CHAPTER THREE
THE HUMANISTS

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THE GREAT BENGAL FAMINE, 1943
As a Turning Point in Indian Art

The Bengal famine caused a significant turn in Indian art, as it made the artists ponder over the tragedies and miseries of human life and its fatalistic end. The Bengal famine was, in fact, a by-product of the worldwide economic crisis and the Second World War. During such a period, after decades of struggle for independence, India was infused with the spirit of approaching freedom, yet unaware of the looming unseen tragedy. Intense brutality continued in Western hemisphere, as superpowers began to emerge. The deadly air of war began to blow in East also. By 1942, the Japanese invaded Chittagong, a district of Bengal. "The British government, caught unawares, made the situation chaotic. The British, interested in protecting their reign and properties in India; initiated harsh measures for self-protection. The massive food supply was diverted towards the British soldiers, causing scarcity of food in rural Bengal. At the same time, cyclones caused heavy floods, washing away standing crops, severely affecting, in particular, the life of the poor Bengal. Black marketing became rampant, the basic necessities were out of the reach of the poor and the scarcities pushed many a life towards death."1 The horrifying nemesis of daily deaths of thousands became a familiar scene all over Bengal. In 1943, according to an estimate, 3.5 million died.

But, this fatal tragedy, as we view it today, made a striking impact among the intelligentsia and the common man, all over the country, more particularly so in Bengal.
That prompted the concern, which dealt not only with the problems that are discussed above, but also in terms of aesthetics, traditions or even nationalism. By the word concern, I mean the examination of the factors present in the individual and society that determine both the differences and similarities in performance of individual expression. "This critical and rather analytical situation forced many a talented artist to join the leftist politics. Whereas, many others including senior and emerging artists preferred to tour over the famine affected countryside of Bengal in order to get a coherent vision and report the human predicaments in different media and methods under the title 'Hungry Bengal.' The famine that has shocked the country, now became the subject of discussion for the intellectuals in India. Both the writers and artists consequentially started depicting the life in all its earthly facets, the human struggle and survival became the inevitable gestures in their expression and thus, a new subjectivity was born."

The Bengal famine proved that a significant contemporary event, deep-rooted in socioeconomic and political factors, could be an emphatic source of authentic, artistic creation. Irrespective of style or mode of expression, many artists came up at this juncture with promising talent and expression. For instance, Somnath Hore, who had involved himself in the leftist politics, was one among them. Hore, with the help of his mentor Chittaprasad, has a great share in dealing with the contemporary issues via his deep expressive sketches and black-and-white vigorous woodcut prints. His personal experiences of hardship have become ingrained in his memory, imagination and feelings and were well expressed in his works. The source of these imageries was from nowhere but the social spectrum itself or more precisely the human suffering that had affected him the deepest. In one of his seminar papers, Ratan Parimoo comments: "The hungry people, the emaciated people, the diseased, hopeless people, people reduced to skeletons, the skeletons visible through rags or people with no clothes, the nakedness enhancing the severity of the condition, in particular, the emaciated young body may be his own self. The hungry and emaciated, reduced to skeletons, sit dejected with no hope left or remain reclined due to lack of strength. A hungry mother with no energy lay reclining, prostrated and on her fleshless, dry breast the hungry child sucks in vain."3

Besides Somnath Hore, there were several others, who, with their potential of transforming the tragic events of life, reached the heights of authentic artistic expression
through their media. Chittaprasad, Zainul Abedin, Ramkinkar Baij, etc., were the outstanding figures of their times, who, having been aware of the realities of life and its relentless struggle, have proved to be the exponents of these times. "A primitive rebel of modern sculpture, like Ramkinkar Baij, the images of starved, dying naked and dead peasants in the work of each of them stood out as symbols of justice denied to humanity" comments Pramabranjan Ray about Ramkinkar Baij and Hore. The active seniors, Chittaprasad and Zainul Abedin, had already begun their mission years before, they convincingly exposed their world in their works. The Bengal famine is revealed as an effective, crucial reality in their works. With all its accompanying horror, as an act of calculated barbarity of the time, yet possessing an evokable simplicity of manner in expression. The encapsulated ideas, emotions and attitudes of the time and the frequent, feverish struggle against constructing deadlines, reveal the breathless pace in the drawings of Chittaprasad.

