Rivers of the World - India

Kolkata 2006, 07, 08, 09, 10 & 12
Artist Tandra Chanda began painting on canvas, paper and also experimented with pottery, batik, leather and wood, before I focused on glass. There have been two distinct directions of my painting on glass, the opaque painting on the reverse and transparent imagery. My earlier works depicted life, people and celebrations in an essentially folk style. Now, nature has got added to these. A mélange of nature and folk-art has now crept into my works, especially in my glass works. I, by no means, intend to plainly mirror nature but would like to also bring in my own personal experiences with it.

Artist Pulak Ghosh received an MVA from Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata. Held five solo shows, between 1987-2008, in London, Bangalore, New Delhi and Kolkata. Participated in major group shows in India including Lalit Kala Annuals in New Delhi, Birla Academy Annuals in Kolkata, Bharat Bhavan Biennale in Bhopal, and Cleveland 12th International Drawing Biennale in UK. Runs a children's school with his wife, glass artist Tandra Chanda, Green Wave Centre for Visual Arts, Kolkata.
As paddy fields turned to engineering factories and jute mills took over what were open fields along the riverside, the pollution load on the river grew enormously. Power plants, paint factories, foundries and ship building and repairing yards spewed industrial and domestic waste and started to destroy the very water that had brought life and livelihood to its surroundings over the years. A city that had been planned for 200,000 people saw its residents multiplying to ten and twenty times that number.

In 1818, in order to provide clean drinking water to Calcutta, a treatment plant drawing water from the Hooghly was set up in Palta. It produced 6 million gallons of water per day. Today, this figure has reached 230 million gallons. To augment this piped water supply, there are 12,000 tube wells and 14,000 stand pipes drawing ground water.
Calcutta is blessed with a couple of unusual gifts of nature. First, the Ganges is a tidal river. This means that the ebb and flow of the water twice a day produces a cleaning action that results in the river water being flushed and recharged. Second, the slope of the land in the city is away from the river and toward the marshy wetlands on the eastern side. This enabled the city to take advantage of the gentle gradient in setting up a sewage and storm water disposal system that moved waste into the wetlands rather than into the Hooghly. Industrial waste, however, as well as dumping of domestic waste by other municipalities along the river, continues to inflict severe damage on the river.

In recent times, owing to dumping of factory and municipal waste, religious paraphernalia, carcasses, sewage and other such substances in the river, the Hooghly had become extremely polluted, lowering the level of oxygen present in the water and critically endangering the existing biota. The government, in order to combat these problems, launched the Ganges Action Plan (GAP) in April 1985.
One of the positive offshoots of greater consciousness about a cleaner river has been the recognition that the river banks also need to be improved. Thus, in Chandanagore, a verdant park has been created in the compound of the sewage treatment plant. This park has become an educational center for visitors as they learn about water treatment and the effects of pollution. It is intended that the entry fee should make the park self-financing.

Another example of environmental improvement around the river is Millennium Park on Calcutta’s riverside. Derelict buildings and rubble that had occupied the bank of the river for many years were cleared away to open this park in 2000. Five thousand trees were planted to create a 9 acre haven from where the river can be viewed during spectacular sunsets. The park gets a peak visitor load of over 50,000 per day, despite the 5 rupee entry fee. The number of visitors on an annual basis has averaged between 1.3 to 1.4 million.
The Hooghly, in early times, formed the lifeline of Calcutta; in fact, one of the main reasons for the foundation of Calcutta was the presence of this river. The navigability that this river afforded small vessels was of vital importance and ultimately led to the European settlements all along its banks. Not just Calcutta, which the British made their home and later their headquarters. The French set up their colony at Chandanagar, also on the Hooghly. So did the Portuguese, who had a settlement in Bandel, north of Calcutta. The Ganges also attracted merchants from other European countries such as the Dutch and the Danish. Boats on the river were used for a variety of purposes such as trade, transportation of people and warfare.

