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## *An Essay on 20th Century Printmaking in India*

Among the modern visual media we see a spectacular development in Cinematography and Printmaking which two evolved complex forms in the 20th Century. The Cinema is a medium which is entirely new; it has drawn into its fold the other performing arts, but it is more than a mere synthesis of these, for it is created in new terms and in a new language. Also it is linked with technological processes and its progress is based on scientific inventions. The medium Graphic on the other hand is comparatively old. The process of printing was for years in current commercial use, supplying documentation and illustration to writing. However, after the invention of machine printing and photographic reproduction graphic processes are no longer used in their former role. Reproduction for commercial printing is clearly separated from graphic prints; the latter are designed by artists and printed by hand. Thus its non-commercialisation has, as a matter of fact, given graphic work a new lease of life. For now it is practised by artists purely for aesthetic expressions and is recognised as a creative art in its own right.

Modern Graphic techniques were introduced into India by the British and were practised throughout the nineteenth and in the early twentieth century. The idea of this style was to illustrate books and journals. Such work often documented the life of the past or was of religious or epic themes. This type of reporting or copying continued to be in vogue till the 1920's. Engraving, Etchings and Lithography were subjects taught at the government art schools from approximately 1855 but the style followed was based on making light and shade studies and showed little originality. Some of the important books published in the latter half of the 19th century were actually illustrated by lithographs and engravings done by students from the art schools.

The earliest artist who tried to do something different and original using print medium was Gaganendranath

Tagore, though perhaps his interest in it was only partial, since he used the print process for his caricatures; this is, more to spread ideas than as an end in itself. The Lithographic cartoons which Gaganendranath created may not be considered very important as art; however, he succeeded in freeing the process for original work, distinct from the copying and documentation that had prevailed until then. A genuinely different aim could be seen in the work of the Santiniketan School especially in the works of Nandalal Bose and Binode Behari Mukherjee. A prosaic and genre style developed at Calcutta as exemplified by the portraits and landscapes of Mukul Dey, Ramendranath Chakravorty and Mani Bhusan Gupta. In Bombay artist of the same period show a weaker or more romantic variation of the prevalent style as instanced by the work of Y.K. Shukla.

The work of Mukul Dey was not influenced by the Bengal school. Though trained in London his portraits in etching are related to the styled set by Abhinindranath Tagore with its emphasis on drawing and interest in "Character". Indeed many of them have an unfinished appearance as the artist is only concerned with the portrayal of the head. Mukul Dey did a great many portraits of the celebrities of his times; most of them have a predominantly narrative interest. Ramendranath Chakravorty studied art at Shantiniketan, but developed a considerable interest in Etching. He had a rather prosaic style which delighted in a detailed description of life around him. A later artist of this trend is Haren Das who continues with genre themes embellished with elaborate texture and detail. On the other hand, some of the other early practitioners of Etching seem to have used the print process only for multiplying reproductions, the works themselves resembling drawings.

Somarendranath Gupta's Graphic work stimulates sketches done in pen and ink, while that of Roop Krishna is close to wash paintings. Chughtai also did a large number of works very like line drawings and incorporating the romantic imagery of the period.

The Shantiniketan school benefited by the visit of the graphic artist Andre Karpels. However the artists there



practiced print media only occasionally. Nandalal Bose's work is dominated by a sense of design and black and white arrangement as for example in his illustrations to Rabindranath's book for childrens, "Shahaj Path" done in 1929. He also did some stylised portraits of Gandhi Ji and Abdul Ghaffar Khan (which are quite well known) in the second half of the 1930's. His intrest in Etching came later and in this medium he generally chose subjects form nature and treated them in a naturalistic way rather like sketches. A large number of younger artists of the Shantiniketan School practised Graphic techniques brifly. Early prints can be seen in the Visva Bharati Quarterly; V.B. Patrika and other Shantiniketan pblications. Nandalal's son Biswarup Bose studied colour woodcut printing in Japan and later taught this medium at Kala Bhavan. However, the most significant work done there was probably that of Binode Behari Mukherjee whose powerful compositions treat both woodcut and Etching in a modern way. It expressed a respectfor form and a feeling for abstract values which give these works a rugged power. Especially notable are his landscapes in woodcut and linoleum done approximately in the decade 1936-45. They have a strong well knit texture, powerful movement and an organic feel. One is reminded the work of Jawlensky and other German Expressionists. In his later years he also practised lithography, the style of his works in this is rather closely to his later calligraphic painting. In other parts of India a number of contemporaneous artists also worked with print media intermittently, among the more successful of them mention may be made of L.M.Sen of Lucknow.

