



## Bringing History and Culture to life - Mega Exhibition organized by AKM Museum



Bringing history to life has always had its never-ending value to humanity. Amongst all the other various ways of putting out history to people, exhibitions are the most popular yet the closest form of portraying culture, history, ethnicity and authenticity to the audience.

Akshaya Kumar Maitreya (AKM) Museum, University Of North Bengal, organized a Mega Exhibition on the 14th and 15 March at the precincts of the Museum inside the University Campus. The exhibition incorporated a historical coin exhibition, stamp papers of the British era, demonstration and making techniques of ancient musical instruments, miniature art, ancient terracotta art, handicraft art exhibition by

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*A visitor interacting with a Khambu exhibitionist at the Mega rally organised by the AKM Museum. Photo by Manisha Mukhopadhyay*

**Text by Rachaita De Sarkar and Images by Manisha Mukhopadhyay and Anmol Pradhan**

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artisans of Medinapore and traditional exhibition of various cultural communities of North Bengal with particular focus to the Hill tribes from the districts of Darjeeling and Kalimpong. The exhibition took place between 10 am and 5:30 pm and was brimming with visitors on both days. Children and youths from various schools and colleges in and around Siliguri and University students from all departments thronged the venue. Indeed, the venue took up a festive look as scores of fast-food vendors set shop outside the gates of the Museum to cater to hungry and thirsty exhibition visitors.

The Carpe Diem team had special access to the exhibition, and immediately after interviewing Prof. Dahliya Bhattacharya, the Director of Akshaya Kumar Maitreya Museum, the team rushed to immerse into the exhibition and interact with those exhibiting and those wanting to see the exhibits. In the true tradition of the University of North Bengal, the exhibition was free and open to all.

As one made its way into the Museum's gates, a stall devoted to numismatic and philately mesmerized all the visitors, for it exhibited the rarest of the rare coins and stamps. There was amidst the glitter of the old silver, copper and bronze coins, a coin that dated back to 2600 years ago, one that belonged to Chandra Gupta Maurya. Further, as one closely glanced over the coins, one saw that there were coins issued by none other than the father of Alexander, King Philip, and what's more, coins from the Gupta Empire right up to the British Raj. The Princely States issued interesting coins during the British Raj. There were even 'paper' coins, and on inquiry, it was found that during the First World War, due to the dearth of metal, 'paper' coins were released by the Princely States, albeit for a short period. Interestingly and quite strangely, one could wonder why they were not called 'paper' currency but 'paper' coins. The

possession of money during the rule of the Princely States was perhaps still the forte of the rich, and small numbers had greater values; 'paper currencies' were still not in vogue.

Another interestingly but poignant exhibits were the coins, paper currencies and the stamps issued by the Azad Hind Government under the aegis of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. The exhibits were nostalgic and brought a sense of pride and purpose. The Azad Hind Rupee was the legal tender in the 'liberated' parts of the British Indian Empire long before Indian currency existed after the nation's independence.

There were interesting 'oddities' also. It was the smallest gold coin ever to be found in India. It was merely a speck, and one wondered how the owner kept it safe in their pocket or wallet if there were such a thing then. A coin issued during the marriage of King Charles III and Princess Diana was also exhibited. Filled with nostalgia and a sense of history as one advanced to the other stall, one stood before the wonderful world of the Tamang people.

AKM Museum, pursuing the age-old inclusive culture of the University of North Bengal, had invited the All India Tamang Association members to showcase their history and culture.

Tamangs are a Tibeto-Burman ethnic group. Tamangs are found in Sikkim Darjeeling and Kalimpong districts in West Bengal. Etymologically, Tamang may have originated from the Tibetan word 'Ta-mag' or 'Ta-mak,' where 'Ta' means "horse" and 'Mak' means "warrior" in Tibetan.

The Tamang stall was tastefully fashioned, and there were many cultural artefacts. The artefacts suggested the value given to the old traditions centred around ancestral worship and deep tradition bound with the

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Himalayas. There were very old jewellery worn by women. One such piece of jewellery belonged to the 1940s and took the form of a necklace referred to as 'mala'.

