CHAPTER TWO
THE FORERUNNERS OF PRINTMAKING

A.R. CHUGHTAI, 1897-1975
BENODE BEHARI MUKHERJEE, 1904-1980
RAMKINKAR BAIJ, 1910-1980
HAREN DAS, 1921-1993
SAFIUDDIN AHMED
A.R. CHUGHTAI, 1897-1975
The Doyen of Undivided India

Abdur Rahman Chughtai is one of the outstanding Muslim painters in the style of the Bengal School. He was born in undivided India, and even later after the Partition took place, he remained essentially an Indian artist. He was born in Lahore in 1897 in a family well known for its architects, engineers, painters and decorators. "When only 18, he rebelled against his father's wish to be an engineer, having already chosen to be an artist. In fact, his early education helped him little to grow further in his chosen career. His brief stint at Lahore's Mayo School of Art did not really help him much and he learned more on his own. "He then moved to Calcutta in 1919 and worked there for several years painting in the style of the Bengal School, but already showing his overwhelming interest in illustrational and 'episodic' themes. By 1923, Chughtai started developing his style of drawing, luscious, languid, narcissus eyed and manneristic figures, with erotic overtones, "1 heavy with fictional content, and 'an air of dreaminess, "1 almost unreality.'

To acquire a clear idea about the significance of Chughtai in contemporary art scene, let us quote S. Kashmira Singh: "In Modern Indian Art, Chughtai has been acclaimed as one of the most virile and gifted artists that Indian Renaissance has produced. His fame is international. For his characteristic style, perfect technique and universal appeal, he has been described as a universally great artist. This is due not only to his genius, but also to the historical role he has played in the development of Modern Indian Art. His art has elements of universal sympathy and appeal, as the themes, tone and expression of his works prove."1
As one of the followers of Abanindranath, Chughtai was also charged for producing works of anaemic sentimentality,*3 similar to those of Abanindranath. In fact, Chughtai's genius had gone apart in two directions that it was difficult to ascertain, which one was his major field. His creative genius could be an admixture of conformity and confrontation, between the literary perception and artistic vision.*4 Some art critics have claimed that both, Abanindranath's paintings as well as his followers' paintings, are condemned for their literary imagery. Indeed this charge has been addressed particularly to the paintings of Chughtai in order to minimize the quality of his artworks, which he successfully achieved during his active stay in Calcutta between 1919 to 1928. They also condemn their linear quality in their work. To reveal this point of view let us quote Ratan Parimoo. "Abdur Rahman Chughtai in his paintings based on Urdu poetry. Producing linear contours with silly body flexes and sensuous bends of limbs, almost becoming a disease in the name of Indian tradition with a number of followers of Bengal revivalism. Of course one cannot discount the influence of the 'end of the century' ars nouveau movement from Europe, the hallmark of which was the curled line, known as the 'whip-lash'."2

In fact, Chughtai acquired influences from many sources and it has been observed by some art critics in Europe around the mid 50s that he grasped some characteristics from the auspicious work of his ancestors and also has had developed a beautiful rhythm reminiscent of Burne Jones, Crane, Morris and Beardsley. He was deeply influenced by the pellucid colours.

However, to reveal more about these unfair judgments, let us go to listen to Jagdish Mittal, who loudly shouted hoping somebody may believe his claims: "Very few people know that Chughtai, a well known follower of the Bengal School, also ventured to do some etchings. Most of his work is similar in style to his paintings. He used large plates for his line drawing type of work. To people who love his work probably for its romantic poetry, these may seem to be an extraordinary achievement, for its fine lines. These drawings have all the weakness of his effeminate, lifeless painting, whereas the medium of etching is successful only in bold work with a surer drawing."3 There is also a brief phrase by Asok Mitra, "Chughtai was less self-conscious, less intellectual and therefore more given to imitation of superficial Indianeness."80

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Jaya Appasamy seems to be very familiar to Chughtai’s early works. She herself was the product of the Bengal School during the late 30s and early 40s. She points out in 1968, “Through Chughtai’s temperament, the attenuation inherent in the romantic style is extended and becomes mannerist. At this time, exaggerated and ornate forms of Islamic refinement are also seen in forms of speech, highly nostalgic verse, or even in the thin marble tracery and arabesques of Islamic architecture. They astonish the eye by their sheer finesse and delicacy.”

It was in 1927, when Chughtai published his series of illustrations entitled ‘Murraqqa-i-Chughtai,’ and ‘Naqsh-i-Chughtai.’ In 1928, he did illustrations for the deeply philosophical and imaginative verses of Ghalib, the mid-19th century Urdu and Persian poet. These illustrations were naturally much more than a mere translation in visuals. Chughtai’s paintings and drawings of the late 1920’s have received tributes from some art critics in India and abroad.

Chughtai had, by that time, developed a ‘signature,’ a distinctive style that has, to the late days of his life, remained his own. His own slogan is “Art is the creation of the common people, but is not meant for them.” In the same breath, he continued: “The only aim of art is that life should thrive. My art is living and will continue to throb with life, so that the land that gave me birth may be truly immortal, when we were making efforts to live and dream with brethren of this land.”

The universal appeal of his works can be witnessed as his works figure in the collection of famous museums of both East and West along with the great contemporaries of his time. “He has vigorously protested against the sectarianisation of his art and has silenced his narrow-minded critics by painting about two hundred pictures on Hindu motifs and traditional themes.” In fact, Chughtai is not a contemporary artist, he is something different, something greater. Wherever he directs his talents – be it painting, drawing or etching - he leaves an indelible mark. Through his self-confidence and creative talent, Chughtai has evolved a distinct style of his own and his artistic endeavour played a leading part in the development of Modern Indian Art.

Most of Chughtai’s themes are obviously sentimental, chosen and delineated with poetic intent. To Chughtai the function of art itself was to provide a new world of beauty and scented emotion. We see his delicate ladies seated at windows, toying with flowers and birds;
very often there is a special revelation of meaning beyond the immediate subject matter. In fact, Chughtai is a great lover of nature, but he is a greater lover of humanity; of beauty which resides in the human form. He sees nothing more beautiful than the female figure, nothing more expressive than the human face in the wide universe. Unfortunately, we do not have space to portray his painting, inasmuch as we are only concerned with his etchings. His etchings are quite relevant to our research.

The art critic of ‘The Artist,’ the London magazine of art, has very perceptively observed in 1935, “Everything he touches is a superb piece of craftsmanship. He has an almost swaggering command of the brush so common to the Japanese and Chinese masters. His handling is more akin to the neat and precise style of Persian and Mughal painters. He uses the pencil with the delicacy of silver point in style. The European student can learn much from his remarkable economy of means and material.”

Chughtai is precise and firm in his choice, when he used a copper brown he meant a copper brown and his pink is unhesitatingly pink; nothing is left to chance. To appreciate Chughtai in any high degree, one must appreciate pure form, rhythmic proportions, the relations of parts and extreme refinements in these relations. He hates the vague and uncertain, loving to see with his inner eye as clearly as with the eye of sense the geometrician sees his triangles, circles and squares. His paintings are, in truth, the delineation of geometry of rare beauty. Chughtai believes that art begins at the point when any tiny portion makes all the difference. For this reason, an artist should be precise and firm. But this will affect any spontaneous motivation. I do not think accuracy always did oppose and hinder the innovative rendering of the inner beauty. However, Chughtai’s depictions go further beyond our expectations and also beyond our conventional scale of appreciation. Here is an exceptional artist; did he not deserve an exceptional recognition?

Chughtai’s landscapes are so characteristically Indian and convey a deep sense of space and proportion in composition. His trees, stalks and flowers are animate with an almost human intention. His figures - men, women and children - give the impression of life, and carry their heads with determination and purpose.

Both of Chughtai’s linear quality and his colour scheme are superb. He uses magic-like colours to reflect the emotional lyricism and a musical consistency to produce the dream-like effects. He was adept at using the yellow, green and red tints at the right place and in just
the right proportion. His success lies in using simple and direct colours that create a direct welcome on the viewer’s aesthetic sensibilities. His harmonious blending of colours creates the right kind of mood and atmosphere that resonate with his poetical symbolism. Chughtai has had an individual approach to his favourite colours and technique. His yellow, red, blue, black and cream are of special quality. The colours seem to bear his own accent and the aromatic flavour of bygone glorious years of his ancestors. But his touch is always fresh, masterly and also indigenous, acquiring a hint of magnetic power and captivating.

To get in touch with these aspects, it is better to go through some of Chughtai’s paintings. ‘Devadasi’ watercolour and tempera on paper c.1924. This painting is one of Chughtai’s interesting works on traditional themes and poems about Devadasis, destined to carry a burden of shame and inferiority. Devadasi is an incarnation of love and sacrifice. Her tall graceful figure, the dignified poise, the fine make-up of her hair - everything is expressed with great mastery and beauty. Chughtai shows here his careful handling and decorative ability in all its details.

‘Holi,’ tempera colour on paper, c.1925, is one of his best paintings. The lovely figures well-designed and well-poised, represent the spirit of Holi. In a fit of passionate abandon, emotion takes the form of flowing lines and gushing colours that the artist scatters lavishly in a rare outburst of creative passion. As Radha and Krishna play Holi, the whole universe re-emerged in a new romance and beauty. Here, we see Chughtai has played with colours and lines with great delicacy. The selection of colour too is the revelation of artist’s sensibility and mastery. In reality, it is a very difficult task to paint the picture in this combination. It is said: “The longer we look at the picture, the more we enjoy the artist’s remarkable balance of movement and feeling.” His early composition ‘Woman, Lotus and Song Bird,’ watercolour over pen, nicely reveals the above mentioned qualities.

Jalal Uddin Ahmed, an art critic of Pakistani, has had observed in 1961, that, “Chughtai’s work always gave inspiration and a new potential, impetus, rhythm, vitality and emotional unity to Indian art. He partly has had his significant role in saving Indian art from falling into a sickening sentimental flabbiness. In fact, Chughtai has secrets of the fatal charm in his work. There is seduction in every turn and twist of his drunken reeling lines. There is apparently no action in his paintings; all figures are shown in repose but there is emotional tension that suggests that something has happened or is imminent.”
Chughtai’s Etchings

It is worthwhile to know that though Chughtai is primarily a master painter and a watercolourist, he is equally at home in pencil work and outline drawings also. While his etchings are so remarkable that a great artistic reputation might be based on these alone. The simple, effective use of lines in all his etchings is remarkable and successful. Chughtai can be rightfully acclaimed as a master printmaker due to the graphic quality present in his etchings. He had mastery over etching and lithographs, evolving an accent of his own. He was never too proud to grasp a new knowledge or to begin from the starting point to learn the new technique of etching. He acquired some new experience, which enabled him to achieve progressive changes in his colour compositions, after his tours of Europe twice in the 30s. He then started to make room for some slight changes in his compositions.

Chughtai showed tremendous interest in etching, just after his second tour of Europe during the mid-thirties. He was able to grasp the technique very quickly. We can say, the medium and the message became subservient to his command. So he was able to make a new start for his career in printmaking field. The outlook of his etchings is completely different from his paintings. Unlike his earlier years, Chughtai started doing the real life day-to-day themes from around the mid-40s. Thus, he became more rooted to his native soil.

Chughtai was adept at etching and sometimes he adds aquatints to enrich the tonal values of his prints, wielding mastery over the technique to create strong lines evoking sensitivity and lyricism. As he got more involved in graphic art, one can discern in his prints the progression of refined mood and method. Each line contributed to the totality of the meaning and the effect was achieved through the economic use of lines. Chughtai did a number of etchings with themes based on present day daily activities. He made a switch over from the romantic themes to interpret the practical modern life in his expressions.

Chughtai’s etchings can be viewed as a series of comments on his tastes and life. His lithographs are not very successful, as they were mere renderings of his drawings in litho process. On the other hand, the purity of etchings acquired an immense range of his emotional expression as reflected in his flowing lines. Chughtai’s remarkable etching and aquatint never pushed him to be an imitator or slavish follower of the West. Meanwhile, through his etchings, he confidently interprets the spirit of the East with the help of Western techniques.
Chughtai began taking interest in the etching technique around the mid-30s. He selected simple subject-matters to achieve his first step in this new field. He executed about then etchings to mark his first phase in this realm: titles such as ‘Flight’, ‘The Divine White Bull’, ‘The Lonely Deer’, ‘More than Shadow’, ‘Spring Breeze’, ‘The Mughal Prince’. However, the most interesting etching in this group is his fascinating portrait that depicts the profile of the ‘Black-haired Woman.’ The Mughal features of the woman is delineated in Western manner; especially when we look to the composition or examine the style of the hair dressing and the delicate hatching of the transparent and luscious upper garment revealing the attractive breasts. Let us have another look at this etching and his seductive tempera painting ‘Ambapali,’ 1924 hosting a feast to our eyes and leaving us in a stupor.

By the early years of the 40s he turned his back to the previous themes of his ancestors and suddenly awakened to see that the world has changed and that he must move fast to grasp some of the up-to-date characteristics. Thus, his series of etchings ‘In the College Compound’ was created. Let us look what happened to Chughtai, did he acquire a new skin for himself? In fact, he was preparing himself for a great achievement ‘The Tribal Woman’ that he created in c.1942, which may be considered as the best of his etchings during this period. He later executed another significant etching titled ‘In Her College Compound.’ From an initial glimpse, we realize the interesting structure of the geometrical composition. The profile of the up-to-date dressed and hairdressing style - altogether project some sort of newness in this picture which marked the new spirit of Chughtai’s work. Back to the college girl carrying her notebook and drowned in deep profound thinking, so, she does not have any interest about what is going on around her. The meticulous hatching shows the skillful hand of Chughtai as a master of his technique, with the substantial quality of light and shades. These qualities truly indicate the striking effect of his prints, and also the lovely handling of such medium.

