge of forest produce. In this way, I ended up studying their ethnobotany of medicinal use, edible and useful plants, methods of hunting and gathering. All these were essential to survival for the tribals. The amazing ethnobotany of the roots and tubers of the forest floor and other medicinal parts ended up in my book *The World of the Birhor*. Each of their wonderful departments of knowledge, ritual, expression became subject for a series of books and short films including their hunting and trapping and indigenous dogs which I ended up making with National Geographic over a quarter century back I was often living for months in places as remote as the Ramgiri Udayagiri forests of the eastern ghats among the Saoras of Orissa in the 1960s to the Goalpara jungles of Assam living under canvas never seeing the outside world for weeks and sometimes even months. In these two decades of the sixties and seventies lived among tribes like the Khonds, Juang, and Saoras of Orissa, Mundas, Oraons and Santals of Jharkhand, Gonds, Maria, Pardhan, Maria, and Muria of Bastar, and tribes of lower Assam in Goalpara

which included the great Boro weavers. A long life lived well obviously has its useful side. Apart from hunting dangerous animals, it gave me the experience of many lifetimes in understanding the arts, crafts and culture of forest tribes.

When I was a witness during the 1980s of the horrendous opencast mining of the Damodar river valley, and when I decided to become an environmental activist and joined INTACH I began to realize the importance of community advocacy. Even as the forest folk were losing the support of the forests and fields that had supported them they were simultaneously being displaced forever from those very resources. I racked my brains for a glimpse of what I could do to help them because by now they had become My People.

Thus community advocacy led to my later work in the form of cultural and environmental activism from discovering rock art to finding lost Buddhist and Jain architectural heritage entombed in the perennial forests where destructive mining and industrial development was spontaneously taking place. I had found my Mission! My subsequent involvement with

^ Kurmi Khovar Painting at Sanskriti Centre, 2016, Image Courtesy: Sanskriti Museum Archives



INTACH as Convener of the Hazaribagh Chapter was a natural development!

Eventually, when I reached Australia nearly two decades later with Khovar and Sohrai exhibitions the companies mining my valley understood the implications and thought it would be simpler to sell their own coal to India! For me personally, the exercise opened the way for my tribal art project (TWAC), and incidentally, the project in the event was funded by none other than the Australian High Commission New Delhi through the AIDAB, none other!

**GK:** *What are the startling connections between the archaic paintings you unearthed and the contemporary village murals painted by the Adivasi women in the Hazaribagh region?*

**BI:** When I brought to light the five thousand to ten-thousand-year-old meso- and chalcolithic rock art in a dozen painted rock shelters in the Karanpura region of Damodar valley in north Jharkhand I found them to be accompanied by floor litter of hundreds of stone tools some daring to the new stone age and others to the old stone age indicating a continuous unbroken

^ Mural painting project at the National Gallery of Canada, 2019, Image Courtesy: Sanskriti Museum Archives

occupation of these ranges over a hundred thousand years! I made detailed drawings of the symbols in these rock art sites, several thousands in all, which are documented in my published book *Rock Art of Hazaribagh*. In 2009 these rock art sites were meticulously documented digitally under the Japan Project by Dr. B.L Malla and his multidisciplinary seven-member team of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA).

My own study of the symbols is the best work on them done so far to my knowledge and in my study *Which took nearly ten years to complete I have given the local vernacular significance of each of the thousands of symbols as well as a relative study of its prevalence in other places. It is through this in-depth study that I researched the prehistoric and contemporary traditions as well as their place in migrations and came to the conclusion that they are connected to the contemporary village house paintings of this region These are found evidenced in the great Khovar marriage murals and Sohrai harvest murals painted seasonally every year on the walls of the muddy village houses and their color and vivacity is sensational and has been celebrated in exhibitions both in India and overseas widely. I might note that subsequent to my work Erwin Neumayer at my suggestion made a study of village art in Bhopal with Yashodhar Mathpal and found Painted motifs in contemporary villages similar to Bhimbetka !! Further, in her book *Painted World of the Warlis**



Yashodhara Dalmia has shown contemporary Warli house wall paintings of Maharashtra to be connected to the rock paintings of Madhya Pradesh.

I can confidently say this art is fit to be considered as our national art. It was the discovery by me of the rock art being connected with the contemporary seasonal wall murals made by the village women that made Khovara and Sohrai art internationally famous in a very short time. The art has no historical links nor religiocultural correspondents and is purely a palaeoarchaeological manifestation. In my continuous research of the art for three decades I have found no connection with contemporary folklore or religiously beliefs. It was this belief that gained acceptance in two major exhibitions of Khovar and Sohrai paintings at SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London) the second one being in 2005.

