

Bengal Biennale returns on 25 November with 'Banalata', a theme of buried histories and entangled lives

The second edition of Bengal Biennale, co-curated by independent curator Ritika Biswas and Chander Haat, spans multiple venues in Kolkata and Santiniketan, from a former prison to a wild park.



Panel Discussion at the Bengal Biennale Curtain Raiser event in Alipore Museum, Kolkata

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The second edition of the Bengal Biennale will run from 25 November 2026 to 2 January 2027, with the theme *Banalata* guiding exhibitions across Santiniketan and Kolkata.

The biennale is organised by founder Jeet and Malavika Banerjee. This year's edition is co-curated by Chander Haat, an artist collective and community space in Sarsuna on the fringe of Kolkata, and Ritika Biswas, an independent curator and researcher.

The Biennale will move through a former prison, old houses and a wild park, among other sites. Rather than treating these as mere venues, the organisers say they see them as spaces for ecology, memory and art practice, and state that they trace underground networks of kinship to find poetic strategies for resting, resisting and creating joy.

Banalata takes its name from Jibanananda Das's 1942 Bangla poem *Banalata Sen* and from the ecology of wild forest-vines (*ban-lata*). The curators use subterranean worlds, buried histories, entanglement, resistance and collective survival as starting points.

Chander Haat stated in the curatorial note: "We believe that art cannot be fragmented but is a medium to build relationships. Our *Banalata* emerges from within the entanglement of these relationships – a living space in which we can coexist."

The Curtain Raiser at Alipore Museum Kolkata

At the panel discussion at the Curtain Raiser at Alipore Museum, Kolkata on October 28, Chander Haat member Bhabatosh Sutar recalled sitting in the audience a year ago when the Kolkata chapter of the first Biennale was inaugurated. Four or five years before that, he said, some Chander Haat members had already been discussing how Bengal needed a biennale, so news that one was coming was "an exciting prospect for us at Chander Haat."

Chander Haat is an artist collective housed in a space that facilitates interdisciplinary practice in Sarsuna, on the fringes of Kolkata. It works closely with a peri-urban neighbourhood largely made up of people who migrated from other parts of India or from Bangladesh, and has a long-standing involvement in designing Durga Puja. Working together, Sutar said, is the collective's signature strength.

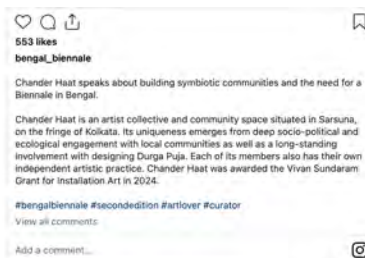
"One of Chander Haat's greatest strengths, and something we deserve credit for, is our ability to bring many people together and work collectively," he said. "We have learnt and been trained to work with a hundred people in any given situation." He said the collective's practice has always looked beyond the gallery, engaging directly with people, locality and local communities. That approach also led it to Durga Puja, which he said was a deliberate choice, made to give young artists just out of college a platform and a larger audience.

bengal_biennale and chander.haat

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That skill helped him with his curatorial work on the Biennale. "Every individual artist has their own expectations and requirements," and each, he noted, writes long letters explaining what they need. "Managing these differences, working with each person individually and bringing everyone together within a single curatorial framework is an enormous challenge," he said. The collective took it on knowing it could adapt, and expecting to learn: "we are still learning to this day."

Ritika Biswas said she envisions the edition as "a slightly strange, slightly dissonant, slightly dark ecology which embraces the full spectrum of being alive in and to a burning world. *Banalata* foregrounds emotion, rest and poetics as ways to examine the systems and selves in which people are entangled, and tries to hold poetics and politics as inherently and generatively entwined forces."



Biswas said *Banalata*, which draws on the figure in Jibanananda Das's poem and on the ecology of wild forest-vines, "dives into subterranean worlds and histories across Kolkata, Santiniketan and beyond." She said: "Its unruly vines navigate the complexity of dwelling with and within plural darkneses of grief, war and persistent loss. By tracing underground networks of kinship, we find strategies that allow us to rest, resist, become errant and create joy."

Over 40 projects at the second edition will be new, she said: "Over 40 projects shown at the second Bengal Biennale will be new, conceptually specific projects, while the others will be site-responsive iterations of existing artworks and generous loans from collections." On how artists were chosen, she said: "We chose to collaborate with artists whose works generate critical and emotional responses, which make ethics embodied rather than prescriptive." The curators hope, she added, "to create portals through which visitors will step into these possible worlds and feel our collective vision, so they too become nodes within this ecology."