Now, we are face to face with his surprising etching ‘The Tribal Woman.’ Here is the seductive feminine attractiveness. But what about this strange posture of the head that is almost stretched to acquire the semi-horizontal position, what about the voluptuous lips? The wave-like hairdressing depicted to convey her inner sensual and solicitous eagerness. ‘The Tribal Woman’ reveals her deep emotions while pressing her ripe lips, ready to receive the lover’s kiss. With her beautiful drawing and attractive features; especially when she twists
her hair that strangely but fascinatingly twined and coiled itself round the neck. The act of throwing her head back enacts the imaginative foreplay or even the particular moment of orgasm. Far from this inference, we may also say, she must be preparing herself to attend an orgiastic, wild party. Here, we see the woman's neck bedecked with ornaments to create a warm sensuous effect. These gestures and indications enhanced by Chughtai's curvaceous lines and emotional rendering of hatching. The perfect rendering of these fine slightly curved lines all over the woman's face, reveal the feeling of longing for her lover, or may be just for showing her earnest desire, her closed eye with its long and attractive eyelashes enhanced by the nearby mole on the cheek. When the beads penetrate the hand through the fingers as a metaphoric love making with its actual action of 'to-and-fro,' the woman seems to be arousing her feminine yearning for the intimate love.

By this time, his prints started to be enhanced by some beautiful accessories and well-designed ornaments. A much more functional purpose began to manifest in place of the earlier embellishing tendency. The elements in the background and the details began to assume a significant part of the picture. There is more breathing space and some harsh or uncluttered corners. These new characteristics reflect an original outlook and enhance the aesthetic quality, which in turn mean more captivating graphic art. Chughtai's etchings from now onwards acquired nearly all the requisite elements and conformed to all the procedures to deserve universal appeal.

The amazing etching of 1946 entitled 'In the Hostel' is one of his best up-to-date pictures. This print nicely reflects Chughtai's proficiency in dealing with his new themes. In this regard, we remember his previous etching 'In Her College Compound.' However, his new etching is an up-to-date depiction and shows his adequate understanding as well as the ease in dealing with the newer etching techniques of the day and also the clever approach to the know-how and spirit of print making. His human figure by this time acquired the dominant position, with an almost minimal importance to his earlier penchant. This significant picture portrayed the two college girls; one of them half-seated while her companion is standing very close to her. This composition acquired some particular gestures and also some meaningful postures to create a powerful and striking piece of Chughtai's art. The delicate sense of rhythm, the hesitancy of the girls' outlook is depicted with careful hands. The girls' alert attitude is probably because of their heavy duties and responsibilities.
The slight reflection in the eyeglasses of the seated girl projects her cleverness; however, both the girls seem to be sharp-minded. Engaged in a conversation with each other, the expressive gestures of their hands combining with their body language succeed to create a vivid and poignant view. The seated girl has an open book on her lap, apparently engaged in a discussion with her classmate. While the standing girl firmly embracing her book to her bosom, seemingly to connote a different signal towards the adoring eyes. The pantomimed gestures in the etching are devoted to convey a specific message to mean that 'the textbook is the girl’s only love, there is no place for the opposite sex.'

However, in 1962, J.U. Ahmed points out, 'Chughtai is still as active as any other of his younger colleagues, having recently completed his monumental illustration based on the verses of Iqbal. A selection of these were seen at a recent exhibition and demonstrated his zeal and talent for aesthetic creations and technical flourishes. That these underlined the element of illustration only proved that Chughtai has grown without either changing very much or being swayed and swept off his feet. Also, it puts him right where he belongs: at the head of an impressive tradition that he himself furthered and almost rebuilt.'

Lastly, we can say that Chughtai lived the maximum of his life in undivided India. When the Partition took place, he was 50 years of age. He came to Calcutta in 1919 and left for Lahore in 1928, where he stayed till his death in 1975. Chughtai, in fact, is one of the significant figures in contemporary Indian printmaking and actually a forerunner in this field. He is not a pioneering figure because his significant etching came little late. He was able to achieve an advanced position but in the early 40s.

**BENODE BEHARI MUKHERJEE, 1904-1980**

The Bridge between East and West

The Bengal school style assumed newer dimensions under the leadership of Nandalal Bose as well as the ideal atmosphere of Tagore School. The proximity to Nature, otherwise not found in urban cities acted as a stimulant. Also, the educational objectives of the school and the independent attitude of the younger artists freed the Bengal School style from its earlier literary moorings. Benode Behari Mukherjee and Ramkinker Baij are two of Nandalal’s illustrious students, who became well known for their inimitable and individual style of expression. Benode Behari joined Kala Bhavan in 1929; Ramkinker in 1934 and
along with Nandalal, the trio reigned over the institution for the next twenty years. Though Benode Behari differs with Nandalal in style, his works are linked with his as if with an umbilical cord. On the Santiniketan campus, Benode Behari created several of his striking works. His depictions were done in mediums of murals, paintings and graphics.

As an independent student, Benode worked hard to retain his individual artistic identity. What makes him different is that his respect for tradition was not clouded by chauvinistic feelings of patriotism. Like his contemporaries, he did appreciate the Ajanta and Ellora paintings, the Rajput and Kalighat Pats, but he discerned in them the qualities based on abstract and structural values. This clarity of concept made it possible for him to admire and understand diverse art subjects and further aspects concerning Negro masks, Maya civilization and also the possibilities of calligraphic lines. Some Western artists like Giotto and Picasso also influenced him. In his etchings and woodcuts, we can observe themes that are similar to his paintings, but depicted with spontaneity and originality and deep understanding of graphics’ special quality and characteristic.

As an individual too, Benode had several facets of his personality. Gulam M. Sheikh has pointed this out fact; “What strikes in most of the work of Benode Behari is his keen sense of structural unity, clarity of vision and unerring facility in handling of the medium. He builds the picture space, plane by plane, as if it were a physical act of laying out a garden. As he is not bothered with the ‘whats’ of painting, everything around him provides him with a theme of subjects for his pictures, such as student chatting or walking in open spaces of Santiniketan lined with trees, panoramic view of the vast landscape of wilderness around Birbhum, sprouts of grass and Kush flowers, a Simul tree with its multi-armed balancing act, or common folk of the Birbhum country side or Mussorie or Kopal, where the artist lived - village food sellers, barbers, sadhus, toiling labourers and petty shopkeepers.”

Benode, to some extent, adopted the abstract attitudes; he emphasized on abstract values in his sketches prints and murals, such as form, their arrangement, colours and textures, instead of the subject matter. Though he was a Bengal School product, he was amongst the forerunners of modern art. He had his own individual style of working with self-defined goals. His creations reflect his emphasis on painting and graphic elements. He based his works on his own approach to reality, drawing inspiration from real life rather than the dreamy, fantasy-like world of Bengal School style. He showed his versatility while
demonstrating the dynamism present in Indian tradition, which allowed it to absorb, grow and recreate. His achievements can be rightly considered as a further extension to the progressive attitude towards contemporary art.

Benode’s work may be difficult to understand without approaching all his artworks, paintings, drawings, graphic art and also mural paintings. All his creative works bear a lively quality and an underlying spirit of unity is present amongst the varied themes. He also shows intimate love and special interest in countryside landscapes, it is worthwhile to discuss these depictions, which have been executed in both painting and graphic style. G M. Sheikh, having come to discern the original treatment that Benode meted out to these countryside landscapes, remarked “His landscapes countered by sentimental mood and also by the dimly lit foliage and the rather unusually poised countenance of trees, at a chance discovery of a piece of land resplendent in deep red, undulating mounds and streams of grass-streaks, all aglow, and feather forms of Kush flower, seem to resound with memories of walks over areas of the countryside. Here the artists, so it seems, lives close to the object he depicts - in both mediums of painting and graphic art, rather than use it as a means to grow his ideas and emotions upon the object becoming tangible to the eye. Without any attempt at symbolization and forced sublimation of the forms of nature, the artist unegoistically reveals a pristine quality of the growth of forms of nature, clearly and vividly.”

It is worthwhile to go further and try to identify other individual artistic qualities contributing to Benode’s successful artwork, such as his interest in form, etc. He presented a new, vigorous, steady and eloquent character, never settling for the embellishment or relying upon bizarre tools for easy achievements. It was always a quest for new discovery. In fact, we can consider his artwork a bridge between East and West.

While examining Benode’s works, we find these works characterized by historicity of the East, and when his work taken together, it has great unity and great variety. In his landscapes, we are able to see a tonal iridescence vaguely reminiscent of impressionist watercolour, or of Romanesque frescoes, Mughal and Persian drawings and certain kind of cubist landscapes. In his murals too, one notices visual devices similar to those of Japanese screen and scroll paintings. “His woodcuts, etchings and lithographs are lively and individual; he was probably the only artist of his time in India, barring Nandalal Bose, who approached the art of prints with deep understanding, originality and distinction. His
woodcuts combine an expressionist simplicity with scintillating arrangements in black and white; his etchings have a suppressed calligraphic verve. His drawings are of various kinds; some grope, some probe, some explore, some plan, some prune, some write compositional shorthand. Together they hold the mirror to an artist of great versatility."

What is noteworthy in Benode’s work is also his interest in colour; these colours are always used in both beautiful and effective manner. With his other masterly artistic tools, he successfully struck a balance and steady compositions that create a feeling of tension overriding the subject matter itself. Just like his guru Nandalal, Benode emphasized on the fundamentals of form and also the sense of rhythm and balance in the treatment of space. He created dynamic tension in the space with its negative and positive forms. He too, considered sketching the world around as one of the most important exercises. In his attitude towards art as well as in depictions, Benode remains a modern artist with advanced motivation and intent.

Benode’s early compositions of the early 30s are from the landscapes around Santiniketan, the surge of the vegetation and the turgid dark leaves of bushes making a relentless pattern and seeming to have a melancholic mood. A portrait of ‘Tree Lover’ effects the attitude of this period. “As a matter of fact, Benode Behari progressed from an early sombre phase with pondering and brooding, to a later lighter, reconciled and more abstract arrangement. These early works are most often in tempera, though the colour is not flat or confined to specific areas as in the tempera tradition, but is brushed in freely; the brush strokes are heavy and the black or dark tones defile the model and interpenetrate forms. He preferred using earth pigment, Indian reds, terraverte, ochre and other heavy hues. He worked in a wide variety of media such as murals, woodcuts, etching, collage and was adept in all kinds of applied design. We find in his work a simplification and restraint and a new emphasis on analysis and structure, so characteristic of modern art.”

Benode practiced and properly examined both European easel painting and Indian ancient art. For Indian art, he took more care in murals and miniatures; he grasped all these techniques to utilize them in his artwork in order to give these processes new dimensions. He could, through using appropriate colours, evoke the sensuous beauty of Indian women. In his murals, wherein he depicted the lives of the medieval saints, Benode could capture the dynamism of Indian social milieu. He has been able to capture the tenuous link between the
daily community routine and spiritual exaltation. His landscapes seem to slowly gain colour along with textural variation. He uses colour also with calligraphic precision, giving importance to the form, as if he were weaving a tapestry. Keeping in background medieval Indian paintings, his landscapes particularly bear his strong feelings for the local environment as well as his ability to suitably express it in appropriate artistic language.

When we discuss Benode's individual characteristics, we should give some hints or at least point out some of his special qualities. Let us take, for instance, his first major mural on the ceiling of a dormitory in Kala Bhavan in 1940. Here, we see pieces of various views of Birbhum village life into a related saga stretched out in time, "People work, relax, plan, etc. With a composition of various visual episodes and landscape details in tantalizing perspective, he contrives to show the passage of time and its cyclic reversal. He works in a restricted palette reds, yellows, greens and whites against a background of russet and ochre, but the whole surface of the mural coruscates with visual surprises and dynamic calligraphy." In fact, this significant mural entitled 'Village Life' 1940,*\(^3\) along with his famed mural 'Saint of Medieval India' 1947,*\(^4\) the latter having been executed on the walls of Hindi Bhavan at Santiniketan remain outstanding due to his prolific mastery over the technique and the subtle depiction of multiple vision as well as connective atmosphere.*\(^5\)

This mural painted on vertical walls, was executed in the process of fresco buono. There appears no illusion of depth and give a compositional effect akin to early Indian paintings. While Benode had started murals, he already possessed a sophisticated arsenal of visual devices. One of its scenes depicts 'Baural Ghats.'\(^5\)

About this significant mural, Geeta Kapur once said, "Benode made a unique contribution to Indian art in his 100-foot mural done in Santiniketan during 1946-48. Narrating the lives of the Indian mystics, he devises a figural style that is amazingly generous and unself-conscious and the unfolding structure, based on the medieval motifs of pilgrimage and procession, offers an exuberant rhythm to the too discreet notions of life and art established through modernism." In fact, Benode often uses architecture and figures in a way that shows his awareness of Cezanne's life long quest for structural unity and strength and a conscious application of geometry. Besides, one can observe the sense of volume, combined with a vigorous personal calligraphy, light washes and also the formal grandeur.
that enhanced his mural. Such special qualities are not commonly found in the work of his contemporaries.