Indeed, a plethora of coins, beads and precious stones formed several necklaces worn long ago by the Tamangni dames. The exquisite Tamang musical instruments lay before us, and of course, the Damphu, the quintessential musical instrument that made every individual sway to the beats of a Tamang Selo. However, the traditional Tamang dress was the true attraction of the stall. The long dresses wrapped around the waist complemented the blouse and were embellished with intricate designs. The colours were very vibrant, reflecting the unique and jovial nature of the Tamang people. The Cholo or the blouse made of red velvet silk was delightful. However, what was more delightful was the waistband, which was adorned with intricate yet colourful designs. Ultimately, the typical Tamang headgear - 'Tagi'- was colourful and richly decorated. The dress was irresistible for any woman or girl and more so for us, as we glanced around and wished we could wear one of the magnificent attires on display.

As we enjoyed and chuckled and wondered about the rich traditions of the Tamang people, the elders from the All India Tamang Association expressed their gratitude to the AKM Museum and the University of North Bengal for giving them an excellent opportunity to showcase their history and culture and to connect with people especially the teens and the youths.

Indeed, a series of stalls showcased the wonderfully vibrant cultures of the tribes from the Hills and the Dooars Terai—these included the Lepchas, Khambus, Yakthungbas, Dhimals and the Oraons. The AKM Museum campus, thus beyond

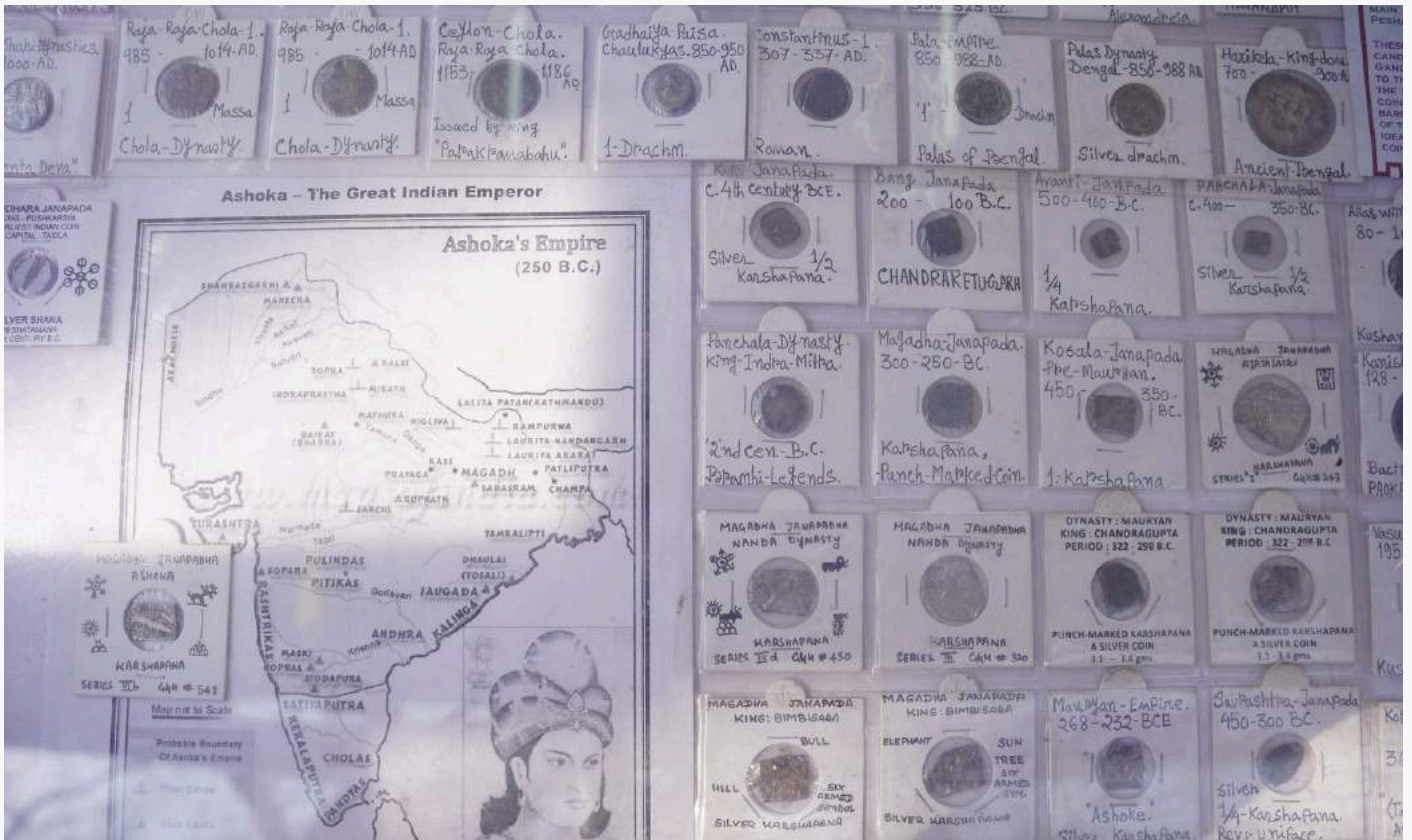
the historicity of the ancient and medieval relics and monuments, was vibrant with the living cultural heritage of North Bengal that day.