The shipping industry was a major source of employment at a time when Bengal was the hub of Indo-European trade. A small crew manning a country boat could consist of as many as 30 people. The British referred to all Asian seamen as ‘Lascars’, which is a shorter version of the term ‘lascarim’ that comes from the Persian term Lashkar (army). The term was originally used to denote non-Europeans who served on British ships under 'lascar' agreements. These agreements allowed ship owners more control than was the case in ordinary articles of agreement. Lascars, for instance, could be transferred from one ship to another and retained in service for up to three years at one time.
Hindus believe that the Ganges is a holy river and use its water for a variety of purposes. Lord Vishnu himself, one of the Hindu trinity and known as the Preserver, is said to have bathed in its waters. The Ganges waters are considered so holy that it is believed that sins as great as the murder of a Brahmin may be washed away by bathing in her waters. Hindus to this day use the water of the Ganges to cleanse any place or object for ritual purposes. Bathing in the Ganga is still the lifelong ambition of many of India’s believing masses, and they will congregate on its banks for the tremendously overcrowded Sangam and Sagar Mela which are held on auspicious dates every few years.

Water from the Ganga has the recursive property that any water mixed with even the minutest quantity of Ganga water becomes Ganga water, and inherits its healing and other holy properties. Also, despite its many impurities, Ganga water does not rot or stink if stored for several days. A curious result of this was that in the late ‘80s, when the government of India was trying to get community participation in its efforts to clean up pollution in the river, many people refused to participate because they simply could not accept the premise that a river that is holy can be polluted.
Adamas International School was partnered with Mayfield School in LB Redbridge
Pulak Ghosh & Tandra Chanda (2006)
River City

The students used watercolours to paint the city surrounding the River Hooghli, adding glitter and sequins to develop their composition further.
Assembly of God Church School was partnered with St George's RC School in City of Westminster

The pupils researched the people associated with the River Hooghli and then, facilitated by the artists, they made an artwork based on their findings in the style of Terracotta art.
BD Memorial Institute was partnered with Stockwell Park High School in LB Lambeth

The pupils researched the water and environment of the Hooghli and then, facilitated by the artists, they made an artwork based on their findings in the style of Warli Paintings.
Bidya Bharati Girls’ High School was partnered with Southfields Community College in LB Wandsworth

‘When we were taken for a trip to the banks of the Ganges before the workshop, we saw the river in a new dimension. The river is so much a part of every Indian’s life that we take it for granted most of the time without realizing that it is our lifeline. Through the Art workshop we have recreated images of life revolving round the River Ganges and Hooghly.’

Samprikta Sinha Roy, Pupil.
Pulak Ghosh & Tandra Chanda (2009)
River Culture

The pupils based their drawings on a style of work called Alpona, which depicts traditional floral designs from Bengal.

Pulak Ghosh & Tandra Chanda (2010)
River of Life

The students used acrylic paint and cloth to create a collage showing the wildlife in and around the River Hooghli.
Birla High School (Girls' Section) was partnered with Sion Manning School in RB Kensington & Chelsea.
River Culture

Kantha is the name for the embroidery. This style of embroidery is exclusively prepared by the village women of Bengal. The extremely delicate needle and thread works are based on myths, beliefs, rituals, symbols etc. A lot of patience is required for such work. ‘River Culture’, the theme of the project and the basic theme of the traditional ‘Kantha’ gel well with the thread they used and fine brush and colour on paper. The final artwork has turned out to be quite exciting.

Pulak Ghosh & Tandra Chanda (2007) 
River Culture

The pupils looked into myths, beliefs and rituals from India. They based their work on a Bengal embroidery style called Kantha and made very fine brush paintings onto paper. These were then scanned into the computer and arranged onto a digital board.
Pulak Ghosh & Tandra Chanda (2007)
Polluted River

Warli is the tribal art of Maharashtra, a state in the Western part of India. It was very difficult, for the foreign students of the International School to work on this style. In spite of that, their works were excellent. This theme is widely popular these days and is a part of one of the main subjects ‘Environment’ in the schools. The students had lots to tell and we asked them to put their thoughts on the paper in the form of drawings and sketches. We showed them some work on the warli style of painting and briefed them about this style. Then we asked them to do their own work using this style. The final work that resulted after three rigorous days of the workshop was unbelievable.