G.M. Sheikh points out the essential ingredient in Benode Behari’s contribution to contemporary Indian art, in his essay on Benode’s above mentioned mural: “The effect is akin to being in the middle of a crowded street... The vibrant imagery hoists him up amidst the panorama... The logic of elastic space, closely following the life-pattern, seems to unfold the structure of the mural as figures diminish in scale to fit into narrow enclosure or grow in size as they come out in open. It provides the mural with a kind of heaving wall-space that ebbs and swells as the figures change dimensions.”

Between the 40s and the early 50s, Benode created many interesting artworks. Some of them based on ‘Lotus,’ ‘Sunflowers’ 1940, ‘Banaras Ghats,’ 1942. Executed with spontaneous motions, they reveal abstract, elegant space arrangement. He technically explored newer ways to render those artworks; the colours he used can be compared to the wet, sketchy style of Chinese and the flowing brush strokes like music notes. The fine spatial treatment is especially evident in his works like ‘Girl Sewing’, ‘Winter Noon’ or ‘In The Garden’, ‘Tempera Colour on Nepal Paper’ 1948.

However, Benode remained an artist without being in dilemma or confusion as because he chose not to depend entirely on the conventional vocabularies of East or West. He preferred to have his own terminology, and the search for it, gave him his own tools. His visual images always offered something new that remained the basic ingredient. The graphic quality is also there, and we can easily feel it. Fortunately, we have some of his ‘pure’ graphic artworks that may be considered a hallmark in the history of contemporary Indian printmaking.

His Prints

Between 1920-'29, Kala Bhavan was the citadel of graphic art activities. During this period there was a good number of graphic production in all the processes of this media. The students of these days in Kala Bhavan were anxious to learn the technique of printmaking, especially an exceptional student there, Benode, who was under the supervision of the great artist-teacher Nandalal Bose. Benode acquired the proper training in the field of printmaking with special interest in linocut that suited him to express his inner feelings and also giving him a kind of satisfaction owing to the bold and powerful impact of this medium.
Benoide can be legitimately called a printmaker as well, not only by virtue of the number of graphic artworks he made spanning over a considerable length of his active life, but also by virtue of high artistic quality of his prints. In fact, Benoide was very active in this field between 1935-'50. During this prolific period, he successfully achieved some of his graphic artworks that are considered to be significant. These prints were masterly depictions of his favourite themes. His prints also revealed the powerful use of his vigorous sketch-like outlook. Broad-minded and a seeker of new horizons, he possessed the insight of a genius. He has had his own individual way of treatment with a completely up-to-date delineation of the medium of printmaking. He added his individual accent to his depictions as a kind of overwhelming signature.

You can easily recognize the unique characteristic in his work. In it, you will find a definite and consistent mark of individual personality discernible throughout. The method of masterly handling of his tools in his sketches as well as in his technique of linocut with the rapid use of the gouge to create lively hatchings distinctly mark his finesse. “By this attitude, he always quickens the tempo of the moving image, particularly when seeking to record a fleeting moment. When he seeks to stretch it out, he strews around a series of movement suggesting a hide-and-seek of spaces and things, which keep the eye of the onlooker sustained on the picture plane, tantalizing it to traverse into those spaces again and again.”

Benoide made significant contributions to woodcut. He studied the medium meticulously, experimenting with it and thereafter linking with the traditions. This is visible in the woodcuts and linocuts he made during 1930-'50. Jagdish Mittal has explained the techniques Benoide employed in his printmaking.

Benoide’s prints characterized by high quality handling of the technique of graphic art combined with original creativity, demonstrate some kind of individual, special idiom and a deep sense of creative approach. His prints are spontaneous, liberal, bolder and more original than those of his contemporaries are. In his etchings, we find themes similar to his paintings and woodcuts. The themes concentrate on landscapes of familiar scenes and things in daily life. One can find the same themes in his woodcuts as well. “His austere and well-knit woodcuts, whose dimensions are somewhat large, make him perhaps the finest, all round graphic artist in India. His prints are intensely felt and executed by methods that are all his own. The use and division of black and white in his work is elaborate to create a pattern more
than chiaroscuro. The texture adds vitality and vivacity. All these are well thought out, yet spontaneous, such that there is not a tinge of mechanical outlook in his prints."

Though his landscapes are comparatively more than figure or animal compositions, his distortion and abstraction - in fact, it is not fully an abstraction - aim at emotive effect and organization of formal elements. In some specific themes such as his semi-abstract depictions, we do not find him vital and sure as in his prints, sketches and even paintings.

As some other young artists took to printmaking in the late 1930s, the prints of those artists start to be viewed in the journals like Viswa Bharati Quarterly, Viswa Bharati Patrika and other Santiniketan publications. Benode's prints were the most successful ones because of their high quality. "In fact, his compositions remain significant as his woodcuts and his etchings had been rendered with unique vision. One can observe their strong, well-knit texture, powerful movement and an organic feel: One is reminded of the work of Jawlensky and other German expressionists." Later, Benode also practiced lithography, his style here resembling his calligraphic paintings. By this time, some notable printmakers came to the mainstream. Successful among them are L.M. Sen of Lucknow. When Benode's woodcut prints are compared with those of L.M. Sen, we find some kind of similarity, which may reveal the fact that Benode was aware of the prints of Sen and grasped some influence from his technical skill in order to enhance his own prints. I think this attitude is always healthy and desirable.

One of Benode's expressive dry-point etchings is 'The Collapsible Dog' 1938. This dramatic posture of the injured dog seething in pain, is really one of his best depictions. One can feel both the masterly handling of the dry-point technique and the suffering situation of the ill-fated animal. A look at the exhausted dog with its limping head, struggling to haul itself to walk to some safe corner, pinches one with the sad feeling of a metaphorical tragedy to which the vulnerable, downtrodden multitude too is a daily target. Benode's delineation of dark quality is indeed outstanding, the masterly hatching acute, full of energetic outlook, exposing the roughness of the animal's skin, the tail ironically symbolizing a bitter question mark... "Why does a human being demean himself to behave such a way against a docile, faithful friend that is a dog?"

Benode also mastered the woodcut technique, let us have a look at his landscape entitled 'Kopal' c.1944. From the first glimpse, one can feel the spectacle with its striking
outlook, rather a subjugating lovely shock, while trying to perceive its tantalizing beauty. The work, though simple, is wit and grit, its composition projecting a high standard of masterly graphic artwork. Here, one can feel the unique language of the graphic medium. Our eyes rejoicing the experience of inspecting an outstanding delineation of the dark and light values, particular method of the effective hatching, the boldness of the foliage masses and shapes, the trunks and branches of the dominant trees, the running stream, the lyrical movement of the sky. Whatever left is also spontaneous, but perfectly depicted. Going through such a charming print is not easy.

Avoiding such work is really a great loss; what else can be said about this splendid print? Let us agree that the whole atmosphere is full of exciting elements, incessantly projecting a magical attraction. Freshness is there, harmony mixed with conflict is also there, straight hatchings eagerly approaching the curved areas, the sprightly rice field and the lower trunks of the trees in front mutually complementing each other as also nicely cope with the characteristic outlook of the curved, but long stretched auspicious stream. What about the dark, lonely, distant tree? The boldness of its foliage is observed, still vigorous enough to create the required rhythm to enhance the other elements so as to give enough space for our eyes to move around and grasp the nectar-like radiants coming out from those lively and slight stroke of hatching.

Benode’s quest for the essential spirit of things gave a strange dialect to his use of the medium as well as an advanced outlook. He treated whatever came his way in a personal and innovative way. When he deals with the emotive effects and seeks the formal structural balance, he almost abstracts the elements with brevity and freedom. The intensity of feeling was effectively translated into the gestures of a style, all his own.

‘Evening Accounts’ c.1946*12 is also one of his best woodcut depictions. This well-knit print effectively portrayed two common pedestrians sitting on a poor and neglected pavement in the evening time in order to take stock of the day’s humble income. The accountant-like person diligently engrossed in his counting process, his peculiar posture perched on an old and nearly collapsed chair, supporting his body’s balance with his drooped knees and his legs come to relax due to the tight position of the feet. The features evidently keen with the papers on his lap and his whole body serving the message of Benode’s intention. Let us look at the leaning position of torso and then also have a look at the
fluttering pieces of paper, the gesture of his right hand revealing the inside details. Even his off-white dress graphically indicates the straight and curved lines on it. The area left of the print is kept fully dark, as if to express the adage that black is beautiful. This kind of dark is repeated in some other areas such that the whole picture is surrounded by seemingly beautiful darkness, let us say, wrapped by the otherwise uncertain future. Downtrodden, the slum dwellers seem to believe that nothing in their hand could be worthwhile to justify even a meagre expectation. Let us capture some other elements of this print, such as the straight but semi-vertical lines of the chair in contrast with the curved and brisk lines in the background. The dark values come to enhance particular areas such as the hair and the eyes to create striking effects as well as a rhythmic movement. One can not keep himself off from this magnetic field, definitely he will be seized by the irresistible charm.

The man on the right holding a poor kerosene lamp, seemingly the subordinate of the other, is intent to help light fall on the sheets of paper, yet the light failing to reach his own face. This poor assistant is trying to shed light for his companion, while settling for himself in dark. He has no money to put on even a poor dress; he has not only permanent bare feet, even bare legs. Back to his master, who is somewhat better disposed, even with enough light, apparently due to his right of the lion’s share that he often grasped. He always spares only little bits to his poor partner and keeps the rest of the money to himself. This is the nature of ‘Evening Accounts.’

It is interesting to search for the reasons that make Benode to choose such simple subject matters. For him, what should be important in the contemporary art is not the superiority of the objects, but the simple objects and the ordinary normal subject matter, which is left out or neglected through centuries, are the best for his projections. He captures such things and gives them a new lease of life, elevating them to a higher plane, bestowing his sense of perfection in handling the medium and expression.

In fact, Benode knocked down the old principles and challenged the mainstream beliefs of his contemporaries, as well as the inherited methods and even the academic aesthetics. Benode wide opened his windows for fresh air; he commands his individual style and adjusts it to his demands. That is why some prominent critics consider him to be the bridge that links Indian contemporary art with what is known as now-a-days’ Global art.
Let us move to his only daughter Mrinalini. Swimming against the tide is a trait she has inherited from her father Benode, the cult figure in Santiniketan, where he taught for most of his painterly life. She remembers, “He loved to experiment with varied media - whether it was tempera, ceramics, gouache, wax. He had a deep respect for the medium, and would not be bound by any rigid rules. And this attitude did not change even after he lost his sight in 1956.” However, his ‘inner eye’ continued to work its magic, uncovering the hidden layers of the Indian collective psyche with as much incisiveness as he had when his ‘outer eye’ was functional.

Benode was very keen that his daughter should work under K.G. Subramanyan, when he was the prominent teacher of art at Baroda. Benode visited the Faculty of Fine Arts, in 1954. Parimoo was then a student under Bendre and K.G. Subramanyan. He remembers when Benode did his colour lithograph ‘Mother and Daughter Ringing the Temple Bell’ now in the collection of Art History Department, M.S. University of Baroda. These days, though his eye sight became very poor, his situation did not hinder him to go forward to achieve such a nice original print that reveals his religious attitude, when he felt the need for the merciful touch of the heaven, or may be there are some other reasons, we do not yet know.

This beautiful print is full of attractive elements, decorative motifs, snake-like curved lines, bold human figures and lion-like figure on the left side. One can feel the accent of the Indian temple, the toll of the bell and even the smell of the incense sticks. Benode, however, had a proper understanding of the litho process; the other elements, such as composition, colours, rhythm and movement, all these elements were under his superior control. Generally speaking, Benode’s calligraphic work became broader and more adventurous in the earlier years of the 50s, his work often permeated by a realistic structural audacity, almost like that of folk painting.

As we mentioned before, Benode lost his sight in 1956. He started his dark life for about 24 years. During these long years, Benode never quit approaching his art, but in some different ways. Benode was also a notable art historian and art critic. He authored a good number of valuable articles about the issues of art appreciation as well as the contemporary movement of Indian art, especially in West Bengal. It is fair enough to consider him as one
of the most significant figures in this field. Benode is a true forerunner of Indian printmaking. India had lost this artist in 1980. However, his art will live forever.

RAMKINKAR BAIJ, 1910-1980
The Passionate Lover of Nature

On the modern Indian art scene, a proper introduction of modernist vocabulary was ushered in by a young man, with rural upbringing, in the 1930s working in Santiniketan. This young man was Ramkinkar Baij, who dealt with albeit in a somewhat hazardous manner with post-cubist expressionism, especially lending grandeur and valour to primitive peasant proletarian figures. Ramkinkar made his mark as a pioneering modernist sculptor ever since early thirties, this being historically important as he introduced new styles of sculpture, which were essentially individualistic reflecting his own personality and environment. He was able to respond with spontaneity to Rabindranath's call for individual creativity and universal expression, looking into the problems of modern art systematically with due seriousness.

Ramkinkar was born in a village near Bankura in 1906 in Bengal. At the age of 19, he joined Kala Bhavan. The atmosphere in Kala Bhavan, its freedom from conventions, its closeness to nature, its catholicity of taste and humanity were ideal for Ramkinkar's growth. First a student, later a member of the teaching staff, his work at Santiniketan was instrumental in guiding younger sculptors, especially in introducing abstraction and in creating an interest in open-air monuments, which had no official subject matter.

Ramkinkar's versatility expresses itself in painting and in sculpture. In his works he creates forms, which acquire a fundamental linear quality, and set off by suggestive undertones of colour. His sculpture, on the other hand, is robust and earthy, influenced by an infectious vibrancy characteristic of the man. His sculptures are attuned to their environment, becoming part of the architecture of the landscape, akin with the soil and the light and the air in studios without walls.