As we moved on, the stall that provided glimpses into the beautiful Lepcha culture was adorned with many musical instruments native to the Lepcha people. It pointed to the love of music among the Lepchas. The Lepchas, who call themselves Mútuncí Róngkup Rumkup, meaning "beloved children of the Róng and God", are among the indigenous peoples of the Indian state of Sikkim and the districts of Darjeeling and Kalimpong. Many Lepchas are also found in western and southwestern Bhutan, the Koshi Province of eastern Nepal, and scattered throughout India and worldwide as a larger diaspora. Interestingly, as our interaction with a Lepcha elder present at the exhibition revealed, the Lepcha people, it seems, are composed of four main distinct strands: the Renjóngmú, the Dámsángmú (Kalimpong), the ilámmú of Ilam in Nepal; and the Promú of Samtse and Chukha from southwestern Bhutan.

The Lepcha language belonged to the Bodo-Himalayan group of Tibeto-Burman languages and was written in the Róng script, derived from the Tibetan.

Interestingly, the Lepchas are also divided into many clans or Putsho, each of which reveres its own sacred lake dâ and mountain peak cú from which the clan derives its name. While most Lepcha can identify their own clan, Lepcha clan names can be complicated and often shortened for this reason. For example, Nāmchumú, Simíkmú, and Fonyung Rumsóngmú may be shortened to Namchu, Simik, and Foning, respectively. Some of the names of the clans are "Zuraboo" [worshippers/highest in rank of the clan], "Barphungputso", "Rongong", "Karthakmu", "Sungutmu", "Phipon", "Brimu", "Lickchingmu", "Sadamoo",

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A coin collection dating back to the days of Alexander and Chandra Gupta Maurya.  
Photo by Anmol Pradhan