Pulak Ghosh & Tandra Chanda (2012)
River Culture

The pupils were inspired by the London 2012 Olympic Games.
Dolna Day School was partnered with Enfield Grammar School, a boys' secondary school in LB Enfield in north London

'The workshop has made me realize what fun clay modelling can be. I have now learnt a new form of art and some of my leisure hours will definitely be spent making creative clay seals. Learning becomes a wonderful experience because of workshops such as this one.' Shabnam Mohanty, Pupil
Pulak Ghosh & Tandra Chanda (2009)

Bengal has one of the best unglazed red-fired traditional terracotta styles of rural areas. The students used clay from the River Hooghli to make their imagery.

Pulak Ghosh & Tandra Chanda (2010)
Polluted River

The pupils made acrylic paintings of river pollution on traditional terracotta pots which are used as part of everyday life in many Bengal villages.
DPS Megacity School was partnered with St Marylebone CE School in City of Westminster.

The pupils researched the trade on the Hooghli and then, facilitated by the artists, they made an artwork based on their findings in the style of Patuas narrative scroll painting.
Pulak Ghosh & Tandra Chanda (2007)
Resourceful River

It is a fairly new school in Kolkata, that has both boys and girls. Their style, ‘Woodcuts’ - is a very popular graphic medium all over the world. We have followed the woodcut prints of 19th Century Calcutta only. These prints are an artistic and aesthetic revolution of graphic art in India and abroad. These artists are however not trained in any art institute but have acquired the art traditionally. The selection of their familiar subjects and simple forms are very attractive for both children and the adults. This art is bold, delicate and minute. The children have followed the bold techniques only. This style suits the theme very well. Instead of wood and woodcutter, they have used paper, brush and opaque colour. We asked the students to draw sketches about their thoughts on the topic, once they had visited the riverside. Then we guided them to the proper way of painting, as per the theme and style.
Future Hope School was partnered with Catford Girls' School in LB Lewisham

The pupils researched the wildlife on and around the River Hooghli and then, facilitated by the artists, they made an artwork based on their findings in the style of the collage artist Shakila.

Pulak Ghosh & Tandra Chanda (2007)

The school is completely different from the other schools as it is a free school for the poor and downtrodden children of the society. Some students are orphan. Their independent mood, unsophisticated character, rich talent, skill and imaginative power help them to be good creators. They successfully finished the three and two dimensional clay works and the drawings. Most of the students have never seen the famous monuments of the city. Everything they made from their observation and experience in life. We hope some of them are the future hope of the (Art) Society. Geographically, historically and traditionally, Bengal is the richest state for terracotta works in India. The students took great interest in making clay models from their observations and visualizations.
Garden High School was partnered with London Nautical School in London’s South Bank in LB Lambeth
Pulak Ghosh & Tandra Chanda (2009) Working River

The pupils used Indian Miniature style painting, one of India's greatest art styles.


Inspired by the few surviving examples of woodcut prints from nineteenth century Kolkata, students made black and white paintings on plywood.
La Martiniere School for Boys
Pulak Ghosh & Tandra Chanda (2007)
Working River

This is more than 100 years old school established by the French. Most of the students belong to the rich and elite class of Kolkata. They have developed their art works based on our composition and the exchange of dialogues. The students collected a pile of old magazines and newspapers which were cut for doing the collage. The boys enjoyed doing it thoroughly as it was a relatively new experience for them.
MSB Educational Institute on Park Street in Kolkata was partnered with Ricards Lodge High School in LB Merton

I was very lucky to be selected to be part of the Rivers of the World group. This project was really interesting and creative. Through it, I got a chance to show my creativity and it was also a chance to interact with pupils from other schools. It was a life-long experience which I will always cherish. Qutubkhan Hamid, Pupil (age 14)

The pupils researched the boats and bridges of the River Hooghli and then, facilitated by the artists, they made an artwork based on their findings in the style of Mughal Miniature paintings.