Ramkinkar was one of a handful of artists who brought about a renaissance of art and sculpture in India. His genius was spotted by Ramananda Chatterjee, editor of Modern Review, who brought him to Santiniketan, where he was put under the tutelage of Nandalal Bose. Ramkinkar, while accepting the essentials of the largely urban sophisticated atmosphere of Santiniketan, was robust enough to maintain his individuality. His roots were
sturdy and this remained a distinctive quality of his personality to the end - a son of the soil amidst the elite. Ramkinkar calls on us to identify with plain rural folk, the scheduled caste agricultural workers, tribal fruit pickers, and a Santhal mother in her hut, peasant woman sowing, reaping, and threshing paddy in the field. It is this sensitivity for the downtrodden and his own humble origins that makes Ramkinkar the first of the moderns to emerge from India's pre-colonial past.

What is remarkable about his sculptures and also creations in other medium, is that he worked with a sense of freedom. His portrait sculpture studies are dashing revelations of character, far away from academic realism; rugged creations, expressive of a bristling vitality, approximating to impersonal types. “He constructed pieces of social realism in the same brusque, uncompromising style-studies of the proletariat, tinged, however, with sentimentality in these, the orientation of simplified forms and the conveyance of movement is already manifest, but there is only little attempt to break the mass and organize it to creative purpose. The conscious distortions notwithstanding; the mass was still to impact on his faculty towards a consciousness of the symbolic possibilities of the material. Then, under the transparent influence of African sculpture, he formulated an expressionism, which derives its power from the abstraction of reality. He realized constructions of dramatic urgency.”

Ramkinkar’s work is vital, expressionist, it surges upward with organic growth. In non-representational work too, he launches his attack on the visual world with the artillery of known forms of vital men, buxom women, and growing trees that swirl and twist with their effusive sap. He is the spokesman par excellence of energy. Ramkinkar is primarily a sculptor and painter of dynamic form. Probably he is the most important sculptor and working in India at a time of transition from traditional to modern idioms of expression.

In almost all of Ramkinkar’s works, one notices an organic growth. Sexuality plays an important part in his sculptures. Yet, he is not purely an erotic artist, sexuality has never been casually or unnecessarily used in his works. What attracted him was the natural irresistible force of sexuality because it, after all, is, if not anything else, a kind of energy. He was from the very beginning a rebel, so he was able to give his sculpture a vigour and a vitality that comes directly from the earth. He often used the diagonal form to impress a
dynamic quality. The rough texture, the incised lines upholding mass, all add to the movement of his sculpture.¹

Janak. J. Narzary has recounted Ramkinkar's style in one of his articles as ".... He adopted the principles of the modern art movements into his works. During the 30 years of his creative life, 1930-60, Ramkinkar followed more than on style without any prejudice. In his creations, the modern sculpture in India got a momentum to develop and progress from the impressionistic style to post-cubist and constructivist abstraction."²

Despite his work being contrary to the tradition of academic realism of his time and environment, Ramkinkar contributed largely to the changing concepts of beauty and aesthetics. According to him, the outdoor sculptures are environmental expressions of local life. He gradually forged a new vision and also acquired a new sensibility. In his hands public sculptural activity underwent a redefinition. He endowed Santhal figures with a heroic proportion and persuaded them forthright without any hint of romantic approach or extravagant lyricism.

Ramkinkar has made a pioneering contribution, in the sense that he executed his portraiture in a style far removed from the influence of Rodin and Epstein's style. He formed his own style lending to his portraits his personal vision into them. He employed a range of formal devices which can be compared with those of Matisse and Picasso but which most of the time remained unacknowledged.

While discussing further about Ramkinkar's sculptures, it is worthwhile to go through Sankho Chaudhuri's quote. "It is not that Ramkinkar always received a positive response. His flourish of personal vision with utter conviction in them was many a time unacceptable. His head of 'Tagore,' or 'Portrait of a Poet,' c.1938*² and 'Winnower' c.1943*³ are the highest models of figurative abstraction in this country. No work of that kind has been produced hitherto. These creations led to a considerable bitterness between him and the authorities. The nudity of the figure of a woman at work was found to be objectionable by quite a few as the taste of our society of that period was rather Victorian. On one side, we proclaimed with pride merits of our ancient traditions."³ The concrete statue 'To the Mill'⁴ c.1939 is Ramkinkar's powerful nude composition of the Santhal family poised in a steady walk. This sculpture is a fine example of his rendering of the voluptuous female figures with exaggerated femininity by accentuating the curves of female body. It appears as if Ramkinkar

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went back to his ancient roots, and was influenced by the great heritage. He, like the ancient artists, be it Buddhist or Hindu, stressed the luscious curves of hips and weight of the breasts, the rounded thighs and jar-shaped buttocks below.*5

‘The Santhal Family’ c.1938,*7 is amidst natural landscape with architectural background expressively architectonic, while the ‘Mill Call’ 1939,*4+5 is an innovation on the mud wall hutments of the villagers. The urgent creative urge of Ramkinkar had forced him to work with any handy local material without considering their short durability. These massive sculptures, which are environmentally expressive and therefore of a kind rarely found in the history of modern sculpture.

Pritish Sen has explained the relationship between the female body and its beholder. His comments do surely throw light on the sensuous effect of Ramkinkar’s sculpture on the viewer. He said, "I am talking about the female form intentionally since it has been one of the major subjects of artists of all ages, in all lands and also because the female body can undergo tremendous formalization and still observe some tremour of its first impact. Besides, the female form has been found better suited for creating all sorts of memorable shapes to communicate certain ideas or states of feeling... The human body has indeed been an object upon which the eye loves to dwell with pleasure. For it is ourselves and most of all we wish to perpetuate ourselves. The Indian genius represented the female physique in its boldest and most free attitudes, one that blossomed into innocent soul force of the flesh."*4 It was thus, the sensuous elegance of Santhal tribals, which affected Ramkinkar. Women in most of his creations undergo a metamorphosis from luscious female bodies*5 to one with grace and emotive expressions making them further mysterious. Most of them are alike, such as the altered ‘Mother Goddesses,’ who are beautiful, but at the same time terrifying.

Ramkinkar chooses to sketch and paint from models, he has also to his credit a number of woodcuts, lithographs and etchings and his work received due attention and respect. For him, the work of art was never measured in terms of money and it was felt to be mercenary and vulgar for an artist to consider his artwork as a market commodity. "His significant sculptures were not done with any thought of remuneration. In fact, all the artists of Kala Bhavan lived in simple dignity and with respect for noble order of artists. They were lovers of nature. They believed that the forms taken from nature have to obtain the citizenship of the picture world. Sketching the world around them was one of the most
important and constant exercises. The mysticism which makes man vibrant to the subtle overtones of Nature and its existential beauty also cast its impression on art.5

Just like his guru Nandalal Bose, Ramkinkar always preferred the clarity, spontaneity and discipline that was necessary in handling ink or tempera. The daring required for placing an immaculate stroke of ink on paper pre-supposes mental concentration, breath control, long discipline and a deep insight of form and attitude of serious playfulness. The best examples to be given here is his sketch-like water colour painting “Landscape” c.1948*19 and his brush and ink sketch “Lotus Pond”, 1949*10

Before we penetrate further into his art career, it is important to know about Ramkinkar as a person to understood his art. K.G. Subramanyan, the noted artist, was his contemporary as well as near to him in Santiniketan. In one of his numerous articles, he speaks about his close association with him. "I have known how transparently sincere his attitudes are and how guileless and disarming his corniest eccentricities. Ramkinkar is probably one of the lone survivors of a lost tribe, the 'Khepa' Bauls. He is like them simple and unsophisticated, he is like them close to the soil, like theirs his feelings are tied hint in the landscape to register its slightest movement, its vivacity, its change of colour, its romantic mystery; like them he enjoys breaking into spontaneous lyric at their behest. His innumerable doodles and watercolour sketches bear witness to his using an imagery, both immediate and instantly persuasive, sensuous and titillating and bewitchingly remote in the same flash. He smells each experiential fact into a metaphor, transforming the figure of a woman into an elusive dryad or a bewitching mother goddess, of a tree into a phallic*6 hymn, of an animal into a suffering fossil or an aggressive predator. So too his factual studies, be they sketches or watercolours or his painted or modelled portraits, acquire an epic dimension."6

Ramkinkar is one of those artists who are an art historian's despair, who have never kept their work together or kept a reliable record of them, or even cared as to what happened to them once the creative fever was over. He never took too great a care as to what materials he used in his work or bothered about keeping them in reasonable safety, and that very often, when he was hot with ideas, he painted over an already finished painting without the least compunction. “So it should not surprise us if a large part of his work has got scattered around as gifts or has gone into decay or is lying in irretrievable hiding under the surface of his
Ramkinkar's paintings and graphic art also represent the organic growth in his expressions. In the non-representational work, he seemingly attacks the visual world with the images of vital men, buxom women and growing trees. Dinkar Kowshik has therefore hailed him as "the spokesman par excellence of energy". Ramkinkar's artistic career branched into three different paths. He remained primarily a sculptor but also was a painter and graphic artist of dynamic form. His unique personality, both as a person and artist pervaded his art works like no others.

With a 'primitive' in him, Ramkinkar was an exile in the elitist air of Santiniketan. With his reckless energy, he was abandoning his skill of painting in the delicate style of Bengal school, and developing his passion for physical force and power. It is inherent primitive vigour, which helps us to explain this passion. However, the particular aesthetic quality of his artworks became highly distinctive for its formal and visual structure, the unique organization of human figure in terms of the strength of construction. This quality was seldom achieved even in West; but was also seen in his paintings as well as graphic depictions.

Ramkinkar has had deliberate approach to other mediums, such as oils, gouache, watercolours and mixed media. Even his etching and smallest drawing reflect his original vision and monumentality. Whatever the form of medium, his each work possessed latent energy and a significant gesture, be it human, organic or symbolic. His style ranged from the naturalistic romantic figures to completely abstract forms.

When artists sought a collective form of expression, Ramkinkar in that period built up his own style solitarily. His works are characterized by the energy, motion, lyricism and the earthy feel. It was natural for Ramkinkar to have his works done mostly outdoors. Very much
a part of the rugged beauty of nature. The works of some artists are marked by their sense of struggle, depicting the inner turmoil and restlessness. Ramkinkar was able to emote this quality in his works with passion that was manifested as a birth of volatile being bearing signs vital to life itself. Another aspect of Ramkinkar's work is the natural emotive fact of sex, in its most basic, essential form, instead of the decorative aspect. Paritosh Sen comments, "Sex has never been casually or unnecessarily used in his works. What attracted him was the natural, irresistible force of sex because sex after all is if not anything else, a kind of energy. He depicted the life around him, such as his cement sculpture 'Santhal Family' 1938, the poor rural folk. 'Bullock Cart of Santhal Labourers' etching, 1966, nature's bounty transformed into symbols of phallus and 'Woman' as 'Mother Goddess.'"

"Man is supreme, there is none above him" this was the guiding slogan when Calcutta Group was formed in 1943. Those were dark days for Bengal Famine and pestilence was stalking the land. The barbarity and heartlessness all around moved few artists of Bengal deeply. Ramkinkar was one of those few humanist artists who were shocked by these tragic events. The shock of the famine might not naturally inspire itself as a theme to them, but necessitated a shift in models of thought perception and expression.

Ramkinkar is one of these artists who sensed the winds of change and was searching for suitable vocabulary capable of reflecting the dynamic of their changed times. He showed a great deal of concern with form and the characteristic qualities of his individual style. Ramkinkar is one of those artists who formed the quest of modernist strand. For him, tradition should be recreated in new interpretations. He deeply agreed with Rabindranath; "... any tradition that could not withstand the fresh breath of influences and alien art forms from other cultures was not of any consequence". Thus, Santiniketan became — from 1925-1945 a focal point for experiments in art styles.

Amongst the prevailing elitism, Ramkinkar remained very much a son of the soil, identifying himself with rural milieu; 'Lotus Pond', watercolour sketch c.1946, the tribal fruit pickers, a Santhal mother in her hut, peasant women sowing, reaping, 'Thrashing Paddy' in the field, oil painting 1944, and 'Mother and Child,' tempera colour c.1946. This sensitivity to the downtrodden makes Ramkinkar one of the first modern artists to emerge out from the pre-colonial past of India.
Ranikinkar also wielded command over painting and printmaking medium. He experimented in these mediums, covering various forms of expression, from abstraction, socio-political themes, vignette designs to bold monumental works of great simplicity and grandeur. Graphic reproductions also interested him. His expressionist woodcut entitled ‘Do or Die’ 1942,\(^{13}\) reflects his detailed interest in politics. The Great Bengal Famine of 1943 gave vent in his paintings such as his ‘Famine-1,’ tempera on paper, 1943,\(^{14}\) and his strikingly fearful, yet expressive sketch done in broad masterly brush strokes depicting a skeleton-like mother and child starving to death and entitled ‘Famine-2.’\(^{15}\) That period he was one of the handful of artists, who reacted towards the tragedy and depicted it hauntingly in their works, while the others remained embroiled in academic arguments. The tragedy of the Bengal Famine created a devastating experience for the people of Bengal and after a long, restless period obsessed by the afflictions inflicted by man on his fellow-beings, Ramkinkar produced one of the most poignant and harrowing images of human suffering, a skeletal corpse hangs from the branch of a tree beneath which sits a forlorn, starving mother with her emaciated child, and an empty bowl nearby. The remark of a poster stuck on a tree reads “Support the War Effort.” Among the many works in clay and cement, in which Ramkinkar reflected the immeasurable horror of that calamity, are some that convey his own sensitivity and anguish.