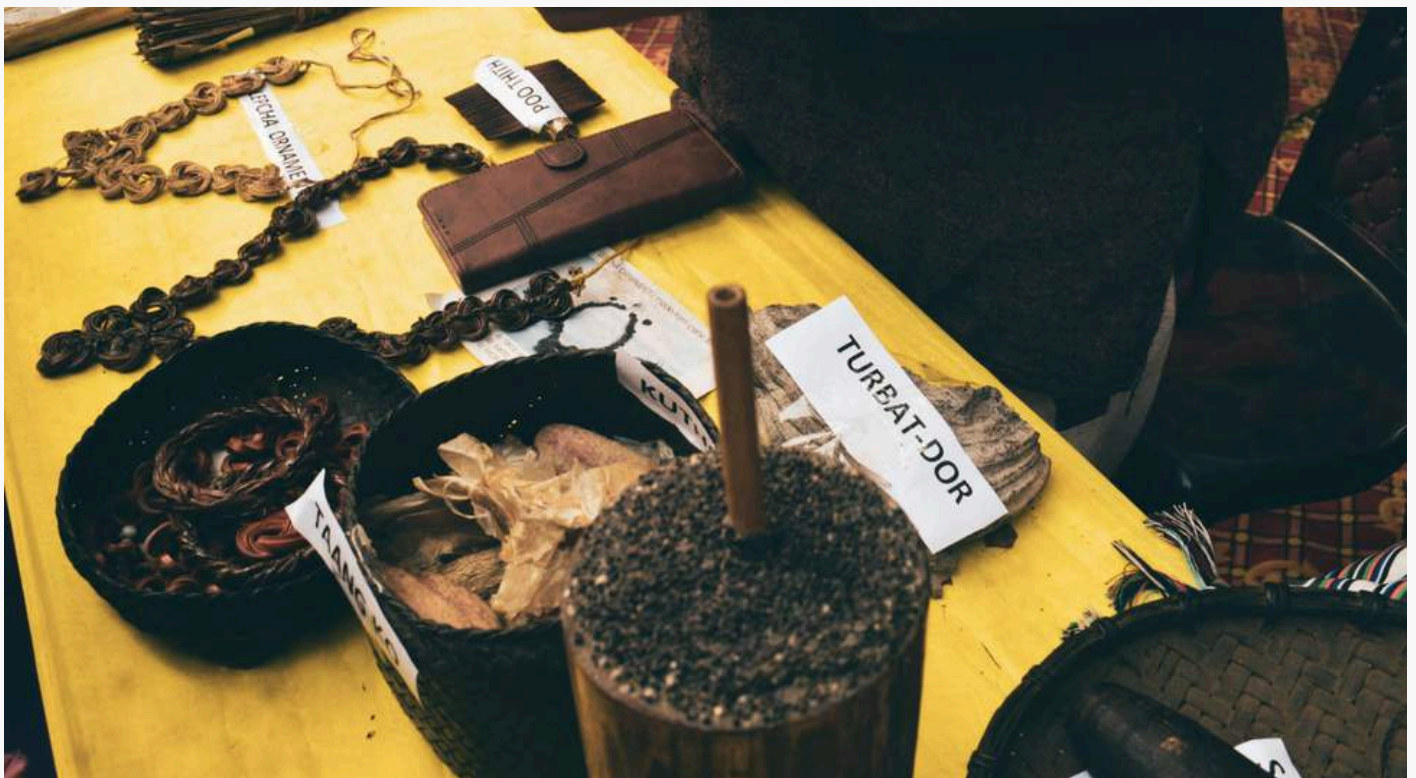


Intricately woven bamboo 'Sumuk' (headgear) and another headgear made of cloth.  
Photo by Anmol Pradhan

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*Tamang Jewellery in display. A double sided Dhyangro used in various Shamanic rituals is also partially visible. Photo by Manisha Mukhopadhyay*



*The quintessential 'Tongba', the famous Tamang alcoholic beverage along with other artefacts of day to day use. Photo by Manisha Mukhopadhyay*

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*The exquisitely coloured and intricately designed dress worn by the Tamangni dames  
Photo by Manisha Mukhopadhyay*

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"Kabomoo", "Molomoo", "Lingdamoo".

After learning much about the Lepcha people, it was time to learn about their way of life. Many outstanding artefacts were displayed; however, the prized one was the 'sumuk', a bamboo hat one of the Lepcha elders wore. He quickly pointed out that the hat took almost four months to fabricate and could only be done by the best Lepcha craftsman. One such craftsman, Jordan Lepcha, was recently given the Padma Shri award.

The Lepchas are unique weavers and basket makers, as evidenced by many displayed baskets and handmade clothes. They also have a rich tradition of dances, songs, and folktales. The popular Lepcha folk dances are Zo-Mal-Lok, Chu-Faat, Tendong Lo Rum Faat, and Kinchum-Chu-Bomsa. As it was displayed during the midst of the exhibition, AKM Museum also organized a musical folk dance festival, and the audience had a chance to join in on the festive mood. Musical instruments used by the Lepcha ranged from the sanga (drum), yangjey (string instrument), fungal, yarka, flute, and tungbuk. One famous instrument the Lepchas uses is a four-string lute played with a bow.