I think it would be appropriate to mention here the role of photography in spreading the horror-stricken pictures of hungry Bengal all over the country. The photographs of famine-stricken Bengal taken by Sunil Janah forced people to pay attention to the terrible reality in Bengal. As the pictures portrayed the reality, people immediately got acquainted with the facts. The pictures as well as the prints of the senior artists added a further dimension to the reality in order to agitate the hearts of people. Like painters and sculptors, writers too have tried to approach the famine through different perspectives. Not surprisingly, many Indian writers, who studied the Bengal famine as a phenomenon of poverty, thought that famine was a result of inhumanity and injustice meted out by British rulers. Some of the writers have made a remarkable contribution to the theory of justice, whereas others responded to the human predicament resulting from the famine as individuals not motivated by any particular ideology or articulated political policy of an organization.

If we investigate thoroughly the reality of the art creations inspired by Bengal famine, we observe that the sheer magnitude of the famine was due to the inhuman policy of the government that forced art to resort to a direct portrayal of victims with the sharpness of a political diatribe. Before we discuss further, it is better to have a look at the senior, leading artists of the time and the perspectives with which they had viewed the
slaughter of human life. To one's surprise, there appears to be no initiative from the elder generation. Even though the younger generation of artists were moved deeply by the famine, strangely enough, the renowned names such as Nandalal Bose, his guru Abanindranath Tagore as well as their disciples, except Ramkinkar Baij, did not show enough reaction to project the proper expressive comment on such tragic famine. But in retrospect of the crisis like the Bengal famine, what we comprehend today is that it was like an earthquake that overturned the then art scene in India and different attitudes began to rise in its place. Though Kala Bhavan had secured for itself as the centre of leading artists and contemporary thoughts, the pressures and Western aesthetic advances of the time reduced the importance of Santiniketan. Instead, there was a shift in focus to the various other metropolitan cities in India.

The famine had disrupted the regular practice of the artists in Kala Bhavan and the chaotic confusion due to the rising importance of Western influence was so critical that the artists were unable to express effectively through their media. Instead, they took to leadership roles in charity works, only to consolidate their belief in helping the needy and to restructure the community feeling among the artists, artisans and ordinary people in Santiniketan. Thus, they were unable to exploit the social conditions and their outrage of emotions and translate it effectively in their artistic expressions. The artistic process almost became stagnant, the artists unable to scale the needs and aspirations of the once leading centre in India, their contribution insignificant during this period; almost turned Santiniketan into a charity house. The artists in Calcutta, Bombay and Delhi were already expressing their empathic visions for the downtrodden multitude in India. They received successful appreciation from the Indian intellectuals and political circles.

The impact of this great famine extended even to the post-independence years. According to Somnath Hore, such obsession of an 'idée fixe' might appear sentimental to other artists of the time. "But beyond this, he did not consider it as an event from the past that is kept alive subjectively, he explored the universal aspects behind the theme and found them as tokens of man's inhumanity and social feelings that are being re-enacted endlessly in different guises." However, our major concern in this chapter will concentrate on the expressive depictions of Zainul Abedin, Chittaprasad and Somanth Hore. Our intention here is to reveal some of their motivations and attitudes by understanding their
use of various languages of individual expression that could be considered as their precise points of view, rather than elaborate on what has been done already. A display of few of their works would be appropriate as to take brief glimpse of them, as this chapter has already explained the situations in the critical years of the forties.

As a matter of fact, we can see the second generation – the successors of Bengal school’s epoch – who were zealous artists eager to imbibe new ideas and create a new direction in those critical years of the decade of the 40s. In fact, this epoch happened to be the area when the struggle for freedom and self-determination was reaching its climax in 1947. Later on, we see the post-independence years leading to some characteristic changes. The widening of the intellectual horizons that came in the wake of political struggle and a certain socioeconomic realm added new dimensions to the otherwise stereotype academic projections and attitudes. The more adventurous among the then upcoming younger painters cheerfully flounder in the fascinating wilderness of new themes and techniques introduced by the major Western movements. With regard to the variations of themes and concerns on one hand and the stress and strain of contemporary life on the other, we may say that even a casual look at such works as the gripping Famine sketches, prints and even some posters of those patriotic and humanist artists, viz., Zainul Abedin, Chittaprasad and Somnath Hore, are enough to convince the reader and viewer that one is moving into a new world altogether different from that of the serene, soothing depictions of the elder traditionalists.