His works are characterized by strong, broad, structural organization depicting spaciousness, in which his epic forms are set. His watercolours, though being conventional, have strength and spontaneity. The brush drawings depict the day-to-day life. The quality of Ramkinkar’s work is voluptuous, almost life-like, suggestive. The demarcations with the blues and reds cause a very striking effect. The prints like ‘Seascape’ and ‘Winter, Inside the Hut’ are his explorations of nature, the man represented with a transparency, yet exhibiting his shining strength. Ramkinkar did some other striking artworks, in different kinds of mediums, which elaborate an immediate reaction from the viewer with their timelessness, such as ‘Picnic,’ tempera, c.1945, ‘Summer Moon,’ tempera, c.1946, ‘Famine-3,’ sketch, oil colour, 1944.\(^{18}\) We can add to this list ‘Girls with Fruits’ as well as ‘Canal Diggers,’ both tempera, c.1949. In fact, ‘Famine I’\(^{14}\) is an expressive painting, wherein a woman is seen cradling her man’s head in her lap. These interesting, sketch-like, tempera and oil paintings inflame the viewer’s sensibility in their timeless rendering of reprise.
It is a matter of fact that Ramkinkar’s marginality in the arena of Indian urban public sculpture confronts the people side by side with his seminal position in the annals of modern Indian art. Geeta Kapur, creates formulation about Ramkinkar’s ‘brave gesture’ of introducing modernist vocabulary into an orientalizing institution, through his articulation in a “post-cubist expressionism to openly eulogize primitive peasant proletariat; to give them an axial dynamic so to speak.”

The ‘Paddy Thrashers,’ a painting of 1944, depicted a solidly and powerfully painted image of a peasant woman thrashing the bunch of produce grasped firmly in her hands, the figure showing a very bold and concretely built female body. Almost the entire dynamics in the act of thrashing have been condensed into the extra-muscled limbs and the posture of the figure, combining with the other elements, convey the suspended moment of the action.

In Ramkinkar’s drawings, we can discern their relation with the Santiniketan School, but they are more expressionistic, combining the tone and sharp incisiveness of finishing lines. He along with his colleague Benode Behari Mukherjee ushered the art towards modern phases during the forties and fifties, their work retaining the explanatory and structural quality.

‘Lotus Pond’ is one of his quick sketches done around 1942, in black ink. Different brush strokes accentuate the curvaceous female figures. This simple sketch is successful in depicting the inviting stance of female posture, each body part, the bust, the hips and voluptuous buttocks, all emoting in a sensuous language of their own. This sketch remains to be one of the most powerful and vivid sketches, matchless in its beauty of the early 1940s. Ramkinkar developed as an artist in an era when worldwide deference for primitivism was on increase with distrust of prettiness and slick virtuosity. “Ramkinkar too felt uneasy with prettiness and polish and tried to give all his work a kind of brash, noisy libidinous animation. Not only his figurative works, but even his landscapes and other compositions come out of a personal experience or observation and grows into something timeless and enduring. This growth and the transformation that ensued in the process were essential to its depth and power. To conform to a preconceived self-image, or carry the burden of a preconceived idea, or work on a project or monument with a preordained design
was irksome to Ramkinkar. He avoided this, as far as he could, but when he succumbed, suffered for it."\textsuperscript{10}

K.G. Subramanyan, thus, has revealed further about Ramkinkar's preordained design, giving particular examples about his descriptive paintings, which hold no special challenge in themselves. This is perhaps the reason why Ramkinkar did not finish his warrior's monument in Nepal, leaving it for his assistants to complete. But his preparatory studies always remained sensitive and energetic, for example, his sketch of Gandhiji done immediately after his assassination. Though it was done very quickly, it still remains powerfully dynamic, whereas the commissioned statue in Assam remains very pedestrian.

I do agree with the point of view of K.G. Subramanyan, who remained impressed by the innovative approach of Ramkinkar, "I should rate high the contribution of Ramkinkar as an artist and teacher. As a sculptor, he is undoubtedly our first modern sculptor. He is our first landscapist, who sought in his landscapes something more than an impressionist record. His paintings are various, but exemplify his efforts at using modern tools for self-discovery, not stylistic affectation; all of them have a biographical aura. As a teacher, he taught more by example than by precept. To watch him work or to work with him was more educative than a hundred lectures. Above all else, was his impressive personality - a complete artist in his wakeful and sleeping hours, considering art his 'Yakshi,' unconcerned with worldly success or renown."\textsuperscript{11}

Ramkinkar dedicated his life for his works especially between 1935-1949 and many a time it appears as if he has become one with the creations. He worked with passionate zeal and persistent obsession, not only with his sculptures, but also paintings and graphic art. Around the mid 30s, he started painting in tempera and wash, and soon around the early 40s, adopted other media more suited to his temperament. Oil and watercolour gave him greater freedom and in these his style remained spontaneous, sketch-like and monumental. His landscapes and watercolours as well as his studies of rural life and drawings of animals are more tonal and plastic in character differing from the then prevalent form of linear drawing. The best example of this attitude may be his tempera painting titled 'Mother and Child' c.1942.\textsuperscript{12} In fact, Ramkinkar's pictorial work, like his sculptures, was robust and emotionally charged. This was as well most evident in his woodcuts and etchings. It is
relevant here to refer to his bold, sketch-like ‘Landscape’ c.1950,*19 in which we can see clearly the profound influence by the French painter Cezanne, 1839-1906.

There are art critics, who have claimed that Ramkinkar had been influenced by the American sculptor Lachaise 1882-1935.*20 To me, it seems highly improbable that Ramkinkar would seek an inspiration so far away from a sculptor, who himself was deeply influenced by the erotic sculptures of Indian temples containing the essence of female sexual beauty in terms of mother goddesses. However, Ramkinkar benefited very much from a visiting student of Bourdelle; the noted French sculptor, and also from a plaster cast of a small Bourdelle figure in the Kalabhavan collection and this strengthened his expressionist underpinnings. Subsequently he moved on from a post-Rodinesque to a post-cubist and post-surrealist expressionism.

At this juncture, it becomes pertinent to go back once more to Sankho Chaudhuri, who had discussed about the issue, which led to a considerable bitterness between Ramkinkar and the narrow-minded authorities. He argues, “No one ever dared to mention the erotic sculptures of Konark or Khajurao. In this unfortunate country, even the best art cannot get either the sympathy or appreciation from its society. It feels outraged in any way. More than once Ramkinkar had to face this kind of out of bound obstruction due to the lack of orthodox lineage. One could not say that it did not hurt him, but he had the robustness to bear such insults all by himself.”*12

His Prints

As one of the great experimentalists in Kala Bhavan, especially during the period between 1930-1968, Ramkinkar achieved a good number of interesting and meaningful drawings as well as prints. Amongst them, specially the six drawings of his favourite and lovely ‘Comrade’ - as Ramkinkar named his print, must be termed as classic. The name of the model that gave him the sittings for these drawings is Binodini. This attractive young lady has a sort of particular aggressive spirit of the ‘femme fatale’ in her face and gestures. Her head in watercolour portrays her with a gleaming youthful face exuding an unspoiled sensuality. In short, she is no more the brooding, self-enclosed, passive person of the first drawing.*21*22 She is a woman turned-on by a passion that leads not to art, but sex.

R. Siva Kumar, has an intimate approach to Ramkinkar’s series of drawings of ‘Binodini’*21-23 c.1955, “Her face here is friendlier, even more voluptuous, but there is no
denying the arched tension of her body. For the moment, it is camouflaged and confusing, but her body and mind have parted ways. There is a new steering in her body that is beginning to be assertive. Propelled by the rousing passion, she thrusts herself forward and reduces the distance between her and the artist. The artist, with no space left to step back, is caught indecisive. Referring to the last two drawings of 'Binodini,' No. 5 and 6, both show emotional ambivalence. One with the right hand lightly touching the lips, recalls the posture of the first drawing. This is not a stable supporting gesture. A dormant aggression shines through her brooding look. The second drawing, straight unidealized, the least appealing of the series and almost frigid, becomes meaningful as the end piece.

In fact, the many portraits of 'Binodini' do not form a series in the ordinary sense, because Ramkinkar does not seek appearance or even character in his portraits. A psychological type is a constant of the mind just as likeness is of the body; both conceive man as intransigent. What he grapples within his portraits is the flux of experience and each image is an eddy in the experiential stream.

Let us, however, again quote R. Siva Kumar, “Ramkinkar counters her forward lurch by pressing her face flat, by compressing the volumes by abandoning foreshortening and playing out the figure two-dimensionally, and more desperately by pushing the table (the hindrance) and his sketch (his art) between them. Pressed against the wall, he decides to meet her aggression defensively.”

The story of 'Binodini' did not come to its end yet. Later on, we will find ourselves face-to-face with his etching entitled 'Comrade' c.1955. But before we state all about this outstanding etching, it is worthwhile to highlight Ramkinkar’s approach to printmaking medium. His research attitude towards this medium created - with the help of his elder masters and colleagues - an atmosphere of creative experimentation in that time. However, in some cases, we see some kind of conflict between the graphic media and the content and form he used. His aim was to build up a picturesque effect on the graphic surface. Though graphic was not merely a re-duplicative medium to him, still he lacked a proper understanding of the particular character and potentialities of various surface effects of graphic media.

Ramkinkar had experimented with various graphic media - woodcut, wood engraving, linocut, etching, drypoint, lithograph, etc. He covered a wide variety of subjects and
proposes, especially, those prints that concern the rural life and activities. Ramkinkar was eager to explore the graphic medium, so he executed a series of graphic prints, which are the most striking examples in the history of Indian printmaking. Nirmalendu Das explained some relevant points of view, "Ramkinkar departed from the influence of the 'Bengal School' by evolving his own conception and style. In his work, one could see no longer the romantic, poetic and lyrical elements of the 'Bengal School'... In the work of Ramkinkar, well organized forms and textural value could be seen." In fact, in the work of Ramkinkar, we can also see his concrete characteristics and powerful personality; we also can easily see and feel his original qualities and vigorous depictions.

Kala Bhavan's atmosphere was suitable of creative artworks during the decade of the 1930s. As we know in the year 1941, Tagore, the poet, was no more. However, it was before 1950s that ex-students of Kala Bhavan were invited to teaching posts in different schools and colleges in different parts of India. Gradually Kala Bhavan started to lose its talented students, who were replaced by the new kind of students that gave special interest to commercial reproductions, such as oriental and decorative themes or medieval and contemporary paintings of reputed masters, by means of colour woodcut and stencil process. In fact, mediocre and less talented students were not being benefited by the teaching programme of printmaking. Mannerism flooded in the printmaking section. Ramkinkar was slowly affected by this situation, which did not allow further progress, so his activity in this field became a malaise. When Somnath Hore joined as the head of Kala Bhavan's graphic section in 1969, Ramkinkar was there, his age was 59, but there is evidence to show that he did some significant prints, especially during the period between 1955 and 1968. During this period, Ramkinkar created some of his striking etchings and dry-points, such as his 'Santhal Family' c.1966, 'Mother and Child' c.1967, 'Bathing the Child' c.1968, and 'Toilet' c.1968. In fact, Ramkinkar took strongly to printmaking lately in his career. However, we see that through the years, he gained much progress and his prints became more expressive. In fact, we still highly appreciate his earlier prints, such as 'Comrade' and 'Bullock Cart of Santhal Labourers.' His landscapes and also his depictions of rural daily life and Santhal women, are of special individual quality. We can rightly say, he is a master of printmaking depictions and techniques.
It is worthwhile to highlight some of Ramkinkar's prints through some rare pieces we
came to know about after a great effort. To find only very few in some old publications, here
or there, often without any date mentioned to ascertain the period, in which Ramkinkar had
executed them. In fact, Ramkinkar did a good number of political and rural life themes using
his powerful woodcut process and etching. We have but the titles of these revolutionary
prints. Luckily, we have here his etching, 'Bullock Cart of Santhal Labourers' 1960.*8

Actually this print has no title, we only selected this relevant title to make it easy to highlight
this significant print and to approach the three human figures with the frontal depiction of the
two bulls showing powerful action and full involvement. The almost naked body of the
peasant woman, though very strong, has powerful muscles, yet she has a voluptuous quality;
her naked breasts showing a challenging posture as well as auspicious breast feeding that
might be for her newborn child. The peasant woman seems to be fully involved in her hard
work, giving her back to her busy comrade, who has a concrete, manly outlook combined
with extra-strong muscles with trunk-like legs and firm features. He tightly bound the bull
with the over-loaded cart. The situation must be said as extremely hard for both sides.

The standing figure resembles the artist, who undoubtedly is the protagonist in the
print, placed in the middle of the events, indicating some commanding and peculiar gestures.
The artist has intentionally widened his legs to expose his masculine qualities. His acute
features with the glasses on his eyes, the bearded cheeks and chin, the positions of his arms,
the grasping hands and the reared feet, all these elements and items are playing its role to
create a wonderful theme full of instinct, motivation and profound in its expressive
indications. Lastly, we can point to the hanging oil-lamp under the wide-opened legs of the
artist, freely agitating to-and-fro, symbolizing the intimate action in the imagination of the
artist. We may also grasp further indications, when going through such themes, again and
again, avoiding any conservative approach.