As we wandered to another stall, we were introduced to another amazing group of people, the Dhimals. The Dhimal or Dhimal are a Kirati ethnic group residing in the eastern Terai and are a Sino-Tibetan-speaking ethnic group. They mainly reside in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal. Interestingly, they are culturally close to Limbu and Koch of Terai and are arguably deemed to have been detached from the 'mother' tribe from the hills and grew into their own separately in the Terai.

Dhimals are primarily cultivators, although most work as labourers, mainly in tea gardens. However, sporadic occurrences of the Dhimal population may have been

seen outside the above-said areas but within the Darjeeling district of West Bengal.

Upon discussion with the tribal elders present at the exhibition, it was revealed that some scholars sometimes misled this diminutive group into an endangered race. However, their counterpart in Nepal, with whom they have a marital relation, was more extensive in number and had a better socio-economic and educational status. The Dhimals of Nepal, thus, received more importance in various writings of Nepali scholars. On the other hand, the Indian Dhimals were, as we were told, largely neglected by the government and others in any field of development. Anthropological studies on the Indian Dhimal were also rare, and sporadic research by Indian scholars could be found, leading to a great deal of lacuna in the understanding of the Dhimal people. Thus, this kind of exhibition and the one-to-one interaction were critically important. Indeed, we were all grateful to the AKM Museum's wonderful initiative and the University of North Bengal.

Several musical instruments were on display as cultural artefacts. One thing was sure: our indigenous communities are fond of music and dance and believe in the fleeting nature of life, and thus, the best way to engage with it was to 'live' to the fullest. Therefore, as the saying goes, not the 'length' of life matters but its 'density'. The Dhimals used musical instruments such as 'Dhol', 'Kunjai', 'Chonga Merdong', 'Gomna', 'Murchunga', 'Urni', 'Dotara' etc. There was a rising suspicion that many of these instruments could have been usurped by other, more endowed communities, but that was best left to our peers and Professors at the Anthropology department to fathom.

Their traditional costumes were colourful and rooted in the flavours of Mother Earth and pointed to their attachment to the

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land.

Interestingly, the next stall devoted to the Oraon people was no less exciting. The Kurukh or Oraon, sometimes called Dhangad, is a Dravidian-speaking ethnolinguistic group from the Chhotanagpur Plateau and adjoining areas. They predominantly speak Kurukh, which is part of the Dravidian language family.

Traditionally, Oraons were forest dwellers, but recently, they have become mainly settled agriculturalists. Many Oraon migrated to the tea gardens of Assam, West Bengal and Bangladesh, as well as to countries like Fiji, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago and Mauritius during British rule, where they were known as Hill Porters. They predominantly work in the tea gardens in Dooars Terai and Assam. They are listed as a Scheduled Tribe in several Indian states.

The Oraons are known for their dance and music due to their rich repertoire of folk music, songs, myths and rituals. Musical instruments and dances are critical to their existence and are integral to their festivals, such as Sarhul, Karma, Dhanbuni, Harihari, Nawakhani, Khariyani, etc. The musical instruments displayed at the stall included the Mandar, Nagara, and Kartal, mostly percussionist instruments pointing to martial traditions. Interestingly, as we were told in our interaction with the elders at the exhibition, most of their folk dances were war dances such as Karam Dandi, Haddi, and Sarhul Dance. There were other dances such as Phagu, Jadur, Jagra, Matha, Benja, Nalna, a wedding dance, and Chali, a courtyard dance.

Many cultural artefacts were also exhibited. These included 'Kupi', 'Dhibri', 'Jata', 'Thuri', 'Shilnora' etc. These artefacts pointed to the traditional value attached to earthenware. 'From the soil, we came, and to the soil, we must go'.

Some stalls showcased the Yakthungba and the Khumbu people of the Hills. They were indeed mesmerizing exhibits. The Yakthungbas, commonly referred to as Limbus, are deemed to be mighty soldiers who, along with the Khambus, widely referred to as Rais, along with Tamang, Magars, and other Gorkha tribes, form the backbone of the Gorkha Regiments in the Indian, British and Nepalese Armies. Interestingly, the 'Yak' is also interpreted by some scholars as 'Hills and 'Thum' as 'people', thus meaning 'Hill People'.

