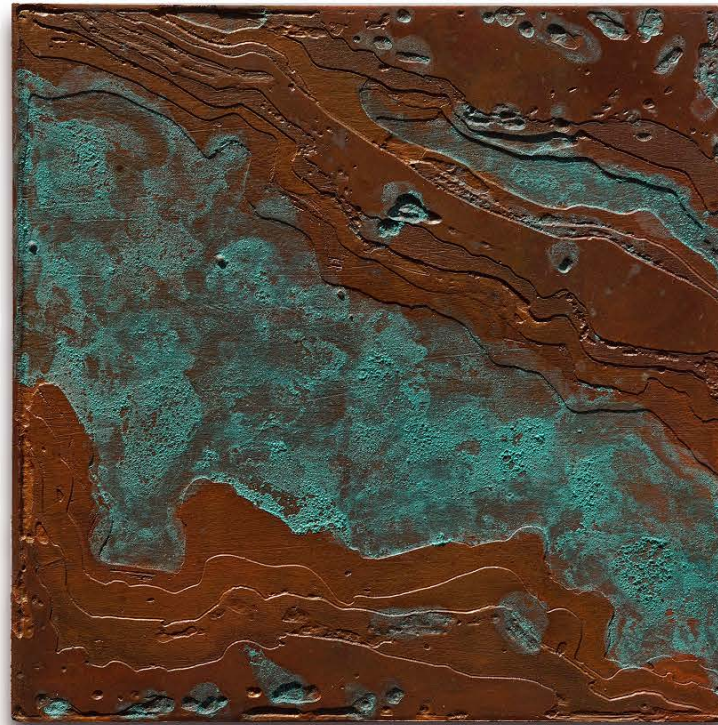


# The Course of a People's Land

– By Satyam Yadav

Earlier this year, amidst some exceptional practices on view in a group exhibition at the SOAS Gallery in London,<sup>1</sup> I came across a familiar artwork — or a close version of it — that I remembered seeing a long time ago in Delhi. Seemingly an aerial view of an open-pit mining site, each iteration was uniquely reproduced in a grid of about 30 copper plates, mottled with pools of striking blue-green patina filtering out from seams across its metallic surface. Like before, I found myself deeply intrigued by the materiality of the work — not to mention the peculiar rendering of the landscape.

Barren mine sites are a recurring image in artist Sangita Maity's (b.1989) multimedia practice, which spans photography, photo-etchings, serigraphy, woodcuts, and more. Moving between portraiture and scenes from everyday life, Maity examines how forces of statist extractivism — including mining, hydroelectric projects, and industrial farming — overlap with labour conditions and cultural disembodiment of tribal communities, alongside environmental degradation across the states of Jharkhand, West Bengal and Odisha.



Details of two copper plates from an older series, *River Diversion* by Sangita Maity. Patina on Copper, 2021–22. Courtesy of Shrine Empire.

<sup>1</sup> '(Un)Layering the future past of South Asia: Young artists' voices' curated by Salima Hashmi and Manmeet K. Walia. 11 April 2025 to 21 June 2025 at the SOAS Gallery, London. The work on display was titled *Changing the Course of the River* (2024).





Sangita Maity, *They are Looking For a New Village*, Serigraphy and soil on canvas, 2022. Courtesy of Shrine Empire.

There is an anthropological pulse to Maity's process: testimonies are methodically indexed into an archive that not only documents, but also re-envisioning an epistemic framework capable of accommodating otherwise overlooked subaltern narratives. In *They are Looking For a New Village* (2022), made using serigraphy printing and soil applied impasto onto canvas, groups of people appear dispersed against a desolate expanse of land. The ochre-yellow laterite soil — sourced from her fieldwork in the villages of Keonjhar, Belpahari, and Jhargram — lends a political contiguity to the work, while the imagery of relocation hints at mass displacement in the area. Made in the years following the Covid-19 pandemic, it is interesting to also think about Maity's imagination oscillating between the country's urban metropolis and its peripheries — a condition tied as much to economic necessity as to a slow attrition of identities. The latter, perhaps, finds sharper resonance in an earlier work, *When They do not Dance* (2018), where she depicts only the uniform-clad legs of mine workers, suggesting a form of assimilation that both dispossesses Adivasis of their cultural distinctness, while homogenising them within an industrial workforce.

Sangita Maity, *When They do Not Dance*, Serigraphy and mine soil on canvas, 2018. Courtesy of Shrine Empire.







Sangita Maity, *Introduction of a Different Way*, Photo transfer on iron sheet, 2019. Courtesy of Shrine Empire.

