

What it means to be a soldier

Baptist Coelho's art installation throws lights on the human conditions of conflict zones

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His demeanour and warm smile are instant ice breakers. As Baptist Coelho walks into the auditorium of Goethe Zentrum and makes himself comfortable, he talks of the *biryani* lunch he relished before coming for the interview. "I could eat *biryani* every day. If I had a dull day and or think life is hopeless, I just need to eat *biryani* and it will be like an instant change of situation," he says with a smile. At the German centre, the hall is brightly lit and looks unusual too. There are a pile of bandages in the centre, a collection of photographs on the walls and five military uniforms on the floor. The art installation by Baptist is titled 'Thread by thread' and narrates stories from the icy battlefield of Siachen Glacier. More than the stories of heroism and valour, these tales are about the human conditions of conflict zones. "It is looking at how soldiers or civilians deal with it; for that matter how Ladakhis cope with it as there is constant vigilance in the entire region. Some of the art works that you see here are like stages in between a journey. It is not like the end of a certain question or an observation; It is like a conversation that continues for me," he points out

Have you ever wondered what it means to be safe; what it means to be a soldier; what does bravery mean? These questions kept haunting Baptist till he began a unique project. This project is close to Baptist's heart and has been on for a while. "I started doing research on it in 2006 and have shown different works at different stages of the research. It will continue as long as I live and I can give," he smiles.

Strangely, Baptist has not gone to Siachen Glacier for the project. "There's a glacier and base camp, but only Ladakhis are allowed there or you need



STAGES IN BETWEEN A JOURNEY (From top) Photograph showcasing how body weaves itself to create a mesh of protection; Pile of bandages

to have permission from the Army. I only went till a point called Panamik, where civilians are allowed. It was a point that I could go at that time," he states.

Although he could not interact with them on a daily basis, his constant research, interaction with mountaineers over the years and a Siachen officer he stayed in touch with, shared their experiences. "My questions were about the human conditions. How did they eat? How did they sleep? How did they brush their teeth? The basic questions that no one talks

about. It's also disturbing because you cannot confront reality. I recollect the first day in Ladakh, when we were waiting for the solar panel to heat just to get one mug of warm water to brush our teeth."

The bandages in the hall,

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which look like a mound of snow, are the first work Baptist did on the Siachen Glacier. "The bandages number 537. A satellite view of the glacier would be something like that," he explains.

His photographs focus on the mental state of soldiers, coping with the challenges of cold. "The entire project is looking at how fabric plays a role in the conflict zone. How fabric has more of a sense of protection than the aesthetic value. In my journey, I also came across something called warp and weft. These are at-

tempts to contain. Here the body is trying to weave itself and create a mesh of protection. You can have a physical protection with clothes, but what about the mental state?" he asks and continues, "Here the body is coiling in itself and weaving its fabric."

Accompanied by an audio, the five uniforms depict a scene where five men, sleeping in a shelter, are dreaming and talking to each other in a zone. "This dreaming, hallucination and this conversation that we hear is constructed and scripted by me. And all these five

men are meeting in a dream and this dream is in an audio situation. They are talking to each other — on simple to complex topics. One soldier speaks of how he misses his family. In my research I also found that some soldiers have no families. There is no baggage of relationships and one of them is in that kind of situation. One of them comes from South of India and is completely overwhelmed by snow. One of them is a ghost; he has seen life and he is now in the afterlife," he sums up.

(*Thread by Thread* is on till October 24)