The disturbed conditions in art in the period of transition following Independence were not a suitable environment for the development of printmaking. We have also seen that hardly any artists devoted themselves to graphic art entirely; there was indeed little demand for prints. Among the younger men working at this time, two have done a body of work showing strong personal styles; also they can be considered printmakers exclusively- namely Haren Das and Chittoprasad. Haren Das's subject matter is usually landscapes; the woodcut print displays a pattern of varied textures and motifs forming an overall pattern. Chittoprasad's work reflects the inspiration of folk art. His stylised woodcuts have a bold treatment and are sometimes frankly based on folk antecedents. The themes – dancers, rural scenes or folk images – are characteristic of the period as a whole.

The 1950's may be considered a period of ferment and readjustment in Indian Art. In painting a strong movement with varied imagery developed, in sculpture new materials and images were being sought. In Graphic art a ground for a development was in preparation. We see a gradual increase in interest in prints, colour began to be used and there was a specific interest in textures, paralleling the textural surfaces

seen in painting. Forms become broken up and there was a tendency directed away from reality and towards abstraction. The work of an artist like Kanwal Krishna is typical in displaying these characteristics. A number of other artists also started to use soft ground processes which were capable of a wide range of complex effects. New techniques such as Silk Screen, colour lithography and mix media were experimented with. This new phase in printmaking may be said to have arrived with the 1960's. the Graphic department of art schools were revitalised giving rise to a large number of artists devoted only to this medium.

Now the focus moves on to the achievements in printmaking at various places such as Baroda, which has been in the forefront in the field of Graphic arts for the last two decades and Delhi region where practice of printmaking, as a serious artistic form, in relation with the works of various artists who worked at these places. Faculty of Fine Arts, Baroda has served a major training ground providing a permanent and suitably equipped place for various printmaking techniques. It is an area of work where without the necessary technical equipment's and workshop setup prints cannot be made. Earlier the fully equipped workshop in the country or art schools were a difficult task and beyond the means of an individual to afford. The importance of a workshop, with some of the basic mechanical requirements, the back-bone of which has been the technical guidance of N.B.Joglekar.

Many of the artists either teaching in or trained at Baroda have had the benefit of this workshop several of whom have tried their hand at printmaking sometime or the other. The workshop is now coaching post-graduate students in the graphic processes. Among the worthy joint efforts in printing mention may be made of a set of calendars of artist lithographs and a delightful fable book illustrated by K.G.Subramanyam in his own kind of flat stylization. Notable among the outsiders who have received training here and who have established themselves in their respective places are Jai Krishan of Lucknow and the Hyderabad artists Laxma Gaud, Shri. Shanker wood cut and Dev Raj Litho and Etching. I shall here only discuss those who have shown sustained interest in graphics and have produced significant work in any one of the processes. Number of them is primarily painters. Therefore, their prints derived much from their painterly pre-occupation. The experiments range from seeking with the conventional techniques and the potentialities of the printmaking media to exploring the peculiar language of the medium, more than merely translate a painting into a print.

In the fifties, Shanti Dave had done a great many linocuts and was probably the first to work on large sizes. He was fascinated by the illustrative possibilities of this medium. His illustrations such as Geeta-Govinda are clean, crisp and sharply an arrangement of simple black and white areas build up with textures and line. They look like Indian miniatures in black and white. The sixties have been



particularly the most productive decade with the emergence of the painters Vinod Ray Patel and Jayant Parikh as notable printmakers possessing structural inclination for the Graphic medium.

Jayan Paridh has shown his brilliance in the woodcut process. His main emphasis is on textures. For making his prints, Parikh has explored work, Linoleum, hardboard and plywood. Not only do they have all different textures which show in the print, they also cut differently because of varying structures of their grains they react to the cutting tools and the pressure of the creator's hand in different ways, for new textures, he collected many kinds of old weathered wood and printed directly from them. He made also rubbings from time worn dilapidated stone movements. Here the irregular shapes of stones and their rough surface's produced by years of use and rubbings of feet give new effects. These impressions are later trimmed to convert into integrated designs. His intaglio-cum-relief prints (taken from a master image of card-board collage) are more complex and painstakingly done. The results vary from merely prosaic to visually striking effects.