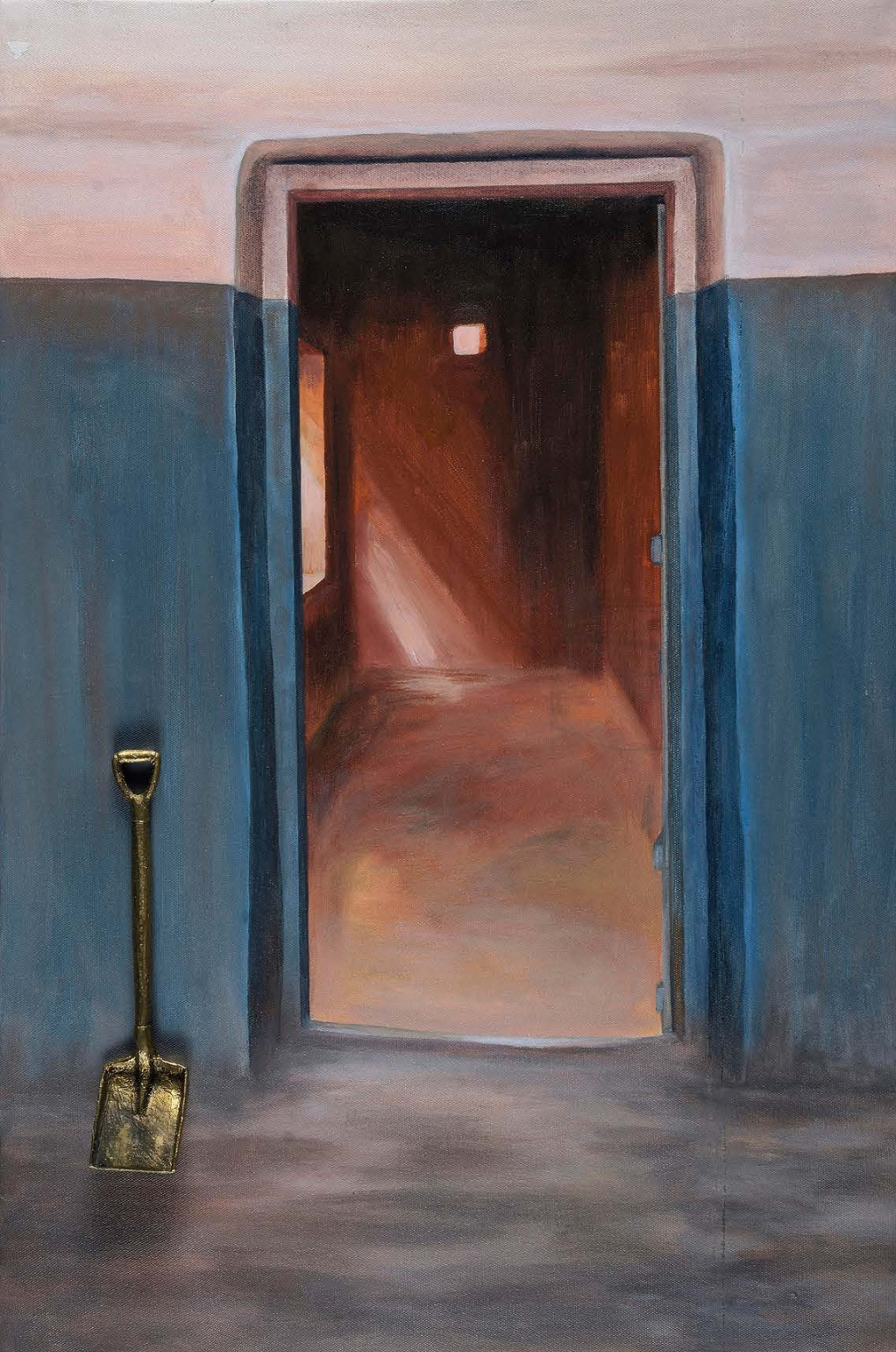


Sangita Maity, *How They Looked At Us*, Serigraphy and photo transfer on iron sheet, 12 x 8 inches each, 2021. Courtesy of Shrine Empire.

The textural depth and multiplicity of applications afforded by serigraphy make it one of Maity's preferred techniques, which she applies across metal plates, paper, and canvas. Series of smaller-sized works like *Portraits from Different Land* (2019), *Untitled* (2021), and *Introduction of a Different Way* (2019), are clearer and concise, as they limn an intimate portrait of people's daily routines. They are especially attuned to the tensions and complexities that arise with the acceptance of modernity as labour gets mechanised, and older ways of living grow obsolete.