As a conclusion, we will see that the tragedy of the great Bengal famine served as a forge for refining the metal heart of pre-independence Indian art scenario and thus, repelled and replaced the old canons, updating Indian art. The Indian artists began grouping themselves, shouting new slogans, opposing the old masters of Bengal school, to imbibe new attitudes as well as comprehension. The post-independence artists could draw inspiration from new substance as well as new energetic power that enabled them to turn the tables over the old masters and their rules, beliefs as well as the strict domination on everything that concerned art. A new epoch of contemporary art started from then on, the situation was critical and in real trouble and this can be aptly termed as a turning point in contemporary Indian art. This great change was eagerly supported by the ‘Calcutta Group’ (founded in 1943), the ‘Progressive Artists Group’ of Bombay (founded in 1947) as well as
the Delhi's 'Silpi Chakra' (founded in 1947). The great upheaval reached almost all parts of the country by the middle of this century.

ZAINUL ABEDIN, 1917-1976
The Doyen of Expressive Depictions

The Bengal famine as we realize during the course of this research has exerted a profound influence on the course of modern Indian printmaking. The psyche of Chittaprasad and Smonath Hore was deeply affected by this tragic natural phenomenon and hauntingly depicted in their prints, sketches and posters. Zainul Abedin, a contemporary of Chittaprasad, had already carved a niche for himself, with his expressionist execution in printmaking as well as painting scenario. Zainul, as a teacher, had influenced and moulded many aspiring artists. Somnath Hore is one of his illustrious students that could imbibe from his master the very ethos of human feeling in his artwork.

While Chittaprasad toured rural Bengal, the chronicler of the Calcutta scenario was Zainul Abedin. In 1938, he had just completed his course of studies at the Government Art School, Calcutta and was immediately appointed to a teaching post by the erstwhile principal Mukul Dey. Zainul had formed a grasp over the academic realist skills. However, the Famine sketches saw him coming down to the rudiments of ink and dry-brush on coarse cheap wrapping paper. There is no loud protest in his pictures. Almost in the manner of a fact-sheet of the Famine, he placed the figures squarely on the centre of the field of vision with the surrounding accessories reduced to the barest minimum. By singling out figure by figure, Zainul builds up an iconography of the Famine, compelling the viewers to acknowledge the disaster.

Zainul was twenty-six years old, when the great famine of 1943 had gripped Bengal. The young art teacher, who had run away from home as a boy, to grow up as a painter of romantic landscapes and sensuous Santhal tribal women, was shocked at this cruel vision of fate. In the descriptive documentation text on Bengal famine, Jalaluddin Ahmed has at length discussed the role of Zainul as an artist. "One day he saw a mother and child, this time very different from what he was familiar to see in the peaceful time. He forgot his art classes and went back to his basement room almost in a trance. That evening he painted his 'Madonna of Bengal' 1943," a vigorous drawing with the barest economy of line on buff background. It depicted a child scavenging for milk in the famishing breast.
of a horrifying skeleton, which was not long ago, its mother! The intrigued, innocent and unquenched search of the child stood out as the most eloquent commentary on the entire tragic situation and haunted the viewer with a challenge of which nobody seemed to know the answer."

Zainul was deeply impressed by these tragic and inhuman scenes - bins with dogs and crows - that could otherwise be skirted past on the pavements, as if those dying multitudes never existed. If one examines Zainul’s human figures, he will find that none of these destitute entities look out at you – they do not address us. It is worthwhile to quote Sanjoy Mallik, who visualized these particular inhuman events intellectually; “His images reflect what ‘Greenough’ has discussed as the issue of ‘fatalism’ among the famine victims of 1943 ....that the victims accepted virtually without protest, their victimization.... there is little evidence that abandoned peasants resisted their fate....while there were instances of unusual violence during the Famine, neither food rioting nor insurrection seems to have been a typical accompaniment of starvation. While Greenough’s analysis argues sufficiently on the psychology of this fatalism, the issue of possible organized ‘insurrection’ remains to be addressed with reference to the political movements and the space and nature of their operation.”

Zainul Abedin was widely recognized and known for his remarkable collection of brush drawings of 1943 Bengal famine. The horror of starving hordes of people and emaciated hopeless corpses, surrounded by watchful ravens, are dramatically caught in fluent brush strokes through varied sensitive lines in his works. The well-known continental etcher and art critic Dr. Reiser writes, “Zainul has succeeded to an extraordinary degree in depicting the horrors of such scenes. No shading or washed-in planes were required to create an outstanding artistic and humane document. In some way, these drawings remind us in their dramatic effect of some of Goya’s etchings, although the volumes are entirely given here by the tension and variation of brush lines. The influence of the great Eastern tradition of pure line is distinctly visible in his work.” Stark, bare and bizarre - Zainul’s famine sketches were the culmination of earlier lessons in realism, which he had learned and then used in his simple, yet rustic scenes and figures.