However, what is more essential for our approach is to inspect carefully the quality of
Ramkinkar's spontaneous and vigorous prints. He powerfully and effectively used his
hatching in order to create some kind of a dynamic variety of dark and light values to
enhance the tonal quality of his print and also to highlight the rough texture all over his print.
This roughness will surely reveal the unbearable way of life of those labourers with their cart
and bulls. Though this print seems simple and somehow naïve, the masterly rendering and
the expressive depiction of the major figures make us feel the characteristics of etching, which is touching and poignant as a whole, even in every square centimetre of its area.

I think we are now face to face with Ramkinkar’s striking etching. Here, we are enjoying to be with his ‘Comrade’ c.1955. I wish we were able to share with the artist his passionate motivation, let us at least grasp whatever we could, from her seductive attraction. Let us join the artist and his model, or let us hide and watch what is going on. Let us conclude by considering his mannequin-like combination of tactility and schematism that tells us that she, his ‘Comrade,’ is a figment of the artist’s imagination, presenting for his vicarious experience the aggression he battled in reality. Here, in the etching, the striding figure is no more featureless. She resembles Binodini; “She is nude or almost, walking through a jungle with a fully dressed artist who has his right arm around her shoulders, and is carrying on a charmed conversation with her. Even with his head turned away from us with his large bamboo hat and his muscular left arm holding his drawing materials, it is not difficult to recognize a self-reference in this figure. Strikingly, in her nudity -undressed by his imagination - she is free of aggression and desirable. In the oils, she is a flesh and blood woman, real and sexual. In the etching, she is an Eve born of his imagination, to be his muse and model, inspiring nature and desirable truth.” ‘Comrade’ is a true theme; it is the artist and the model as comrades in art. “This is the fleeting dream of a romantic artist; but it helps us to see his battles more clearly.”

Let us have our share in this exciting atmosphere approaching this suggestive feminine body. The eager artist is dominating the picture bringing some particular artistic aspects to his lovely intimate relationship. While the artist strides closer along with his attractive companion, he was naughty enough to have his face turned to the opposite way from the viewers, he intentionally moved his head with a big hat in order to foreshadow his real intention. However, this doubtful position accidentally heightened the pretty face of the striding model and bring to focus the rest of her naked breasts and even down, till our sight reached her tiny belly button, let us move our eyes just to have a glimpse of her inviting eyes. In fact, the model’s nude body only possesses a fragile, delicate and romantic quality; the upturned breasts seemingly offering warm invitation. The artist seeking something beyond his inspiration, is fully responding to the situation, primarily as an artist and then as a man.
Even the backdrop in the etching evokes the sensuous relationship, the swaying dress as well as the auspicious reared grass wishing, then bending to show its eagerness to be gently touched or even pressed by her lovely bare feet, going a little forward to see these dark lines, which are strongly chiseled and incised roughly in the heart of the scene. However, these acute lines have a language of their own. The consistent and passionate hatching enhanced the foliage areas. The nature reveals its romantic quality and inviting us to feel the magical music and the singing of the invisible birds. Nature is not always the mother; here, Nature is the mistress.

It is noticeable that the bust of the female figure is free from harsh hatching, retaining the smooth contours of the body. Ramkinkar seems to have created an aura of inviting magnetism around her, the model revealing the narcissistic approach of the artist. The artist appears to be intent on discovering the very core of her attractiveness using his inner vision to achieve a sense of fulfillment which may not easily be available in the actual life. The artist keenly mixed his graphic depiction with his desire and instinct motivation to press his passionate invisible signature on his internal impressions to achieve an eternal œuvre.

It is equally true that through the ages, the story behind such a masterpiece always reveals the intimate relation between the artist and his desirable muse and model. He eagerly needs such feminine companion, cuddling her to grasp actual inspiration and to destroy all the fences between his passionate depiction and the object of his intention. In fact, Ramkinkar is not an exceptional case. However, his signature is more vigorous, and his approach may be more faithful and lifelike. Ramkinkar has had stated that; a work of art fulfils its own demand, it has no meaning other than its physical presence, it possesses above all a vitality of its own. For him, art making is the pleasure of life, this is the ultimate cause beyond which no other cause is worthwhile.

Ramkinkar was one with the joyful and carefree life of Santhal and was thus able to give free rein, in a direct, spontaneous manner, to his thoughts and feelings. He did not need to make a special effort to 'imitate' nature, for he was an integral part of it. In a sense, his works are the songs he sang to celebrate the wondrous phenomenon of life and lament its pain. This great artist drew his last breath on August 2, 1980.
HAREN DAS, 1921-1993

The Unrivalled Master of Printmaking

Haren Das’s printmaking career is considered as a hallmark in the history of Indian graphic art. His prints prove that he is still an unrivalled master in woodcut and etching, even though he follows conventional techniques. During his long career from 1943 to 1993, Das has produced a large number of delightful woodcuts and aquatints. He lays emphasis on form; his prints are based on careful drawing with thin, sensitive lines and tonal variations. In order to acquire a proper understanding of Das’ prints, a reference to the article by Kali Biswas in the year 1974, should be worthwhile; “Among Calcutta’s contemporary graphicists, Haren Das deserves mention as a senior printmaker attached to the Government College of Arts for the past few decades. Das took lessons in graphics from Ramendra Nath Chakravorty. Though his work is traditional in style, Das is still considered a virtuoso in both woodcut and etching... His themes are pastoral scenes, where chiaroscuro plays a dominant part, as for example, in ‘Towards Home.’ The rhythmic steps of village women going home and the serenity of evening have been depicted through subtle and sensitive wood engraving. In ‘Ferry Ghat’, one notices the meticulous care with which he depicts the minute details and tones of a river scene.”

Haren Das is perhaps the first among Indian artists to take up printmaking as a medium for artistic pursuit. He also deserves merit for making printmaking popular and inculcating in many modern artists the passion for the medium, especially when he took charge of the graphic department at Calcutta, for more than thirty years; c.1948-1980. Prominent among his students was Somnath Hore, Sanat Kar, Lalu Shaw, Amitabh Benerjee and Shyamal Dutta Roy.

Sovon Som’s views reveal his insight in Haren Das’ meticulous prints; “As an artist, Haren Das has trodden an altogether solitary path, which makes his position none-the-less of great importance. He grew up at a time when the subject of painting was considered most important. Before his death in 1993, he was then stressing on the thematic aspect of his work, but he gave an equal emphasis to the medium, in which he worked. He has maintained an objective view within the matrix of naturalism. The majority of his oeuvre is surcharged with a genuine nostalgia for his childhood recollections of the romantic surroundings of a remote and obscure village in Bangladesh. This hankering for roots adds an idiosyncratic charm and contemplative spirit to his art that many of our modern artists lack.”
Haren Das wielded mastery over the technique of printmaking. Though his drawing was stylized at different phases of his development, it remained characterized by its frankness, boldness and attractiveness. Before we discuss in detail his developmental phases, let us examine the background and events that shaped his printmaking career. It was Mukul Dey and Ramendranath Chakravorty, who in their capacity as principals of the Government Art School in Calcutta introduced the programme of relief printing in the curriculum. Lithography was already existing ever since the inception of the school. Haren Das learnt graphic techniques under the guidance of Ramendranath Chakravorty in the period 1940-44. After graduating, he began to teach graphic arts there. Zainul Abedin and Safiuddin Ahmed were his colleagues, who also taught in the same section. Somnath Hore was one of their distinguished students. Though Ramendranath Chakravorty was adept at the techniques and skills of printmaking, he was not innovative or an experimentalist.¹ In my opinion, Haren Das being thus influenced by the conventional style of printmaking, was hesitant to embark on new paths of discovery. He also averred from doing experimental work. But one important contribution of his to printmaking in India, is the seriousness with which he pursued printmaking, instead of the casual experiment as done by others at that time. The range of art in those times was confined only to those mediums that were preferred by the Bengal School of painter-printmakers and their assistants. Like some of his contemporaries, he also restricted himself to themes that were to be his personal obsession. Actually he was only reflecting the prevalent ethos among his generation in Bengal, which witnessed the trauma of Partition in 1947. “His generation, which could not be reconciled to the strange urban situation, in which it found itself and could not emigrate psychologically, continues to hanker for its roots in every walk of life. Haren Das did his best to evade the risk of moving outside that reality. It is worth mentioning here that his themes were characterized by naturalness and simplicity executed with deft expertise, which makes him stand apart from his illustrious peers. Even though Calcutta remained his home ever since 1947, there has been only occasional portrayal of the city, as seen in his works as ‘City Scape’ or ‘Chiarosuco.’”³

Haren Das' printmaking career could be divided into three phases. The first one is from 1940-49 going through the era of the great Bengal famine and ended by the events of
partition and inhuman riots. The second phase is from 1950-69, which is the most splendid and prolific phase. The last one is from 1970 till the end of his life in 1993.

We come to be familiar with Das’ prints in the year of 1948, when he starts to present some interesting etchings such as ‘Joint Effort’ and ‘Summer.’ In the year 1949, he presented his linocuts ‘Towards the Market’ and ‘Going to the Fair.’ His aquatint ‘The Ganges’ was also created around this time and in fact, this phase is a formative phase. In his second phase, which is rightly considered the major phase, one can discern his indecisiveness in choosing the two parallel trends that were in vogue simultaneously. He was finally able to overcome it as he chose the option between the two examples of his meticulous narrative depiction in etchings, which were done the same year are ‘At the Mela’ and ‘At the Temple.’ The prints are faultless and also conform to the prevalent and conventional tradition. Such exactness is not necessarily required from an intellectual artist, who is supposed to use his third eye to project his inner feelings. In fact, Das binds his creativity, restricting his personal insight into the subject matter. What is left after such an exercise is a superficial depiction with no life of its own.

On the other hand, to expose some interesting qualities of Das’ prints, let us hear what Sovon Som has to say, “‘A Glimpse’ - colour woodcut 1955 - has a symmetrical format with a village hut at the centre for either side. The clothes of the two women standing near the hut reflect the glow of the setting sun, the shimmering ripples and the light from the open window. An inherent geometrical order makes the piece striking. A shop showing a common place village scene has a strong pattern of chiaroscuro worked out with subtle tonal variations. In ‘Morning Breeze’ - linocut 1955 - the black mass of land cuts across the white sky and sheet of water. A sweeping white line thrusting through the black is reciprocated by fluid dark lines on the white below, creating a rhythmic continuity. The irregular edge touching the upper side of the frame sets the limit and works towards an unexpected unity of design.”

To precisely understand his artistic traits, we need to go through some of his significant prints. I think, it is better to start with his linocut print ‘In the Kitchen’, executed in 1950, depicting an Indian village woman cooking a meal. In this print, in a glimpse, the dramatic interplay of light and shades is palpable, the grey tones distributed in geometrical forms; such rendering of forms enhanced the composition and emphasized the feminine
gesture, giving it a bold structure. Such masterly delineation reveals the actions and lends the picture an appropriate aura for the theme; besides, the elements such as the old shelves, the vessels having been beautifully placed, to enrich the background. The old wooden roof descending from the upper side of the wooden matrix is beautifully rendered in creating that rare kind of harmony with the other elements and also exuding third dimensional feeling. Thus, Haren Das exhibited consummate skill in the field of linocut prints, which is cherished as a successful depiction of themes with ingenuity. While Nandalal Bose’s version,\(^{3}\) that also happens to be a linocut print executed in 1929, has a flat cut out quality, Das is able to bring in his, three-dimensionality in the volume of the figure and effect of space in the kitchen setting. Although it was Nandalal Bose, who is to be ranked as the first to render such themes in linocut more than twenty years before, it need not necessarily be better than the later ones. In this regard, I think that Das’ version is more progressive than that of Nandalal. Though Das might have been deeply inspired by the old master, he has adopted his own individual tools while he approaches the process of printmaking. He is more genuine and meticulous than his contemporaries.

In the linocut print ‘Unwelcome visitors’ 1952,\(^{4}\) a critical social comment can be observed. Das here depicts poor old couple along with their two grandsons – tired and disappointed emotions etched on their faces as they stand outside the locked door of the house. They are the unwelcome visitors for their little richer relatives, who look down upon them. There are some particular indications in this print. The white door, bolted against their will, to come in, brings however an end to their anticipations, after the entire family has had trodded a long, weary walk in the blistering heat. The old man seems to have suffered more as he can not even hold his umbrella straight upon his left shoulder, the pointed edge drooping backwards, symbolizing the unacceptability design with geometrical structure straight lines can be seen, especially in areas like the door, wall and the woman’s dress. Hatching in different places gives lyrical quality to the print. The print though does not prod the viewers’ sensibilities, it does have shades of caricature somewhat on the satirical lines of Gaganendranath Tagore. If one were to overlook this criticism, which might not be fair too, there does remain one fact, i.e., very little care of aesthetic understanding is clearly reflected in the prints.
If we carefully examine the prints of Das during his second and major phase, we will find that linocut medium is his forte. His achievements in this medium are a landmark in Indian printmaking. Das was able to produce variations in the same style, but he never went forward to be considered as an experimentalist; he strictly confined his career to conventional norms. His etching ‘Ferry Boat’, 1958, is worth mentioning. As an expert, he scans his subject with the deliberation of creating contrasts through the relationship between his bold forms and the contents to enhance the meaningful black and white areas. Thus, his prints are full of vitality.