The palaeoarchaeological evidence recovered by archaeologists at the rock art sites has convincingly shown that these sites belong to ages separated from us by tens of millennia and are remains of man's earliest painted signs on the planet. Naturally, the academic investigation quickly followed my discovery in 1991-92 and archaeologists and rock art specialists from around the world came to Hazaribagh and the

INTACH Chapter at Sanskriti to see and explore the rock art sites and study the tribal societies carrying on the tradition chief among academic institutions were Deccan College Poona, Archaeological Survey of India, and some famous rock art specialists including Erwin Neumayer of Vienna the greatest authority on rock art in India.

**GK: Has your region's history or current social situation compelled you to research more?**

**BI:** Naturally, these discoveries and the subsequent successful tribal art projects gave me both the incentive as well as the opportunity to research in a more scientific manner both individually and in collaboration with academic institutions such as the University of California, La Casa University, Italy, Rock Art Research Association, Australia and Valcamonica Symposium Rome, SOAS University of London, and independent academics and researchers like Robert Bednarik and Erwin Neumayer, Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient, Rome, La Sapienza, University of Rome as well as researchers

^ Mural painting by artist Putli Ganju at the Vicino Lontano Festival in Udine, Italy, 2008

connected with the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Museum Pigorini, Rome, Australian Museum, Sydney, Queensland Museum, Brisbane and others.

Palaeoarchaeology aside, biological and natural history research compelled me to find deeper studies into the migration of archaic societies and even their canine companions in which DNA tests at leading Indian, Australian, New Zealand, Merican and Chinese universities proved the Indian pariah dog identified as the hunting dog of the Santals (Santal Hound) was descended from the South Chinese wolf. I could go on and on but this is neither the place not space for this.

**GK: What really is the role of INTACH in your life?**

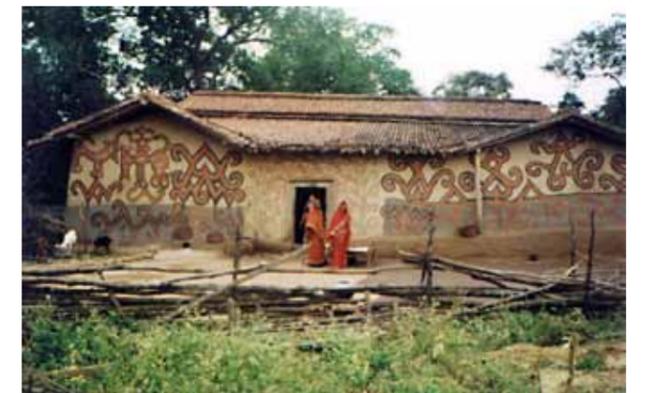
**BI:** I joined INTACH in 1987 as the first Convener of the Hazaribagh Chapter which I began. In those days Dr.B.K Thapar was Secretary-General and Mrs. Pupul Jayakar was the Chairperson of INTACH. Mr. Nalini Jayal newly retired after being Secretary of Environment government of India was in charge of the INTACH Natural Heritage wing, Shri Martand Singh commonly known to all as Mapu was the soul of the young organization. Mrs. Hershah Kumari was in charge of the Chapters Division, each of these people were an idealist committed to saving the nation's cultural and natural heritage and this spirit continues in this noble organization. I can say my past thirty-five years with INTACH has been family in the truest sense of idealism and cooperation with towering achievements.

**GK: What is the most rewarding experience you have had working with the Environment Sector and with the Tribal Community of Hazaribagh?**

**BI:** The most rewarding experience has been working with women artists. For starting example, the now world-famous Sohrai artist Putli Ganju came to us at Sanskriti when she was twelve years old and we built a special mud house for her and her cousin sister Chamni also a great artist with all the necessary accessories of the village life that she was used to such as rice pounder (dheki), stone flour wheel (jatha), etc. This is thirty years ago exactly, and she still lives in this beautiful house on the Sanskriti campus even though she has travelled around the world painting and attending exhibitions on a regular basis. She hasn't changed a whit in style, dress, manner or way of painting! The same may be said for the dozens of our village women artists who did not get the opportunity to go to foreign countries to paint murals or attend exhibitions in Australia, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, France, England, and Canada. Many of them however regularly go to our projects across India especially after Sohrai got its GI tag a few years ago. Therefore I can say that my most rewarding experience has been in seeing the



^ Artist Putli Ganju painting mural in Sanskriti mud house, Hazaribagh, 1995



^ Bhelwara village painted house painted in Kurmi Sohrai style first discovered by Jason Imam in 1994, Image Courtesy: Sanskriti Museum archive



^ Artist Chamni Ganju mural painting in Sanskriti mud house, Hazaribagh, 1995



village women (and even their daughters joining our project) grow into deeply fulfilled women gaining a status some thought was beyond their reach. This has definitely been my most rewarding experience by far.