The predicament of Bengal famine so forcefully dominated the mind of Zainul that he could not think of an expression devoid of human tragedy that shook the very core of
his own sensitivity. He suffered as he witnessed men around him falling in the abyss of unjustifiable inhuman situation. He mastered the portrayal of those scenes in his expressive sketches. He executed a large number of such famine sketches with an amazing speed and efficiency, all on ordinary pieces of brown wrapping paper or straw board, with Indian ink and brush and yet with the vibrant tones of emotion and involvement.*143 It took only a little time to find the name of Zainul uttered and mentioned in the artistic circles, especially between the serious artists in India. Though, he did not care for media, reputation or fame, all came to him as a bestowal for his sincerity and humane qualities. A few years later after the famine, while reflecting on the same, one of his critics Stuart Griffin wrote: "Like a Goya angry over captive sufferings all over what wounds and war to do human beings, Zainul grew angry and like the Spaniard, he painted with anger. Day and night he sketched, for days on and on, his eyes glued to the terrible panorama 2000 sketches were there to depict the Indian horror for any one to come and see and try to fathom. A young, virtually unknown artist became almost immediately recognisable."

Zainul was born in 1917 in a pastoral and paddy-growing district of East Bengal. He grew up in an atmosphere of unsophisticated life. As the river Brahmaputra flowed majestically, winding its course through the countryside, Zainul grew up as a child. "There on the banks were fishermen's little huts nestling amidst tall, graceful palm trees and coconut groves, suddenly brought to life by strong-muscled boatmen pulling their boats and ferries to anchor. And women working in the fields, with their shapely graceful figures almost bare; agonized by the vagaries of tropical life out in sun and rain. It was this simple beauty, with its sad introspection and a certain tragic quality about it, which he later deftly captured in the scaffolds of his brisk, bold and strong lines and his soft, glistening water colours." Zainul had imbibed the soft, natural hues of the paddy fields, the lakes and rivers and thus possessed an exquisite sense of colour and live rhythm in his works.

Unlike many other artists, his very early paintings and sketches brought him international fame in the beginning of his career itself. Zainul painted extensively in a wide variety of styles that ranged from pure objectivity, almost photographic, semi-abstract studies and various abstract compositions as well. Yet, his very expressionistic attitude was reflected in every style of his - even in his abstraction. This attitude of his working in different styles reveals his urge to discover something new and innovative, wide enough to
explore his talent and this helped him to scale new horizons in the world of art. On one hand he could express the emotional attitudes in different methods and on the other, he experienced and mastered the core of the art language. Besides his favourite watercolours, brush and ink, he also handled oils and produced some lovely figure studies like his tempera painting of 1950, the ‘Santhal Maidens’*4 and at the same time, he used different kinds of colours. Among his mixed media and egg tempera studies, two works seem to be particularly outstanding – ‘Women with Pitchers’*5 and ‘Toilet.’ It appears that Zainul had great, unique ability to fuse the East with the West. Almost all of his works reflect his attitude of correlating different idioms. However, in some of his sketches, one can notice some kind of influences by the portrait depictions of those of Jamini Roy. But this attitude did not last for a long time. Zainul, always looks forward to improve his projection in a quite up to date depiction.*4*7

It is worthwhile here to notice in his early famine paintings the discernible and definite search of poised and restrained expression. This aspect is stressed impressively in his further evolved work like ‘Goon-Tana,’ gouache, c.1956*6 and ‘Santhal Maidens.’*4 Erich Newton points out, while commenting on watercolours and paintings he produced in this period, “The water-borne vegetable market is a joyful, colourful sight, full of details bound together by the rhythmic sweep of the boats. The spacing of the main masses is oriental; the observed fact is occidental. Again and again, the placing of each feature is reminiscent of Asia, yet the detail itself might have been drawn by an English watercolourist.*5 It is this ability to fuse the East and the West that makes the student of art watch out for Zainul’s future work with considerable optimism.”*5

Zainul was an astute draughtsman. With the bare economy of lines and use of empty space, he succeeded in creating astounding effects; yet never missing the quality of emotional power, while reducing into simple lines and spaces. Perhaps, it was this quality, which attracted him towards etching and a break from oil painting. “An artist who can draw like this should etch” – wrote John Buckland Wright, adding, “Zainul’s drawings have the directness and power which is inherent in all good etchings. I believe that with dry-point etching, soft ground and sugar aquatint, his already considerable means of expression will be greatly increased and will provide him with enormous benefit of the
The quite secondary advantage of etching: that of multiplication etching will give the far wider public which he deserves.