Although Vinod Ray Patel began with lino-cuts, his output in Lithographs is considerable. His Lithographs are mostly nude compositions of Buxom, voluptuous figures with exaggerated femininity achieved by accentuating the curves of hips and breasts. Their long hair floats in waves; the hands are raised upwards or cover the faces as if in shame. These Lithographs quite puzzling could also be regarded as drawings with an excellent cohesion achieved between line and tone. He has also made a series of line engravings using plastic sheets as a substitute for the conventional but expensive metal plates depicting similar imagery as in the Lithography set of winged skeleton one cannot help appreciating his rich and widening repertoire of imagery.

Notable work in Lithography has also been done by Naina Dalal, Kishore Wala and Magan Parmar. Naina studied lithography in London. Her work is always based on a theme usually expressed through the human figures. While facing her canvas she finds images staring at her of deformed, misshapen, miserable human beings who unconsciously encroach into whatever she paints or draws. Such themes are much suited to the medium of Lithography, where deep blacks contrasting sharply with whites, it is possible to intensify their expressiveness. They could represent the apprehensive melancholy of the sad eyed adolescent. Naina has certain lyrical element in the crisp tonal variations of her prints. In the same class can be included the Lithographs of Kishore Wala now working at Rajkot. The horse has been his persistent theme to the point of obsession. He has portrayed the horse in various moods, stampeding with comrades, huddled with the family, in tender movements of the necking lovers which make them

so human. The artist has felt with the horse, as it were, dealing with the variations on the theme as in a biography. Such an interpretation of the obsessive image probably reflects the personal psyche of the artist whose unfortunate physical handicap also partly explains naiveté and an occasional looseness of the drawing. His prints are built up in dense dark tones, each time there is a different grouping, varied movements and surprising arrangements.

Magan Parmar's Lithographic and relief prints are noted for their naive imagery which is both folk and childlike. Having had a long acquaintance with the printing process but no academic training, there is no obvious conflict between painterly concepts and the graphic language. His imagery appropriately suited to the medium, visually communicate personal poetry. His prints are a poetic transformation of a rural setting mingling the silhouetted forms of foliage and animals. In them one does not look for technical fineness but the richness and the varied levels of meaning. He is undoubtedly an outstanding Indian naive artist.

The technical experience brought back home after studying abroad, particularly some of the mediums like colour intaglio printing by Jyoti Bhatt in 1967 and later by Rini Dhumal after learning viscosity method from Paris has contributed a great deal in the overall growth of the facilities. Prominent Etcher Jyoti Bhatt who has concentrated on the intaglio process which he mastered during two year training in the United States. The enthusiasm for printmaking led him to master the technique, at Naples in Italy (1961-66) and later at Pratt Institute, New York (1964-66). The fine craftsman quality found in his paintings is revealed in his etchings too, where line and contour form the basis of delineation combined with textural and relief effects which are peculiar to the print process. In them, therefore the quality of illustration is uppermost. Thus his prints are not merely coloured textured surfaces into which many of the Etchings somehow seem to fall, but have an underlying meaning. Meticulously planned and carefully printed they are conceived in terms of an integrated whole as design and image in which the diagram and the symbol play interchanging roles. After post-graduation in painting (1972) at the same institution, Rini Dhumal has availed different scholarships for specialization in Graphics. Initially under K.G.Subramanyam and Somnath Hore (1973-75), Rini studied under Sir S.W.Hayter at Atelier Dix-Sept, Paris, in Etching and Claude Jobin in Lithography (1975-76). Establishing her studio in Baroda in 1977, she had been concentrating in creating a personal language through Graphics. Rini has experimented in various printmaking mediums and has always gone beyond the possibility of printing in black. Particularly fond of colour viscosity technique, Lithography has also attracted the attention of the artist due to the facility of spontaneous drawing quality and the colour superimposition the medium allows. Despite the medium, the colouristic variations and



textural variety in building up the surfaces and exploring the linear graphic possibilities are her concerns. These enable her in bringing printed images at par with painting. This predilection of the artist, probably also explains the disinterestedness in a medium like Silk screen printing, as the flat areas of colours do not suit the requirement of the artists intentions. The spontaneous linear articulation in Rini's prints is invariably subsumed within the viscosity of the activated coloured textures. The overall textural blanket completely envelops the pictorial space, endowing a muted and mellowed effect, dashed occasionally by brighter colour areas. Among the young artists in Baroda, Jayanti Rabadia and Vijay Bagodi have taken up printmaking profession ambitiously.

