

MASKED MALADIES

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SRADHA TAMANG PT





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I still remember when I stood first in the elocution competition in Class 7. I loved how it made me feel and I couldn't wait to do more of it.

While growing up I realised that many of the things that claimed to protect me were also those that restrained me. Looking back, ever since I started understanding my feelings, there aren't many moments in my life where I felt free. For most people who know me now, it must be hard to believe that as a 12-year-old, I loved public speaking. I enjoyed every moment of it. The confidence I had then felt completely innate. Elocution, speeches, any chance to speak and perform on stage, I wanted to take it. A year later, I had to change schools and move to a bigger town. I was happy to be there, but that is also when I gradually started retreating into my shell when I felt restricted for the first time. I saw people my age going out, having fun and talking about it, whereas I hardly ever got to do so. My confidence slowly deteriorated, and I stopped interacting with people. Even though I had a knack for public speaking and loved taking part in competitions, I felt that I was not

encouraged to pursue this. I don't know if it was because I am a girl or the world itself is unfair.

Things slowly started changing for me from then on. I no longer wanted to do the things I liked any more, maybe because I did not like being said no to all the time.

In college, I found some independence, but not completely as I was living in a conservative Christian hostel. As I had mostly stayed at home, I realised that I wasn't able to interact much with others, which I try to do every day even today, but I am still insecure. It makes me very anxious. Over time, I became less articulate and I could hardly express how I felt through words. So, I started taking photographs not because I wanted to express myself but because I just liked taking them. I took photos every day while going to college from the hostel and when coming back. I felt a connection with photography and felt that I had found my voice through photography.

I don't blame my family for the way I feel. They had grown up in a certain way and were only doing what they feel was right for me. This is rather a reflection on the larger society and how the public space is seen as being unsafe for women.

Even though we see that society is modernising and ancient hierarchies of caste and gender are slowly giving way to modern ideas about the equality of all individuals before the law. But a sense of insecurity and fear is still lurking in people's minds when it comes to identifying themselves as women. These insecurities and fear give rise to unnecessary restrictions that we face in our day to day lives.

We are thought to be vulnerable in some spaces and are restricted to the 'safety' of our homes.

This project, therefore, is a visual narrative that attempts to portray the feelings of a girl living in a so-called safe world that claims to protect her but does so through restrictions and limitations. The images explore her never-ending desire to know what it's like to be free—to know how the streets of Kalimpong look at midnight, to explore new places to eat, to meet new people and speak to them with confidence, to know how it feels to go on treks, staying in a tent with a view of the

mountains near a river, to learn how to cycle on open roads, to sleep and wake up when she wants to and do all these freely.

As I was working on this project, I got a closer look at what I felt deep inside. This only made me feel worse about my situation and I didn't feel like working on the project. Photography was an escape for me but as I was trying to photograph, neither was I finding subjects nor was I enjoying the process and I also felt somewhat disconnected, maybe because I photographed things that I liked and not something that I did not. I have confronted myself and space as well as my practice through this project.



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