Pulak Ghosh & Tandra Chanda (2007)

This is a ‘Dawoodi Bohra’ Muslim Community mixed School. They love their own tradition and culture, and at the same time they are not opposed to others’. Therefore, they gladly followed the ‘Madhubani’ style, which is from our neighbouring state Bihar. The vibrant colours of ‘Madhubani’ and the theme ‘River of Life’ was very amusing for the children. We told them the salient features/points of the theme and asked them to visualize the images related to them and put it down on the paper. Then we guided the students towards the completion of the final images which were then scanned and put together on the final art boards, with the help of a digital designer.
Pulak Ghosh & Tandra Chanda (2009)
River City

The students were very excited about the project and put their thoughts on paper in the form of drawings. They then transformed these drawings into mixed media using watercolours, pastels and etching and these were all combined to form their final artwork.
Pailan World School

Pailan World School was partnered with Lilian Baylis Technology School in LB Lambeth
The pupils researched riverside development along the banks of the Hooghli and then, facilitated by the artists, they made an artwork based on their findings in the style of Bengali Woodcuts.

Shaw Public School was partnered with Oasis Academy Coulsdon in LB Croydon

'It was fun to see the landmarks of our city coming alive with little bits of paper. It was great that we could express our creativity. Thank you to the artists who visited us and shared their talents with us.' Manisha Shaw, Pupil.

'We could not imagine that bits of paper stuck together could look so magical. The workshop was awesome. I now want to see what our friends at Oasis Academy Coulsdon are doing in their art workshop.' Senjuti Bhadra, Pupil.
Pulak Ghosh & Tandra Chanda (2009)
River City

The pupils created this collage by using pieces of coloured paper from magazines and newspapers.

Pulak Ghosh & Tandra Chanda (2010)
Working River

Using simple forms and bright watercolours inspired by traditional Bengali Jadupatra, or scroll paintings, students portrayed river workers and river industry.
The pupils researched stained glass windows. Their drawings of river culture were then worked into stained glass style paintings and these were then laid out together to form the final artwork.
Pulak Ghosh & Tandra Chanda (2009)
River Culture

The students were influenced by festival lights and they used liquid opaque colours on black paper to create an illuminated effect.
Pulak Ghosh & Tandra Chanda (2008). Polluted River

The girls sketched initial ideas on their theme. They were then shown how to make collages using magazines and newspapers. This was a new learning experience for the students which they enjoyed greatly. They worked with the artists to incorporate their final collages into the finished design.
Techno India Group Public School was partnered with Bexley Grammar School in LB Bexley
‘It has been a fantastic experience for us through the three days of the workshop. We used ‘flat tone’ colours and carefully covered every part of our work. This in turn taught us to have patience in doing our work and helped us to learn a lot of new things about art.’ Ankush Chatterjee, Pupil

‘We had a lot of fun learning a new style of art, ‘Kalamkari’, and also came to know about the vegetable/natural dyes used for this type of work.’ Shubham Sadhu, Pupil
Pulak Ghosh & Tandra Chanda (2009)
River of Life

The students used the style Kalamkari, a very famous traditional form of art on cotton fabric from South India.

Pulak Ghosh & Tandra Chanda (2010)

The students used vibrant acrylic colours to paint sara-round terracotta plates traditionally fired and decorated by Bengali artisans.
Vivikananda Mission School

Vivikananda Mission School was partnered with Preston Manor High School in LB Brent

The pupils researched the celebrations and customs associated with the River Hooghli and then, facilitated by the artists, they made an artwork based on their findings in the style of Kalighat Pat paintings.
Exhibition - 2010