

# CONFRONTING THE IMAGE OF THE ADIVASI WOMAN

*Representation of women in the Chittagong Hill Tracts by indigenous artists*



*Festival, Kanak Champa Chakma*

**SELIMA QUADER CHOWDHURY**

In the mainstream Bengali culture, the image of the indigenous women is exoticised. Often shown dressed in colorful attires and traditional jewellery, frolicking in the hills—they are the embodiment of a “primitive” culture, with their ties to nature and their “simple” ways of living. A combination of this supposed simplicity and exoticism of the “tribal woman” has attracted many artists to portray them on their canvases. Indigenous artists have strived to challenge these reductive narratives of adivasi women through their own work, but to what extent have they managed to represent the complex lives and struggles of the women and girls living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT)?

Kanak Champa Chakma portrays the daily chores of indigenous women in the hills; some are seen fetching water in pitchers, whilst others are depicted collecting crops from a field, carrying large baskets on their neck, a reflection of their productive labour. They wear traditional indigo-and red striped sarongs, tribal jewellery and traditional ornaments; their cultural artefacts are highlighted, underpinning their heritage and local knowledge. Kanak's representation of the indigenous people emphasises their cultural or ethnic identity, an identity which separates the people of the CHT from the Bengalis. Kanak Champa says, reflecting on her own work:

*“Coming here today I felt those cultures and the heritage that they had from many years ago, the culture that adorned and enriched them so long ago, their songs, dances, food, clothes and ornaments. I felt I had been working with every one of them for a long time.”*

Kanak's work offers a vision of a culture devoid of western influences and much technological advancement.

Kanak uses simplified forms for the women, and makes no attempt to emphasise their casual sexuality. Although the women are partially nude [as in *Festival*], exposing the upper part of their bodies, their breasts are not highlighted with the same bold lines used in the facial features; instead the colour is smudged, leaving the viewer with a blurred impression. According to Willem van Schendel, historian specialising in South Asia, the Bengalis perceive the authentic nakedness of the indigenous women of Chittagong Hill Tracts as a sign of primitivity, backwardness and indecency. The “naked breasts” were more “provocative” to outsiders visiting the Chittagong Hill Tracts than to the indigenous men, who were used to seeing exposed breasts. Kanak has represented the women's breasts as obscured by dark shadows and ornaments, repelling any voyeuristic pleasure and preventing the indigenous women from becoming sexualised objects for Bengali men.

