

Coriander art in hill hamlet

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- Artist youth returns home with 'dream' project

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The coriander art patch in Rampuria village, Darjeeling. Picture by Suman Tamang

The lush green fields of Rampuria forest village, about 25km from Darjeeling turned into a natural canvass earlier this month as villagers came together to express their creativity through farming.

Wangdi Sherpa, a 33-year-old artist from Rampuria who is now based in Vadodara, Gujarat, has started the unique project in the village where farmers were encouraged to participate in the "I have a dream," project, which in Nepali translates to "Mero euta sapana cha."

Sherpa encouraged the farmers to grow coriander, which when fully grown has turned into a relief work, its design spelling out the words "Mero euta sapana cha."

"Art has always been confined to galleries in these parts of the world. Being born in this village, I have seen that many of my villagers are creative but they cannot express their creativity. I wanted to give back something to my friends from my village and make them feel happy and break the monotony of farming," Sherpa said.

Sherpa studied fine arts at Santiniketan before completing his masters in fine arts from MS University of Baroda. He is currently freelancing in art galleries in Vadodara.

The villagers immediately took a liking to Sherpa's project.

"I had initially thought that even if five to six farmers showed interest, I would be more than happy. We held six meetings with the farmers and finally we had 21 farmers involved in the project. There was excitement for they were doing something creative," Sherpa said.

The project started on April 16, 2014, after L.B. Rawat, a local resident, agreed to part with a portion of his land to grow coriander on a 3ft x 27ft space.

"We probably spent only about Rs 2,000 as the entire village participated in this project. We are happy with the end result," Sherpa said.

He said he was in touch with a Canada-based non-profit charitable organization, The Vancouver Biennale, to try and showcase a documentary of their project during one of their exhibitions.

"I am in touch with them and am hoping for the best. If the documentary is shown, it will bring recognition to my village. I also plan to screen the documentary in art galleries in Mumbai and Delhi," Sherpa said.

The coriander leaves, when fully grown, were plucked in early. "We had sown in half a kilogram of coriander seeds. The leaves were not for sale and were given to the villagers for their own consumption," Sherpa said, adding that the project was aimed at celebrating creativity more than looking at commercial interest.

On the day the leaves were plucked, the residents organised a poetry recitation programme in the village.

The programme titled "Barima Kavita" or poetry in the farmland, was attended by budding poets Nima Sherpa, Saran Muskan, Bhupendra Subba, Binod Pradhan, Asish Rai and Pradip Lohagun.

Muskan said: "We have been reciting poetry in various places but it was a different feeling to recite a poem near a coriander field. We, too, are trying to bring poetry to the common people and this project by Sherpa also reflects our ideas."

Sherpa now plans to invite artists from across the globe to his village for an art camp in the fields in October this year.

"I am also planning to organize a workshop and invite school children to participate in the event," he said.

Sherpa and the local villagers believe that if they can come up with such unique ideas, they can make the village an attractive tourist destination in the long run by starting homestays.

Nima Sherpa, a resident of Rampuria who is a lecturer at Ghoom-Jorebunglow Degree College and was involved with the project, said: "Our long-term goal is to promote village tourism in the area by encouraging people to come up with homestays. We need to create a unique space so that the village can stand out to be different in its activities."

The villagers are predominantly farmers who grow maize, cabbage, potatoes, carrots, cardamom and ginger. Some of the farmers have also set up flower nurseries.

L.B. Rawat, one of the farmers, said: “Everyone in the village was excited about the project as it has brought about something new in their lives. Most of the educated youths have left the village but now many are returning and bringing in new concepts to the village. This new concept made us think we can do something different and this feeling, I think, can help us think differently. We were too stuck with our lives and we had stopped thinking.”

Nima said: “We can do unique activities in the village and connect with global initiatives, even if it is about celebrating creativity. We can create a unique brand and identity for the village. It will, however, have to be a sustained effort.”

The website of The Vancouver Biennale says it is a non-profit charitable organisation that celebrates art in public spaces. “Our exhibitions are unique in the world in that we feature sculpture, new media, film, music and dance.” The website states the project is inspired by Martin Luther King's famous speech “I have a dream”.

The Biennale has a documentary video section in its website where documentaries of such projects across the globe are featured. Sherpa, who is making a documentary on the project, is hopeful it will feature not just on the website but would be shown during events.