In 1947, when Pakistan emerged as an independent country, Zainul Abedin drew up plans for an art institute at Dhaka and which has since grown to be the finest institution in Bangladesh, imparting instruction in fine arts and graphic art through a five-year course. Though he was the principal and at the same time, the head of painting department; “He managed to find time for paying a painter’s tribute to El-Greco’s house in Spain; spent weeks of wayside sketching in Mexico; flew to Japan to learn the techniques of Japanese printmaking, especially coloured woodcuts. And he simply disappeared into the fascinating wilds of Bangladesh’s tribal hill tracts to return after months of hectic semi-primitive living, armed with fondly collected specimens of tribal and folk art; his scrap-books full of a thousand sketches of high quality and also amazing, powerful drawings.”

In Zainul’s Famine depictions, one can see, the figures of anonymous victims, blocked out in solid tones of a darker hue, are lost in an empty nowhere landscape, caught in the famished and hopelessness that seem to envelop them. Perhaps, it is possible to read into this loneliness. Many of his images are either those of mothers clutching on to their children or undefined groups, scattered, singles, dumb and damned, that very picture of disrupted social cohesion. One can observe that the significance of this artist relies on several factors. Firstly, he was one of those senior masters, who are rooted to East Bengal by birth and love, like Chittaprasad and Somnath Hore. Secondly, these three artists were the most deeply involved men in depicting the tragic events of the Bengal famine and therefore, introduced a new approach to the subject matter in Indian art. They all are deep-rooted in social reality.

In the years since his earliest paintings and sketches brought him international acclaim, Zainul has painted extensively, in a wide variety of styles ranging from the purely objective and expressionist, to various abstract and semi-abstract studies. Besides his other favourite tools, he also handled colour etchings. However, in his post-famine delineations, there was discernible and definite search for poise and restraint, which marks his more mature works like his gouache ‘Goon-Tana’ c.1956 and his colour etching ‘Poise’ c.1959. These two semi-abstract works are quite outstanding and reveal his advanced interpretation.
Zainul, as a person was shy, sensitive, yet strong willed and powerful to become the leading artist of Dhaka Art Group. His paintings and drawings, as well as his etching, which had become his favourite medium since the late 50s, had been widely appreciated for their innovative and experimental qualities, in the exhibitions organized by UNESCO and various international bodies. During the 50s and the 60s, he held solo exhibitions in the United Kingdom, France, Japan, Medico and United States.

If any art historian or art critic were to write about the history of contemporary Indian art, we have no need to doubt that he has surely to mention about Zainul Abedin as one of the leading artists of the renaissance builders of Indian art. This will happen regardless of all contradictions, discriminations and religious prejudices, I believe.

**Beyond the Boundaries**

Zainul’s noble attitude for his lovely great country, India, though later on he remained on the other separated side, made him a special man among the artists and he also shared this attitude with his native contemporary artists, and masters like A.R. Chughtai and Safiuddin Ahmed. Safiuddin was his colleague. Here, what concerns us more is all about Zainul’s sincere contribution to enrich the contemporary Indian art. And it seems to us that he has done well all about in many ways, as an art teacher, as an art lover and above all, as a passionate human being. His attitude remained unchanged, when he was a prominent teacher of art in Calcutta, but that remained in him even after the tragic separation of his beloved country in 1947.

Sandip Sarkar, re-stresses this point to convince us: “Bijn Chaudhary has always been in the ethic of things and very radical in his opinions. As a younger student, along with his colleague, Somnath Hore had to leave the Government College of Art, Calcutta. After partition, Zainul Abedin, one of their teachers, had just started an art college in Dhaka and he welcomed Bijan to live and to have a steady job in Dhaka. Here, with Abedin’s blessings, Bijan married.” Perhaps it is interesting to reveal a little about this younger artist. In the late fifties, Bijan was one of the key figures around whom the art movement of Calcutta revolved. As a founder member of the Society of Contemporary Artists, he worked with full spirit, but later resigned with the other members such as Prakash Karmakar, Nikhil Biswas, 1930-1966 and Ahibushan Mallick from the group. It is worthwhile to mention some events, which may reveal about the tragic impact of those
days, when Zainul was still there as a senior artist of Calcutta with his outstanding colleagues Safiuddin Ahmed, a master in the technique of printmaking. The younger and promising artists and their colleagues were growing up, when the country was passing through a period of crisis. "As growing up children, they had witnessed the famine of 1943 and the war, when they were adolescents the riots that culminated in the partition of the country and shook the whole province of Bengal in 1946-47. The exodus of millions of people was as traumatic an experience as the fall of Paris was to the French people during the Second World War. Later the crisis deepened in West Bengal, moving from catastrophe to catastrophe." 