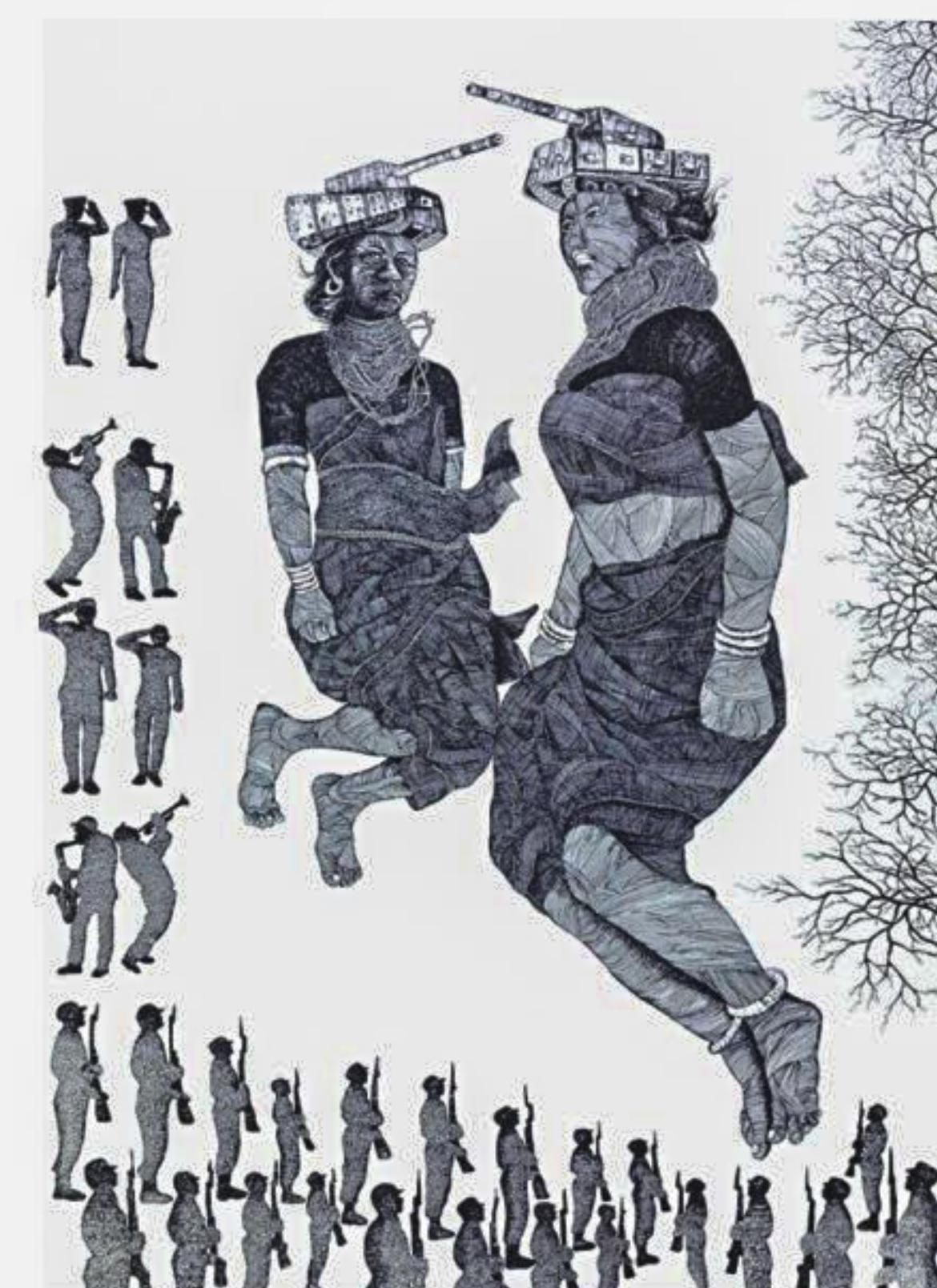
While Kanak's work challenges the Bengali Male Gaze, it does not reflect the lives and struggles of the women in the region. The communities in the CHT have had to live with colonisation and oppression, which began with the British and continued after the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. The CHT Peace Accord, signed in 1997, brought so-called peace in the hills; since then, however, the Bangladesh state has embarked upon the militarisation of the whole region, populating the area with Bengali immigrants, placing the jummas under surveillance and subjecting them to human rights violations, including killing, rape, kidnapping and destruction of villages and property. Indigenous women in the CHT face double discrimination—both as women and as ethnic minorities. Women's

representation in political life is poor, and they continue to struggle for their rights, in the face of rampant violence.

This struggle is vividly captured in the work of indigenous artist Jayatu Chakma.

Jayatu's painting of indigenous women wrapped in cloth gives an impression of patients wrapped in bandages or of mummies of ancient Egypt wrapped in linen—an image that is in sharp contrast with the vibrant traditional attire and ornaments in Kanak's portrayals of them. Jayatu highlights the agony of physical and sexual abuse at the hands of settlers and security forces, and the tremendous emotional and psychological trauma they have suffered as a result of the systemic violence. The faces of Jayatu's indigenous women have been obscured with white patches of cloth, reminiscent of rectangular first aid bandages, reflecting, perhaps the attempt of authorities to silence the victimised women and to suppress the human rights violations that have taken place in the area.

Joydeb Roaja's indigenous women, on the other hand, echo the feminist spirit of Kalpana Chakma, an active human rights activist in the CHT, who vocally criticised the repression and harassment of the indigenous women



*Generation Wish Yielding Trees and Atomic Tree, Joydeb Roaja*

by the security forces.

In *Generation Wish Yielding Trees and Atomic Tree*, 2017, Roaja paints two women in mid-air, with military tanks looming over their heads, surrounded by tiny soldiers. The monumental exhibition of the women amidst soldiers, who are more reminiscent of toys than men, exudes female strength and a strong feminist consciousness. The women have fierce expressions on their faces and seem to be attacking the security forces. In another painting, three indigenous women with baskets on their back pull the tanks, making the women appear physically strong whilst depicting the security forces as being drained of energy. In yet another iconic painting, two women are destroying tiny tanks which once again resemble toys, smashing them with wooden logs.

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