**GK:** You founded the Sanskriti Museum and Art Gallery in your home in 1995 and the same year you established the Tribal Women Artists Cooperative (TWAC) with 30 women to encourage women to continue painting professionally. Your effort has now empowered over 6000 women, allowing their artwork to be displayed at 80 international and over 25 national events. How do you value this achievement in your life?

**BI:** In the year 2009, I was invited to take part in the important forum of the Vicino Lontano Conference in Udine, northeastern Italy, and this became the venue for three very large Sohrai murals painted with mud from Naples mixed with Italian binders on canvas. The canvases went on to our month-long exhibition at the Museum Pigorini in Rome. Later these canvases were exhibited at the Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient in an exhibition organized by our good friend Ms. Daniela Bezzi. More recently we were invited to take part in the Arts Atlantic Art Festival at La Rochelle in western France through the assistance of Michel Sabatier and his Charming wife Beroze. My son Gustav accompanied Putli, Juliet, and Philomina and they painted several large murals on canvases before admiring crowds. A few years

later they repeated the performance at the Rietberg Museum in Zurich where the huge canvases were acquired by the museum for permanent display. We are very thankful for the director-curator Mr. Johannes Beltz. In 2019 Gustav again took the artists Putli, Yvonne, Philomina to the National Gallery of Canada at Ottawa to paint four very big canvases mounted on steel frames to cover the entire hundred and twenty feet entrance to this great museum. The canvases were ten feet by thirty feet each and cover twelve hundred square feet, the largest Sohrai murals on canvas anywhere in the world. They were acquired by the museum and put on permanent display and are our joy and pride! This art festival, where these murals were painted was the great ABADAKONE when hundreds of indigenous artists from forty indigenous nations created their traditional art in situ at the National Gallery of Canada.

I must not forget to mention our first Sohrai murals on canvas painted on-site over four months at the Australian Museums Djamu Gallery in Central Square, Sydney in the spring of 2000. I was invited by my old friend John Kirkman the director of the gallery to bring four women artists to paint these

<sup>^</sup> Artist Putli Ganju in front of her mural, Village Saheda, 1993, Image Courtesy: Sanskriti Museum Archives



large ten feet by six feet each mural, fourteen of them, to be put in state museums across Australia. My late son Jason whom many will remember was with me on this remarkable event and Putli and Chamni painted their canvases in The Ganju Sohrai style. Philomina painted the Oraon ancestor totem in the Oraon Sohrai style. Rukmani painted a magnificent Khovar Mandala that was placed in the central foyer of the Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane.

The number of exhibitions and residencies around the world apart from the carrying forward of the baton for the work on a larger scale was accomplished by my son Justin and his wife Alka who managed to get the GI (geographical indicator) for Sohrai art. This national-level development has empowered thousands of artists apart from this Justin and Alka's efforts led to dozens of events and exhibitions, some at major venues, including a series of exhibitions organized in France. Femme du Hazaribagh and the well-known photographer Deidi von Chaewen. Japanese friends like Akahiko Ogata and others brought out significant photo journals on our village painting that will remain a historical document.

<sup>^</sup> Bulu Imam with Malo and Rudhan Devi and other Kurmi women artists in Jorakath village, 1994, Image Courtesy: Sanskriti Museum Archives

I avoid individually mentioning my indebtedness to persons who have helped in my work, even to a considerable extent perhaps, to avoid any hint of ill feelings by those left out. Here I have to mention one name that has made its presence felt significantly through involving TWAC in the production of our nicely selling Khovar wallpaper marketed in America by La Aviva Homes, a company based in New York. Laura Aviva came into our work suddenly when she mooted the idea and the Khovar plant forms were executed through comb sgraffito in the soft cream clay of the Barkagaon valley backed by *kalimatti* or the jet black earth of a paleozoic period which comes from pits dug at the edge of the jungle, nowhere else.

