



The Lost Tribe

Samar Jodha's new portraits document the life of Assam's Tai-Phake tribe, which is just a breath away from extinction. By DEEPALI NANDWANI

PHOTOGRAPHER AND FILM-MAKER

Samar Singh Jodha has spent the last four years working with, and photographing the Tai-Phake people who live in Phaneng, in the upper reaches of Assam. The portraits are on display at New Delhi's Gallery Arts.i till 10 December.

Phaneng: A Journey Into Personal Engagement has 12 large black-and-white prints, along with an audio track of jungle sounds and a 10-minute video that captures the ravaged topography of a land devastated by open cast mining. The 12,000 sq ft gallery has been left in complete darkness; the only light within the space is the spotlight on each picture.

Jodha, whose earlier work includes *Ageless Mind and Spirit*, a book of photographs on the country's ageing population, stumbled upon the tribe when he was driving down the Stillwell Road from Southwest China into India's cloistered north-east for a documentary project.

"I came across a village with a few bamboo homes on stilts and small farm holdings, which was occupied by a few members of an ancient tribe with only 1,500 surviving members," he says. "It's under siege by rapid urbanisation, coal mines and Hindi-speaking migrants. The tribe has very few children; most of its population is old." The portraits — a part of a documentation project that Jodha worked on in a little hut-cum-studio he built for himself in the village — have a black background, an attempt to "show how the coal mines have eaten into their lives, leaving their future in darkness".

Jodha now lives in Phaneng for six months a year and runs a trust along with a German partner. The duo has set up an eco-resort on land provided by the Tai-Phake people.