The inherent violence of being "othered", encoded within these encounters, does not go unnoticed, and is inscribed in works such as *When They Stopped Dancing* (2018) and *How They Looked At Us* (2021). Elsewhere, in *Wall of Traditions* (2021) and sculptures like *Dysfunctional Tools* (2022), she chronicles baskets, drums, air-dried corncobs, pots, harvest straws, and agricultural tools with an attentiveness that foregrounds endangered customs and knowledge systems not as romanticised relics, but as critical counterpoints that lay bare the promises and failures of "development."





Although trained as a print-maker, there is merit in situating Maity's choice and treatment of metals like iron, copper, and brass both within the history of sculpture-making, and also, within the region's indigenous craft traditions like Dokra (lost-wax casting), to understand how she frames the social ecology of minerals, alongside considering divisions between 'high art' and 'craft'. In *Untitled* (2022), she props up brass figurines of mining equipment, and worker safety gears like helmets, vests and boots onto paintings of traditional architecture features like the *chabutra* and wooden *chaukhat*. Similarly, in her series, *In a Span of 15 Years* (2023), brass airbricks symbolically bridge transitions between homes made of mud to those of concrete. Through such frequent material juxtapositions, Maity is able to promptly interlink people's labour and land — the terms and conditions to which are regularly negotiated under a neo-colonial, capitalist order.

Sangita Maity. *In a span of 15 years*, Soil, synthetic filler and brass on canvas, 12 x 12 inches, 2023. Courtesy of Shrine Empire

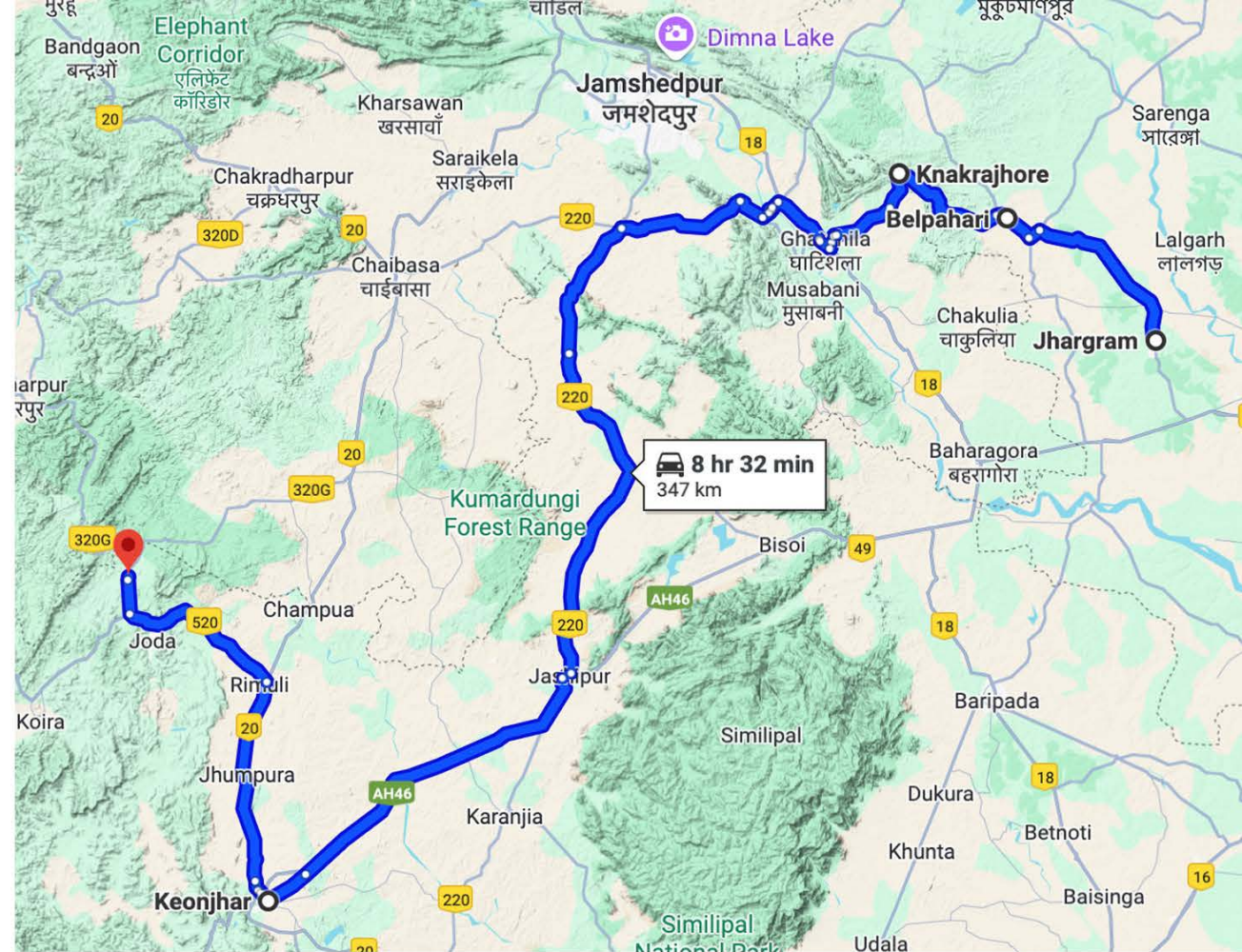


Sangita Maity, *Untitled*, Acrylic on canvas and brass, 24 x 16 inches, 2022. Courtesy of Shrine Empire.