Two important qualities characterize his second phase. First, is his matchless meticulous handling of the technique of woodcut and linocut prints and second, is his attitude to restrict his technical prowess and bind his creativity, which was a shadow on his otherwise illustrious printmaking career. Das employed his technical expertise to achieve the ‘exacting accuracy.’ This may be suicidal for his creativity. Just like the senior master of etching Mukul Dey, he too had introduced an exacting artisan-like attitude. What is worst, is that he came to emulate the style of etching of his guru Ramendranath Chakravorty. Thus, began in his graphic career, a phase of restricted activity. Instead of being intuitive with spontaneous reactions, his work began to take mundane perspective. What is conspicuous is that he was bogged down by the illusory effect of such a mundane, ‘life-like’ work. However, despite all odds, his work was highly appreciated by a class of art critics and some art lovers, who had taken to art appreciation just then. They were naive and unaware that this kind of appreciation would stunt the creative quality of the artist. Their overzealous praise misled Das, who remained blissfully confined to what otherwise could be called mediocre images. However, commenting so, all the same, the fact should be borne in mind that there exists no valid yardstick to judge the prints of any graphic artist. Passing such judgements resembles treading on a minefield, where one has to be wary about and press one’s faculty of understanding to its brim. There ought to be prudent justification and room to supplement with others’ views.

We may bring into focus three of his prints ‘Ferry Boats’ aquatint 1958, ‘Autumn’ and ‘Chiaroscuro,’ both linocuts done in 1962 that could be considered as the most significant of his prints. Courage and trepidation mingled, I cautiously venture to dwell on these three. In the seascape ‘Ferry Boats’ there are various boats, with a motley of shapes and
sizes; while some lay moored on the river bank, some are mobile. While some seem to be awaiting customers, two boats near the bank have set sail to catch wind and steer to the other. Some are far and dwarfed by distance as if they were about their destination. The ripples on the river are sweeping gently in zigzag lines. The sun shone on water beautifully casting silvery glitter, which contrasted with the sky above with its tinge of dark grey meeting the distant horizon. The whole panorama of a seascape is indelibly impressive, especially exuding a mystic touch. The superb composition and the rare quality testify the masterly rendering of the theme. In this beautiful print, Das depends on exaggerated use of tones. The emphasis on dark and light dominate most of his works, giving the feeling of much overuse of this particular medium, i.e., aquatint. One may rightly feel that the detailed rendering of the river surface disturbs the graceful depiction of ferryboats. On the other hand, we see the large sail has been fully spread to acquire the required energy to push the boat forward. While the sail is showing its function, it is at the same time exposing its beautiful design – the four vertical wide-area patches – which in fact, capture the viewer’s eye; especially when it comes to contrast with the smaller sails of the other boats, which rise in different directions, but almost tend to be in semi-vertical position to acquire proper balance. There seems to exist a rhythmic relationship and gesture language between these sails. While this is quite appealing, the picture becomes slightly distracting due to the superficial use of some elements such as the delineation of dark and light spots depicting the stones in the foreground of the seashore and some other obscure tiny things that should have been better neglected. These ferry boats, in fact, bear the imprints of Das’ youth in East Bengal before partition; especially the atmosphere of the big harbour-city Chittagong, where he was born in 1921 and stayed there around the age of 18. I think it is a symbolism that got recreated by Das through his meaningful print ‘Ferry Boats’ – the distant ferryboats seemingly bidding farewell to an idyllic era as they set out towards an unknown destination beyond the distant horizon.

Coming to the second: his wonderful linocut ‘Autumn’ 1962,* the striking part in this print is the horizontal areas and lines that render the sky and the bold depiction of the jungle and also the peasant’s hut dwarfed by the big trees, all rendered through lines that move heavenwards. The intense light of the river surface contrasts with the widening reflection of the rice fields. Looking to the right side, we see a wide-open hut with a rustic irrigation system. There is also a maize field, which provides some kind of variety in elements of this

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print. The white hatching does not function properly, so there are nothing, which may be called creative touches or a new way of projection, which may enhance the print or give it a striking impact. This kind of exact depiction of the landscapes may serve as an adequate visual aid to students of graphic art.

In such a detailed and accurate depiction, one can say, the media is there, but there is no message. There is no mutual dialogue between the viewer and the print, wherewith we are facing a dead end; nothing left for our imagination. Das’ artworks are immovable and unyielding. Yet we can feel its beauty and its masterly depictions.

Let us turn to the third: his controversial linocut ‘Chiaroscuro’ 1962. This print, in fact, shows a great deal of meticulous accuracy on par with a photographic depiction. In this print, we see a big, old house by the side of a narrow road, which affords no scope to the spectator to communicate freely with the crowded composition. The over-detailed house dominates the printed area, while the remaining space is occupied by sky. Here too, Haren Das professes his skill of competing with the perfect depiction of the camera – the exact and accurate representation. Each small detail, from the brick to the stone on the road, is portrayed carefully in this otherwise overloaded print. When looking at the maid servant, who may be doing some daily house-hold work, such as drying the clothes, we find the same kind of interest, even those far away figures of human beings are included in order to provide the presence of human life in an otherwise still representation. But these small hints did not help much to create the required lyrical atmosphere, or to allow some kind of friendly communications between the major elements of his composition. However, we can say, though Das remained aware about these artistic facts, but he did not recognize the drawback of his intuition and the way he projected his expressions. Something in his inner mind seemed to pride itself that such a style should be considered as his privileged forte and anyone could hardly compete with him in this field.

I believe that Haren Das named this print ‘Chiaroscuro’ deliberately to draw attention towards his technical prowess. There is no doubt that he achieved his goal, but in doing so, he destroyed almost all the creative options and the innovative approaches. He may also deny his inner feelings and tied himself to conventional cannons and the perfection of the handicraft rendering to achieve this meticulous print. This controversial black and white print, seems to be a condensed projection of all his previous idiomatic skills. One remarkable
aspect of this print is his depiction of sky. But the rest of the elements hardly seem to be in harmony. However, this print shows clearly the expert rendering of his elements and tools as a graphic language through the dramatic quality of one colour linocut print. Let us move to his interesting etching ‘Twilight,’ 1961. This print almost attained the quality of watercolour painting with its soft and fluid tonal variation. In this print, we see a shrubby tree spreading across the sky. Such a manner of delineation somehow bespeaks of an inner sublimity. But, I think that such picturesque depiction is far away from creativity.

Let us now come to the third and last phase of Haren Das, 1970-1993. Though technically adept, I can not deeply appreciate it because of the lack of creativity. However, this negative factor combined with his early work, is a permanent issue, but for some art critics, this issue may be of little concern. For them, it remains neither a proper, nor an adequate point of view. Those are art critics, who have written admiringly about him and highly praised his prints – we have already gone through some of their views. Amongst such critics, Sovon Som being the prominent one, has written, "His third phase shows a journey towards a definite stylistic development. This period reveals a consistent inclination towards pattern on the basis of an underlying naturalness."

In his other etching ‘Ungrateful Larch’ 1972, we see the austere geometry of square and rectangle in the structure of the landscape, representing continuity of a conceptual approach. Indeed, it is a strong architectural structure. This virtue is apparent when we look at the huge gesture of a peculiar and very big tree dominating the area of the sky by its flame-like foliage. However, this colour etching almost attains the quality of a watercolour painting with its soft and fluid tonal variation, exactly like the ‘Twilight’, an etching ten years older.

In still another etching 'Homewards' 1975, we see the depiction of a cowherd in ochre and green, which can be cited as the culmination of this phase of his development. Here, colours determine the forms as the drawing transformed into areas of coloured masses. Das demonstrates how painterly prints can be produced, retaining the quality of the plate and the incision of the engraving tools. When we look at his perfectly done mezzotint process ‘Window II’ 1973, we can see his nice rendering of the variations of grey tones with painterly articulation and a synthesis of tonal and formal unity. Sovon Som further points out, "Fortunately, Haren Das was among those few in India, who have zealously sustained the great modern revival of wood-engraving since 1920. His works will always have an interest
for those, who look for an elegant serenity beyond extravagance of our cluttered urban existence.

Das wanted us to know some of his individual concepts. He preferred intellectual rationalization to aimless spontaneity that dominates his prints and gives his intentions an aspect of superfluity. Yet, he always had the will to control the results on his prints. Das' attitude towards printmaking is quite conventional; yet, there are no channels, which may link him with any of those innovative depictions. We can not stop talking about Das' prints without mentioning his woodcut print that he did in the early 50s, viz., 'With All Her Property.' This is only to reveal the overloaded attitude of the image making that Haren Das had strictly adopted.

SAFIUDDIN AHMED

Visions of Printmaking Master

Safiuddin Ahmed, the Bengali printmaker is amongst the eminent artists of the Indian subcontinent. This talented artist started his career as a printmaker after his graduation from the Government School of Arts in the early forties, in Calcutta. Later on he became one of the staff of the Government School taking charge of the Graphics Department along with his colleagues Haren Das and with the help of Zainul Abedin their senior colleague. The three artists were very active in the early forties, when Somnath Hore was a student in their college, seeking know-how of printmaking. Somnath Hore was much influenced by Safiuddin's bold process of black and white linocut prints. On the other hand Safiuddin was deeply influenced by Zainul Abedin and so was Haren Das. These printmakers along with Chittoprasad were the renaissance builders of West Bengal printmaking, especially in the field of black and white woodcut and linocut as well.

Safiuddin was born in East Bengal in 1922. At the young age of 15, he completely took to plastic art, showing early the signs of talented art works. A few years later, he underwent rigorous training in art. Eventually he started teaching graphic art in 1942, a year before the great Bengal Famine. From that time onwards, till he left for Dhaka, Safiuddin worked hard to gain more knowledge in printmaking techniques that helped him to do his post-graduate research from his Calcutta College. Thus, he gained specialization in etching, wood engraving and mural painting. However, Safiuddin's early interests included formal
study of folk traditions, its visual and aesthetic manifestations in varied things as toys, fabrics and ceramics.

Unlike his mentor Zainul Abedin, Safiuddin, strangely enough, did not show an interest in the themes of the Great Bengal Famine of 1943. In fact, his colleague Haren Das also did the same. However, we should notice that Haren Das has had a different approach to the art of prints. Let us first bring to focus Safiuddin’s earlier works and try to discover his talented depictions and to have some kind of approach to acquire a proper perception of his expressive images through his bold compositions and masterly delineation of the woodcut medium to achieve his outstanding prints.

‘Santhal Maidens’ of 1944*1 is one of his best examples of these woodcut prints. Safiuddin, with sheer expertise, has used a folk idiom to bring forth a lyrical composition. The well-known art critic Jalaluddin Ahmed has evocatively described this select print, “The turning and twisting tree trunks in the distance harmonize with the curves and the supple, subtly balanced figures of the Santhal girls, while the horizontal strokes of the water-surface and the tree texture in the foreground are brought out in sharp contrast with vertical strokes of the simple embroidery motif and the draping hands and feet. This gives a certain massiveness and solidity to the whole composition, blending life with the landscape that his selective eye carefully chose in its lush abundance of foliage and its perennial pastoral mood.”

Actually this outstanding black and white attractive print deeply inspired me and provoked me to begin some sort of dialogue, as the images depicted by the artist are really living creatures. Then why are we avoiding the tenderness towards communicating with such masterpieces? In this fascinating portrayal ‘Santhal Maidens,’ we see the folk idiom has been dexterously used to give a rare authenticity to what is essentially a lyrical statement. ‘Santhal Maidens’ is not just an ordinary black and white woodcut print, but there is striking revelation in the gesture of the maidens’ bodies, which possess a flowing movement. One of them poised slightly bending downwards her torso, suggesting the girl’s expectancy towards something behind her. The beauty of their ornaments is innocently exhibited in an alluring manner. Seductiveness is hidden in these unintended yet very feminine postures. One of the water pots is neatly balanced on the head and the other one snugly held with her bangle-laden wrist and pressed close to the breast. The dark and white areas in the background and
foreground seem to merge with each other with tenderness, and the amusement in the maidens' expression is vividly visible.

The composition further creates a very bold impression, due to the girls' figures and the graceful movements of their limbs. As one of the girls bends down to fill the water in the pitcher, her bare back glistens in the sunlight, while her supple breasts appear to be shy, but with an unconscious youthfulness offers spontaneously thrilling and seductive beckoning. The reflections created due to the sunshine lend a silvery look to the surface of the stream that seem to be running eagerly towards the charming bronze legs. Their half-submerged shapely legs strike a profound and poignant image. The soft flow of the stream is active enough to start caressing their feet, playing with their toes and penetrating some areas to satisfy the needs of the two maidens, thereby creating a feeling of gratification, which also offers that magical feeling of exhilaration.

The two maidens appear as if they are conscious of a male amidst the thick foliage. They are also anticipative of his appreciation of their youthful beauty and wish him to reveal his desire and make advances towards them. At the same time, they are hesitant, appearing instinctively afraid of the man who would storm their safe bastion and sweep them off their feet. Safiuddin has successfully and emotionally made the Santhal girls emote with the viewers outside the frame of his work. One can literally feel the inviting looks in their faces, which captivate the inner-self of the viewer, giving him an elated feeling mixed with pleasure and making him eager to go further through this striking and lively print. While trying to scrutinize the print, one can not miss the other figures.

A Santhal woman with the pitcher on her head, enjoying the company of her male escort, carrying a heavy bundle of grains, both seem to be continuously striding to reach their destination before sunset. The human figures are tiny. Yet they lend a rhythmic value to the picture, creating a lyrical effect on the surroundings. This amazing picture forces the viewer's eyes to move to-and-fro, between the foreground and background, arousing in him a kind of visibility, which gives liveliness and thereby avoiding the depiction of routine rural life.