The line-up, Biswas said, includes "some of the most prominent artists in the Indian and international contemporary landscape, and also artists who have perhaps never had a solo exhibition or worked with a gallery before."

Positioning Bengal in Bengal Biennale

In a discussion on how the Biennale places Bengal and its art history, Sutar said a significant proportion of artists in this edition are from Bengal, partly by design. "Bengal has, in some ways, been underrated in the art world, particularly in comparison with other states," he said. "At the same time, we have tried to ensure that the selection reaches out to a global context, bringing together artists whose ideas and practices resonate with our own concerns."



The organizers provide a glimpse of what to expect at the Biennale in the Curtain Raiser event.

Artist Paula Sengupta said the previous edition's focus on historical collections and archives, alongside contemporary dialogues, helped establish connections, and that this year's edition begins with a wider engagement with Bengal and reaches outwards. "Art in Bengal has its own distinct character," she said. "It is different from art in Mumbai, Delhi or Baroda."

Devina Swarup, director of Paharpur foundation speaking on what the Biennale could do for the city, pointed to the sites. "Many of these venues have been inaccessible or unused for decades," she said. "Alipore Museum, for instance, is a fabulous venue."

Building on the first edition

The inaugural edition ran from 29 November 2024 to 5 January 2025 under the title *Anka-Banka: Through Cross-Currents*, curated by Siddharth Sivakumar. According to the organisers, it was attended widely across more than 25 venues in Kolkata and Santiniketan and featured over 100 artists. Its highlights included Dayanita Singh's *Museum of Tanpura* at the Indian Museum.

2026 Venues

17 venues have been confirmed so far.

Santiniketan: Nandan Art Museum & Gallery (Kala Bhavan), Tokaroun, Santiniketan Society of Visual Art & Design (SSVAD), Aritshila, Sculpture Park, Somnath Hore Studio, Kritika Arts Space

Kolkata: The Alipore Museum, The Indian Museum, TRI Art & Culture, Lalit Kala Akademi (AJC Bose Road), Victoria Memorial Hall, The Red Bari, The Dockyard Co, Siddhi & Muni Art Studios (Stephen Court), New Empire, Kolkata Centre for Creativity (KCC)

Artists announced so far

A first list of participants was released, with the full programme to follow.



Artists, collectives and groups: Atul Dodiya, Arpita Singh, Amar Kanwar, Amol K Patil, Abir Mukherjee, Aban Raza, Anupam Roy, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Arijit Bhattacharyya, Arunima Choudhury, Ashfika Rahman, Ayoung Kim, Abin Choudhuri, Bandu Manamperi, Bimalananda Roy, Britto Arts Trust, Debashish Paul, Debnath Basu, Debasish Mukherjee, Imaginary Collective, Jitish Kallat, Jayasi Burman, Jogen Chowdhury, Jonas Staal, Janhavi Khemka, Jamdani Project, KS Radhakrishnan, Lapdiang Artimai Syiem, Layout Collective, Maksud Ali Mondal, Neel Bhattacharjee, Nilanjan Bhattacharya, Pankaj Panwar, Paresh Maity, Prasanta Sahu, Probir Gupta, Rah Naqvi, Resting Museum, Robertina Sebjanić, Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir, Seamus Murphy, Shilpa Gupta, Sankha Banerjee, Shoji Yamsaki, Srikanta Paul, Suhasini Kejriwal, Sukanta Majumdar, Suman Chandra, Sunil Sigdel, Tejal Shah, Vikrant Bhise and Willem de Rooij.

Masters: Bikash Bhattacharjee, Chittoprasad, Nirode Mazumdar, Rabin Mondal, Xu Beihong, Chang Xuofeng, You Yun-shan, Rabindranath Tagore, Nandal Bose, Benode Behari Mukherjee, Yokoyama Taikan and Hishida Shunso.

Collective projects: Xewali Deka, Zahra Yazdani, Bassam Issa Al-Sabah, Jennifer Meghan, Stefanie Knobel, Samrat Banerjee, Gram Art Collective, Sargaon Collective (Argha Manna and Parimal Bhattacharya), Sujatro Ghosh, and Carvaan and Tamarind Tunes (Debalina Majumdar and Samata Biswas).

The Bengal Biennale opens on November 25 in Santiniketan and November 28 in Kolkata

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Bengal Biennale announces curators for its second edition commencing in 2026-2027

Art Bengal Biennale

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