



## Village Letters

An exhibition of works by Prafulla Mohanti

27 September 2022 – 20 January 2023

iniva, Stuart Hall Library, 16 John Islip St, London SW1P 4JU

*Village Letters* is an exhibition with works by Prafulla Mohanti, focussing on six of his published books: *My Village, My Life: Portrait of an Indian Village* (1974), *Indian Village Tales* (1975), *Through Brown Eyes* (1985), *Changing Village, Changing Life* (1990), *Longing: Poems* (2004) and *Shunya: Prafulla Mohanti, Paintings* (2012).

Prafulla Mohanti is an architect, artist, writer and performer. His identity is based on being an artist, and a villager. Prafulla often speaks about his artworks acting as a form of protection and therapy that has aided him to overcome hardships; but they also carry a spiritual significance. Through his artworks, Prafulla aims to create spaces for spiritual connections, silence, reflection and contemplation, independent of any particular religion.

The exhibition title reflects on Prafulla's intrinsic relationship with his home village Nanpur, India – the artist often speaks of how “*his village made him*” – while exploring the ideas of sharing knowledge, representing movement and connections between places. Prafulla permanently moved to England over fifty years ago, but he kept strong ties with his hometown and communities, by visiting them every year and initiating educational projects in his village. In England, Prafulla has wholeheartedly shared his village traditions and knowledge with his friends, and has encouraged many of them to visit Nanpur, where they were welcomed to the village as community.

His book *Through Brown Eyes* (1985) is an opportunity to learn about Prafulla's experiences, from leaving India in 1960 to him settling in Pimlico in the mid-1970s, where the artist still lives today. It offers perspectives on Indian and British politics, and draws historical contexts through a personal narrative. *Through Brown Eyes* depicts the curiosity and joy that Prafulla experiences in contrast to the challenges of migrating to a new country, while reminding us of structural racism and violence that immigrants face. One might wonder how to persevere with a spirit of generosity and kindness in the face of such adversities. In order to understand his approach to life, it is fundamental to learn about his upbringing and dive into the sense of the world shared by his village.

*My Village, My Life* (1974) portrays the culture and traditions of Nanpur. On one hand it brings statistics around education and farming, on the other it relies on interviews and personal experiences from community members to represent the village life. It is accompanied by beautiful line drawings, illustrating daily life and members of the community, unfolding yet another side of Prafulla's artistic practice. *Changing Village, Changing Life* (1990) acts as a continuation of *My Village, My Life*, reflecting on the political, cultural and economic changes in the region. *Indian Village Tales* (1975) also presents cultures and traditions, but through metaphors that propose lessons around honesty, love, care, trust and family values. They are funny, sad and curious, while offering an outlook on the village ways of living.

As an exploration of love and intimacy, *Longing: Poems* (2004) presents stories about relationships and desire, and utilises syncretism to describe emotions. It is a collaboration between Prafulla and the Indian poet Devdas Chhotray (b.1946). Prafulla translated the poems to English and created line drawings, illustrating encounters between bodies and intimate figures, to go alongside them.

*Shunya: Prafulla Mohanti, Paintings* (2012) reveals Prafulla as a photographer, making colourful and emotional photographs of his village. Shunya is an Indian philosophical concept referring to voidness or emptiness, which interrogates the meaning of life while invoking its essence, and invites each of us to have a personal meditative experience.

We invite visitors to pick up the books and browse through them while exploring the textiles, paintings and drawings on the walls. The pages on the walls, highlighting specific passages from each book, are placed in dialogue with the artworks. Within each book there are relevant passages marked that have been inspirational for the curatorial narrative. In addition to the books, the curatorial process relied upon extensive conversations with the artist over many afternoons, prioritising trust and relationship building.

Alongside Prafulla's six books, there are recommended readings from Stuart Hall Library collection as part of this exhibition.

Beatriz Lobo, Curator

## ABOUT PRAFULLA MOHANTI

Prafulla Mohanti (b. India, 1936) was born and brought up in the village of Nanpur (Orissa), and moved to England in 1960 after graduating as an architect in Bombay. In 1964 he gained a diploma in town planning in Leeds, the same year his first solo exhibition of paintings was held. He worked as an architect-planner for the Greater London Council (1965 to 1969) but gave this up to devote himself to painting and writing. His paintings have been exhibited worldwide and are in several private and public collections including the British Museum, National Gallery of Modern Art (New Delhi), The Hepworth Wakefield, and ICCR-New Delhi.

## LIST OF WORKS

- |                                    |   |
|------------------------------------|---|
| 1. My Village, My Life             | 10. Pimlico                             |
| 2. Blue God                        | 11. Three Gods in a Row                 |
| 3. Jagannath                       | 12. Home                                |
| 4. Through Brown Eyes              | 13. Bindu                               |
| 5. Ganesh                          | 14. Essence of Life                     |
| 6. Indian Village Tales            | 15. The Sun of God                      |
| 7. Changing Village, Changing Life | 16. Shunya: Prafulla Mohanti, Paintings |
| 8. In Nanpur                       | 17. Longing: Poems                      |
| 9. Milkman                         | 18. Dancing Hands                       |