Safiuddin's other best woodcut print in this theme is the 'Way through Jungle' 1945. Here, the powerful movements of the Santhal men and women striding through the jungle with their belongings are wonderfully depicted. The rendition of the elements is the
same as the previous print, the 'Santhal Maidens.' However, in the latter print, we may have many different aspects; for instance, this print is fully crowded by the striding group of Santhal men and women accompanied some children and animals. The artist showed us his interest in the figure of the old man with his bamboo umbrella, riding the back of his mule, seemingly overloaded with the peasant's belongings, tools and cooking pots. The nice-looking hyperactive dog guarding their path while the cart is constantly moving in the front. Two huge tree trunks further enhance the scene. These bold trunks dominate the foreground creating a kind of dramatic atmosphere, accentuated with the expert use of light and shade values that are at times enhanced by powerful white hatching and the expressive attitude and the manner of depicting the beautiful foliage.

In fact, Safiuddin did his best to create this attractive foreground, while in the distance, one can see all the figures are in action and rhythmical movements. Safiuddin here played with his human figures. He does enhance their gestures as well as their postures by making them holding or carrying all what they may need on their heads while eagerly striding for a promising destination.

Let us move to capture some other aspects of Safiuddin's printmaking career and also some of these special qualities. It will be relevant to approach this observation acutely; he is a genius as printmaker, he could easily establish the reality of everyday life without showing it to be mundane. He is primarily a very adept craftsman, wielding high technical expertise, with an uncanny sense for form and composition as well. Even in the early forties when some of his work has the tendency of being repetitive in details in some way or another, some critics opine that his works are similar to those of Zainul Abedin's sketches; but in fact, Safiuddin's sketches command a good attention and appreciation. On the other hand his water colour landscapes seem to be bereft of boldness and some other interesting qualities which characterized his later woodcuts and etchings.

Only for a few years Safiuddin could work in peace at Calcutta, for he had to leave for Dhaka due to the communal riots of 1946-47. The tragedy of Partition was a heartrending experience for Safiuddin. Being peace loving by nature, yet he was obliged to leave his hometown Calcutta, the city of great expectations, and had to made a new beginning in Dhaka again. Here, in East Pakistan, a new era came with high expectations. Hand in hand with his senior colleague Zainul Abedin, they established 'Dhaka Institute of Art,' with
Safiuddin taking charge of the graphic department right from the beginning, in the late forties.

Safiuddin created some of his outstanding prints between the years 1945 and 1955. He did interesting woodcuts such as ‘Golden Corn,’ ‘Journey’s End,’ ‘Through the Trees,’ etc. These excellent prints may be considered as a good example of his individuality in rendering creative compositions as well as mastering of the woodcut technique. He did, but fewer linocuts and lithos. However, in the late 50s, he took more and more to colour etching.

Though Safiuddin has initially worked in several mediums, he later on took to etching. It was in 1956, when he embarked upon a study tour of Europe including United Kingdom. Meanwhile he acquired a Diploma in Graphic Arts from the Central School of Arts, London. This was the turning point in his printmaking career. Safiuddin benefited a lot through the study of graphic arts abroad. As he acquired the proper know-how of up to date printmaking, this experience helped him to create and propagate his new semi-abstract innovative rendering of the image making. We can say rightly that he rose to the global heights, but this advanced position, consumed years of hard working through the trial and error processes and painstaking efforts.

It was in the late fifties Safiuddin was invited to participate in some of the global art competitions. In fact, some of Foreign Cultural Attaches in India as well as Pakistan with the help of some art lovers from Dhaka had collected his few prints to be displayed at some of significant European museums and at some of art group exhibitions. Safiuddin’s prints were highly appreciated from all the above-mentioned places. “Safiuddin’s work has been seen abroad, in London, the UNESCO International Exhibition of Modern Art, Paris and also in Singapore.”

Safiuddin’s work has been inspired by the indigenous folk tradition in his earlier works. However, he explored advanced printmaking techniques in his later works. In fact when Safiuddin had started his coloured aquatints, there were just a handful of Indian artists, who could match his profound understanding of the medium. Also Safiuddin was far ahead of his peers, in the technical aspects of rendering and the plastic art language he developed, being more effective and up-to-date. His prints of the late 50s are highlighted by colour etching mixed with associated qualities of aquatint, filled with lively gestures and vibrant freshness. One can observe the dramatic yet original blending of colours that from light
yellow ochre shining with warm golden reflections of different tints of sepia, with some light yellowish brown beautifully positioned next to small blunt geometric areas to highlight the soft beams of virgin whiteness.

Safiuddin gained a better and fresh insight, due to his individual way of printmaking, by exposing the hidden qualities present in his forms and by exploring the technical possibilities of etching and aquatint. He was no more fond of figurative depictions, or of taking care of minute details. He became fully aware about the core of printmaking today. So we observe, though his semi-abstract prints seem simple, they capture the profundity of his expressive quality. His special and original quality of presenting the shades, which create a kind of magic giving a symbolic representation to his intellectual intentions penetrating the psychic power of drawing lines. The mysterious and pellucid olive green, confronted with hints of golden yellow-ochre, both surrounding the particular shapes in the print and add charm to it, along with the lively sepia mixed with deep ocean blue merged with tiny light-golden grey. A combination of such colours is hardly seen or even used by Indian printmakers. It is his own special cocktail, which is, in fact, not revealed yet by other artists.

His significant series of ‘Flood’ are entitled ‘Flood I’ and ‘Flood II’ c.1957*5+6 and ‘The Bridge across’ c.1958*7+8 the etching and aquatint depicting the fury of a flooded river in semi-abstract delineation. However, we can feel the expressions through Safiuddin’s visual languages even in his abstract rendering. The last amongst this group of prints are the ‘Receding Flood’ c.1958.*9 Though these prints are represented in the same theme, its colours are quite rich, effective, vibrant and suggestive.

Fazle Lohani, one of Safiuddin’s critics, while introducing his one-man show at London’s New Vision Gallery in 1959, says “For this highly sensitive artist, the many patterns in gushing water, ebbs and the whirlpools, the clouds and the tides, all have a different meaning. And he has followed this verdict of his own feelings as truthfully as he could. By reason of the fact, he was able to comprehend the intrinsic nature of this new realm of discovery, his work has become enormously exciting, sincere and persuasive.*2 It is worthy of mention that the series of ‘Flood’ was the major part of this exhibition.

The ‘Bridge Across’*7+8 is an etching and aquatint print, which is characterized by an individualistic approach, expert craftsmanship and freshness. Here we can see the various coloured features combined with some sort of human figures in mysterious and conflicting
positions with some other elements, creating expressive rhythmic motions and perceptive musical forms, mixed with meaningful colours. In fact, Safiuddin has projected subtle combination of colours. His conflicting lines show expressive motivations penetrating the semi-geometrical figures holding some tiny black areas ranging with assorted shades and textures. These elements reflect the beauty of the whole combination. The brisk winds play with the frenzied clouds and together lean forward, then quickly change their directions. They seem eager to blow out the sails and merrily dance with the rainfall, fluttering and teasing the top of the sails, creating an emotional and dramatic performance. They are unaware of the fury of the flooded river that burst over both banks.

No signs are left of the poor fishermen that were captured by the overwhelming flood and had completely lost their destination and caught up in the flood, but they bravely struggle for survival. The frenzied current and the whirlwind forcefully pulled their vessels towards the unknown destination against their will. They were in a fearful area that is completely dominated by the forceful flooded river. Lastly they found their own way to grasp the brave hopeful option, by following the patriots example of the courageous struggle of the lotus flowers which depicted wonderful story of how the fight for survival should be. The exciting struggle should take place now.

Yet, hope can be perceived by those groups of lotus flowers that seem to peep through the distant corner. Unlike man they are firmly rooted to their ground, their roots bravely facing the anger and fury of the river. The overwhelming force of the water is unable to up-root them. Nothing can shake them or mover them from their place, which they hold by the veins of their hearts. They are always ready to sacrifice, but not ready to surrender or even go little against their decision or widen their will. They will strive against the fury of the flooded river and they will also defend their divine place firmly anchored in native soil. They at last won the battle. Such struggle should symbolize the patriotism and national dignity. Thus, it is our national flower. It is also known to be the abode of ‘Goddess Lakshmi the goddess of beauty, wealth and great expectations.

The dazzle and magnificence in Safiuddin’s works owe to his mysterious secrets concerning his special individual qualities in printmaking field. He may reveal some hints about his graphic career by giving some indications of his active projections, being deeply involved in such creative processes. One of his amazing indications is his eagerness to create
some kind of tender light here or there to serve as enigmatic windows in his pictures. He creates an extraordinary way to help the viewer to inhale the core substance of his pictures. In order to be captivated by this lovely charm depicted in these innovative masterpieces. Such kind of successful and advanced compositions are rare in the history of East-West Bengali printmaking.

Reaching for the best print of 1958, it is his etching and aquatint entitled 'Receding Flood.' It has more vibrant colours, glistening with such mysterious charm, offering our eyes a unique chance to imbibe the divine beauty and striving to embrace our eyes through these suspicious figures combined with expressive geometrical areas leaving as usual some tiny spaces for that peculiar divine light to peep out from behind these combinations of meaningful forms and coloured areas. In fact, Safiuddin always played his special instrument in original method, revealing little about his individual secrets leaving some indications for intellectual beholders to enjoy solving some of these aesthetics, but still some hard processes waiting for further interpretation. One can claim that each day the viewer can keep on discovering some new qualities in Safiuddin's prints. In this particular print, we find the dazzling mixture of etching and aquatint, supported by high qualities of colours shimmer with mysterious charm and liveliness which reveal some kind of Safiuddin's expertise quality, he starts to use brown mixed with tints of deep blue-grey or faint orange strokes to evoke some kind of penetrating power to allow the underneath colours — the hidden colours — to peep with its lovely tender radiance through the thickness of the surface layers. All colours are striving to project its best rays, mixed with other colours in order to produce different kinds of effective outlook and also to create a wonderful atmosphere enhanced by rare and charming beauty.

This divine radiance of brilliant light combined with gleam of tenderness has a kind of attraction which captivates our inner feeling and embraces the core of our sense of appreciation creating a special kind of pleasure and happiness — such splendid achievements are objects of envy for all his competitors and also some art critics who intentionally neglected his achievements in Indian printmaking field, due to some ill considerations and prejudiced attitude. One can feel that his lines and shapes and even his geometrical figures are full of life, and acquiring the actual spirits of the living creatures. His genius helped him to achieve the resurrection of some of his ancestors' artistic splendid qualities. He also gave
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them the power of an eternal life. Safiuddin’s etchings behold us completely, offering a feeling of exhilaration and also holds our breath for a while; this is enough to captivate our inner entities. For these reasons, we consider him a forerunner of the contemporary Indian printmaking.

Safiuddin has used soft layers of blended mixture of particular colours. Such as the unusual orange, embracing parts of thick dark brown branches like areas to have its path through the bluish green. It moves laying its hues over the borders of other colours, then confronting the deep brown through its angled areas, then quickly crossing over the curved yet bold hints of spontaneous strokes to reach the region of dotted and flicked areas, these elements create textured surfaces with hatchings and reveal some of his amazing skills in the realm of improved techniques of printmaking. His form show an immense motivation to invade the unexplored areas of his compositions, his coloured acute lines induce the steady figures and move around a little, then suddenly it burst in an attractive briskly movement – powerful yet tender – to compose orchestral dancing combined with pantomime performance, and mixed with meaningful gestures and indications which pull to life the other steady figures in these innovative composition.

The major feature of Safiuddin’s career is his masterly use of the psychological power present in his compositions. At times one finds him carefully pushing his calm and peaceful figures to some noisy and unfriendly regions by exchanging blows with the other forms. In fact this process often creates some kind of dazzling movement – lovely, but with a whirl of activity, enough to enhance his bold and brisk out look. Thus, Safiuddin successfully achieved the extraordinary combination of conflicting elements, successfully controlling them and achieving harmony in his own system. His idiom brought out spontaneity and simplicity, yet it acquired a deep inner mobility and expressive power, perfectly reflecting his craftsmanship.

Safiuddin did a lot of hard work to achieve his goals. Unlike many artists who work less but boast of great achievements and use the media to serve their purpose, Safiuddin’s work spoke for itself. He did not have to resort to any kind of gimmicks to gain media coverage. His genuine quality makes him stand apart from his contemporaries. He carved his niche by his own hands, his heart is ever captured by his Indian native soil. In fact, Safiuddin is one of the renaissance builders of contemporary Indian printmaking. Being a forerunner in
this field, the realm of his prints opened a new chapter in the graphic art of the Indian subcontinent. His prints clearly epitomize his high standard of craftsmanship and advanced technical expertise, be it in etching, aquatint or his earlier black and white woodcuts.

Safiuddin feels that life is chaos, a thick jungle, where man is lost and at the same time bewildered, thus losing his sense of orientation. He finds the ‘roads’ through the moods of his forms and images. He is an altruistic and optimistic artist by nature, believing that there would be light at the end of the tunnel. Art for him is what saves a human from just existing. It helps a man to live a meaningful life. Speaking of Safiuddin, Keshav Malik once said, “Safiuddin is trying to bring out what may be called ‘the state of being torn – of being fragmented, dismembered or alienated from one’s environment and indeed from one’s own deeper self. He portrays both the state of human life and hope for it.” He chose an untrodden path, opposing the old beliefs, creating a new trail and a hopeful horizon for Indian printmakers. His achievements are far beyond the reach of his contemporaries.