During one of my conversations with Maity, I impulsively tried mapping the names of villages online to trace her travels from the Jhargram district in West Bengal to as far as Kendujhar in Odisha. We spoke about the everyday livelihoods of the Santhal, Munda, and Lodha tribes; about Sonajhuri, Mahua and Sal tree plantations; and from Tarfeni river Barrage, and the Damodar Valley Corporation, to annual cropping, and immigration patterns in Belpahari. She explained how hydroelectricity and iron-ore mining projects have not only displaced Adivasis from their lands, but also depleted groundwater, eroded forests, and caused recurrent floods by altering the river's course. At the same time, protests against forced land acquisitions, non-consensual relocations, and human trafficking have rarely drawn the attention of mainstream media, while public opinion remains dismissive — often reducing Adivasi struggles to Naxalite-Maoist extremism.<sup>2</sup> One only has to look back at the Singur-Nandigram-Lalgarh violence between 2007 and 2009<sup>3</sup>, or the starvation deaths among the Sabar tribe community in Amlasol in 2004<sup>4</sup>, to understand the extent of bureaucratic mismanagement, state-sponsored human-rights abuse, and police brutality in the region.<sup>5</sup>

In the preface to *The Political Life of Memory: Birsa Munda in Contemporary India*, interdisciplinary scholar Rahul Ranjan emphasises “writing from a place of solidarity... as a submission to learn and listen to Adivasis; to be able to speak with, not for, them; and to be able to write alongside, not on, them.”<sup>6</sup> I believe Maity poses a similar “alongsidedness” through her practice: a way of *being with* and *returning to* a people, whose histories, landscapes, and resilience synthesise into her own modes of making and remembering.



Tracing Maity's fieldwork: Jhargram – Belpahari – Kankrajhor – Keonjhar – Barbil. Image by the Author.

<sup>2</sup> A 2015 study published by Bagaicha Research Team on alleged “Naxalite” undertrials in Jharkhand revealed how large numbers of Adivasis, Dalit and other backward castes were caught in false police cases. Most of those who were accused as being Maoists or ‘helpers of Maoists’ were arrested, and imprisoned based on misinformation. Other findings also included a large number of fake cases under the 17 CLA Act, UAPA, and the anti-state sections of the IPC. See Antony Puthumattathil SJ, Marianus Minj SJ, Renny Abraham SJ, Stan Swamy SJ, Xavier Soreng SJ, Sudhir Tirkey, Damodar Turi, and Jitan Marandi, *Deprived of Rights Over Natural Resources, Impoverished Adivasis Get Prison: A Study of Undertrials in Jharkhand* (Ranchi: Catholic Press Ranchi, 2016), [https://sanhati.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Undertrials.in\\_Jharkhand.pdf](https://sanhati.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Undertrials.in_Jharkhand.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> See Santosh Rana, “Lalgarh: A People’s Uprising Subverted by the Ultra-Leftists”, *Revolutionary Democracy*, July-September 2009, <https://revolutionarydemocracy.org/rdv15/lalgarhnew.htm>. Also see Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar, “Notes on a Dying People”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 26/27 (2009): 10–14. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40279767>. A consolidated archive of fact-finding reports, and overviews on Lalgarh, Nandigram and Singur is also available on the Sanhati website. <https://sanhati.com/excerpted/1083/>

<sup>4</sup> Olivier Rubin, “The Politics of Starvation Deaths in West Bengal: Evidence from the Village of Amlashol,” *Journal of South Asian Development* 6, no. 1 (2011): 43–65, <https://doi.org/10.1177/097317411100600103>

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed overview, see a collection of short-essays and texts in Fr. Stan Swamy, “Adivasi Resistance to Mining and Displacement: Reflections from Jharkhand” (updated April 20 2015), *Sanhati*, March 10 2015, <https://sanhati.com/excerpted/12884/>

<sup>6</sup> Rahul Ranjan, *The Political Life of Memory: Birsa Munda in Contemporary India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), xx.