The Delhi Silpi Chakra held the first All India Graphic show in 1965. It had a modest show with 33 artists with notable contributions by Jagmohan Chopra, Bhupendra Karia, Manhar Makwana, Jayant Parikh, Vardaraj.n, Krishan Reddy, Akbar Padmsee, Kanwal Krishna, Devayani Krishna and Somnath Hore. This show interested many artists in the possibilities of the medium. The real credit for creating the necessary climate for printmaking in Delhi was by Somnath Hore, Kanwal Krishna and most recently by Jagmohan Chopra. Somnath Hore was already a graphic artist and a lecturer at the Indian College of art and Draftman ship, Calcutta, came to Delhi in 1958 and was placed in charge of the Graphic Department of the Delhi College of Art. He commissioned an outmoded printing machine and set to work. Inspired by the Veteran Krishna Reddy and even more by the humanism of Kathe Kollwitz, and with sufficient experience as wood engraver, Somnath applied himself to metal engraving with tenacity and devotion and is now acknowledged as one of the most gifted and experienced Graphic artist.

Kanwal Krishna who is as well known, had worked at the graphic press even before he went to Paris to Hayter's Atelier-17. He was engrossed with the immense possibilities of the mono-print technique to start with, but gradually discovered the phenomenal technical range of intaglio printing. The orthodox method of metal and acid printing with all its engraving, etching and aquatint effects did not satisfy his essentially inventive temperament. He left it all behind and resorted to a combination of relief and intaglio process by building demarcated relief areas with a whole range of different materials, including collage and adhesives to build up different levels with this and the employment of rollers of varying hardness's, Kanwal was able to achieve results which combined the best of both the conventional and his own innovated methods.

Devayani Krishna, who is an excellent graphic artist in her own right, relies on similar technical processes as those of Kanwal. she highlighted the basic calligraphic beauty of the Arabic characters by cutting deep into the surface to release the glimmering, radiant areas of free forms which

rose from the generally heavy, mystifying coloured background. Her subsequent series, why and what, carried forward the same concept with high intaglio motifs of the interrogation or exclamation marks, symbolic of questioning and wonder, talking the place of the Arabic character.

Jagmohan Chopra, who is the live-wire of Delhi graphic works, owes much to the works of Somnath Hore who inspired and encouraged him. He too prefers the unconventional technical processes of paper block or mount board plates, engraving the relief, building with additives such as resins, polymers and araldite etc. he achieves a much vast and varied range of relief and intaglio surfaces than is perhaps possible by the time honoured metal and acid bite. The result often incorporates the qualities of both painting and graphics. He is also the moving spirit of the Group8 of Delhi, an association of working printmakers most of whom are senior students of the Delhi College of Art where he has taken over teaching graphics from Hore. He and his young colleagues joined hand in framing the Group8 in 1968. The inaugural show in September 1968 and the second in September 1969 made a fine impression. The group organised an excellent All India Graphic Exhibition in December the same year. Already some of these Group8 artists have produced works that hold considerable promise. Among them Anupam Sud has already shown works of very fine potential. Another artist Zarina took many by surprise by her two excellent shows of woodcut in 1968 and 1969. A very sensitive artist, trained at Atelier-17, Zarina gets the best out of her arrangements of plywood surfaces with an insight into the nature of the linear texture of the wood and seize its print possibilities instinctively. N.K.Dixit and Bimal Banerjee- also from Hayter's Atelier-17, Umesh Verma, Jivan Adalja, and G.Ganguly and Jai Krishna is talented artist capable of producing competent graphics. Laxman Pai, a painter who is also a graphic artist has to his credit two fine portfolios of etchings on the Budha and Gandhi.

In concluding printmaking in the 20th century in India has a remarkable changes in visual vocabulary of the artist and individual technical experimentations and it is a medium of par excellence compared to painting or sculpture and the end result is not concerned of the processes or the labour of the period of growth, what confronts is the result- a work of art which is an original but can be reproduced and moves us by its aesthetic significance alone.

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