Both Limbus and Rais were once predominantly rice farmers who ploughed the hills forming the terraced farms, which were extraordinarily scenic, requiring the most arduous labour—no wonder most of the Limbus and Rais have given up farming.

Both tribes have incredible traditional costumes, as was exhibited at the festival. These included the Limbu Chunglokek/sunghamba, a type of blouse, and Mekhli, a long dress with horizontal strips worn by women. However, what took the prize was the fantastic jewellery that both Limbu and Rai women wore. These included the Samyanfung, literally Gold Flower, a huge circular disc of gold worn by women or young girls on their foreheads. It represented the sun.

Nessey was the sizeable circular gold ring flattened gold earring. Laskari are gold earrings in the shape of leaves, diamonds, etc. Namloyee or yogakpa are large silver necklaces embedded in a square or circle with coral stones and turquoise. It is also known as Chandrahaara. Our amazement thus was of no bound, given how much gold a young Limbu or Rai girl or woman wore.

The musical instruments included the famous Chyabrung, Yalambar Baja, Chethya/Yethala, Mephrama, Miklakom, Niyari Hongsing Ke, Negra, and Phakwa.

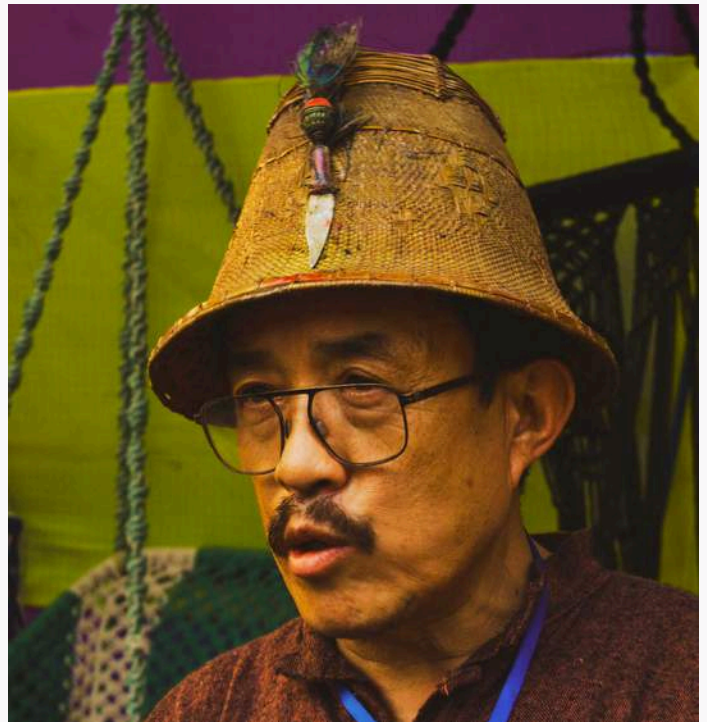


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The Rai elders merrily gave us a short rendition of the 'Silli' dance, playing the Chabrungs.

To be a part of this wonderful exposition where potters and artisans made potteries on the other sides and gave us a chance at the wheel was a wonderful experience. Some miniature artists exhibited art so minutely that it needed a magnifying glass to see their creation. Indeed, they were, beyond doubt, devoted and dedicated to their art. Getting out of the class, discussing theories and how communication evolved, and experiencing it in real life on campus was an exceptional educational experience.

Kudos to the AKM Museum and our beloved University for organizing such a fantastic exhibition.



*A Lepcha elder wearing a Sumuk. Photo by Manisha Mukhopadhyay*



*An assortment of Lepcha traditional musical instruments. Photo by Manisha Mukhopadhyay*

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A Khambu Rai elder giving a rendition of 'Sili' Dance while beating a Chyabrung.  
Photo by Manisha Mukhopadhyay



Crowd of visitors thronging the stalls Photo by Manisha Mukhopadhyay

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*Dr. Dahlia Bhattacharya, Director AKM Museum browsing through the exhibits. Photo by Manisha Mukhopadhyay*



*A potter fabricating a clay container on a spinning wheel. Photo by Manisha Mukhopadhyay*



*A miniature artist at work. Photo by Manisha Mukhopadhyay*