**GK:** We know from the stage of TWAC that Putli Ganju is making a reputation and a name for herself in the arena of folk and tribal art both nationally and overseas. would you please recommend three excellent artist names in the sphere of Sohrai and Khovar art?

**BI:** The first name I will recommend is Putli Ganju my first ever Sohrai artist in TWAC and the one who has done the widest work and received the widest exposure and travelled extensively abroad these thirty years and deserves something like an honour such as the Padmashri award. No words of praise me or examples of her achievements will be adequate. She has become the icon of Sohrai art. Her Putli Cow painting is now a postal First Day Cover stamp. What more can I say.



Her first solo exhibition was shown alongside a solo exhibition of the great Gond artist Jhangar Singh Shyam at the Hogarth Gallery in Paddington, Sydney in the winter of 1997, and organized by the legendary Australian curator Anthony Bourke.

My own favorite Sohrai artists are in the following order,

The late Chamni Ganju, Putlis's cousin who lived at Sanskriti, second to my Oraon wife Philomina Tirkey whose experience matches Putli, who is like her daughter along with our daughter Juliet who grew up thirty years with Putli and is next on my list of favorites followed by Yvonne her sister who painted the large Ghoda mural at Ottawa. My favorite Khovar artists must be Sugiya Devi and Rukmani Devi in the *Prajapati* style and in the *Kurmi Khovar* of jungle animals one artist's name is foremost, Rudhan Devi. In the *Kurmi Sohrai*, I will unhesitatingly nominate the great Parvati Devi of Bhillwara.

**GK:** *What major challenges did you face during the process of saving the tribal art and environment of Hazaribagh? How did you manage them?*

**BI:** Obviously, the main difficulty would have been in having a team to support me but I was fortunate in

having the support of my immediate family and we in the process became an institution in ourselves in the best missionary tradition! Anyone who comes to Sanskriti today will find a highly organized workforce a Dynamo of support and not merely a tribal art project or museum but a family undertaking, an outreach, welfare, and research center that receives researchers and academics on a regular basis apart from visitors. We now have a small beautiful residence for academics we have named Dove Cottage in its own pretty setting!

^ Bulu Imam and TWAC artists in front of mural painted by Juliet Fatima at Udine, Italy, 2008

**GK:** *Despite financial constraints, you never sought outside assistance to support this noble project. Does financial support never knock on your door, and if so what is holding you?*

**BI:** An aboriginal mindset of independence of self and faith in natural outcomes in traditional value systems. This is one of the reasons tribals stay out of the GDP! Traditionally nothing is done solely for financial return. We must understand that financial gain or loss to a tribal is different to others. Who calculates the financial loss of thousands of homes losing their magnificent painted earth murals each monsoon?

**GK:** *What kind of mindset is required to connect the tribal and rural communities?*

**BI:** Precisely not the urbane mindset which begs the question! An entirely noncommercial relation based upon goodwill and respect for strengths and rewarding them and acknowledging weaknesses and accommodating them. The precise opposite of the Capitalist Concept. TWAC was founded and succeeded upon these principles and values. This has also preserved the essential quality of our traditional tribal art. It is a selective approach to creativity in creating and caring for rare indigenous art and has succeeded without donors or think tanks and precisely because of this is the secret of its remarkable success.

**GK:** *How do you stay motivated in your work?*

**BI:** By remaining high on adrenaline without drugs in search of limits which instinct defines, without hackneyed urbane thinking which distorts modern life. We leave the mainstream outside our work at Sanskriti.

**GK:** *When have you been most satisfied as an environmentalist specialist in your career?*

**BI:** When I found myself definitely failing in my attempt for perfection, and finally achieved what I was trying for.

**GK:** *What techniques of promoting awareness have you found to be most helpful in your experience?*

**BI:** I am not a fan of such things and follow strictly traditional methods that have been matured by instinctive reflexes and experience.

**GK:** *Could you tell us more about your new project? What type of project is this, exactly?*

**BI:** At the moment we are working on creating an online platform for my research archives and publications, and also displaying and marketing our tribal art collection created by the Tribal Women Artists Cooperative (TWAC) through our website [www.buluimam.com](http://www.buluimam.com)



^ Group photo at the SOAS, London Exhibition, 2011, Image Courtesy: SOAS, London



^ Artist Philomina and Yvonne at mural Painting Project at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 2019, Image Courtesy: National Gallery of Canada



^ Bulu Imam in Sanskriti Museum, 1993, Image Courtesy: Sanskriti Museum Archives