With this, the excellent senior artist started to imbibe their fresh ideas and innovative thinking from the younger generation, who were full of potential of exploring the changing circumstances as a subject matter and source for their creative activities. In fact, their main attitude was to deal with their own daily life issues and problems. They also came closer to take their share in the people's concerns and suffering. They preferred to deal with the present chaos, than going back to the old idioms and methods, and by this attitude, completely rejecting the goals and qualities of the conventional understanding of the role of fine arts.

Depression and tragic events were the favourite themes for Nikhil Biswas. He approached the Bengal famine, wherein he inculcated the metaphorical image such as the brutality of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. There are also some other talented artists who exercised individually their empathy for the poor, downtrodden and oppressed. They realized that millions of Indians are suffering many privations and humiliation. One can observe, from this point, the group of younger artists growing up and willing to face their responsibilities; both in the context of art and society, after overcoming a lot of hurdles, yet to face new ones through all the inhuman games of the world they lived in. However, all the former events were having a great deal of deep and harmful effects on the Indian society, which persisted strongly for a long time. I think that Somnath Hore is the foremost of the artists, who are deeply penetrating the theme of the Great Bengal Famine. He is one of the major artists that became aware and also deeply impressed by these critical events and dramatic changes. Later on, we will see that he started his mission as a noble humanist printmaker projecting the core of his experienced knowledge concerning his involvement.
in these critical years of the 40s. One can say, he fully cast himself in the formative themes of these events. However, he stuck tightly to such themes. Somnath has had already generated his own trademark. The following section will highlight the expressive linocuts of Chittaprasad – Somnath’s guru. In the next, we will give due emphasis and highlight on Somnath’s prints.

CHITTAPRASAD, 1915-1978
Master of Expressionist Prints

Chittaprasad was described as a man of great physical appeal – handsome, tall with broad shoulders, prominent nose and large attractive deep-set eyes. These were just the visible attributes of his personality, what really remained unseen about him and recognizable by only few was his chivalrous heart. In the words of Somnath Hore, “He was sometimes irascible, sometimes intolerant. Yet for some people, his affection was boundless. I have received nothing but love from him. I knew little about his personal life. He would spend all his time immersed in his painting and music. When I first met him, he was busy drawing innumerable pictures of the hopeless men and women, who were the victims of the Bengal famine of the early forties. These pictures were regularly appearing in “People’s War’ and ‘Janajuddha,’ the organs of the Communist Party.”

Chittaprasad was born in 1915 in West Bengal. He completed his higher secondary studies in Chittagong, now in Bangladesh. As a young boy, he drew inspiration and encouragement from village potters, painters and puppet makers. This early exposure and experience virtually got imprinted in his works throughout his career. Amit Mukhopadhyay comments thus, “It was so strong that throughout his artistic career, he fell back repeatedly on the sources of the traditional and folk style. The other important thing to happen in Chittaprasad’s life during this period was when he was in Chittagong he first came in contact with the Communist Party. He started doing sketch-portraits of the national leaders of the country. Later, he tried to seek admission in Kala Bhavan. There he met Rabindranath Tagore and made a quick sketch of him; because of which Rabindranath was so impressed with it that he advised Chittaprasad not to waste time in the Art College and continue his ‘sadhana’ in his own way.” Following Rabindranath Tagore’s advice, Chittaprasad gave up the idea of joining Kala Bhavan and decided to be on his own. To
establish himself as an artist at Chittagong, at that time was difficult for him. Therefore, he did what was customary for an ambitious artist. He migrated to Calcutta.

In Calcutta, he made a remarkable start as an artist with an important recognition of the leadership of a distinctive art movement, which had imbibed the ideology of the people’s struggle for freedom from the British. This was a period of great upheavals, both at national and international levels, and Chittaprasad found himself amidst people’s struggle against the hardships of life. He began to identify himself with the section of society condemned to misery and suffering for centuries, battling for survival against all odds, living the life of a poor man, yet working for the common cause. That finally made him an artist of the masses, the poor and suffering. His compassion and sympathy for the poor and miserable are quite effectively expressed in his works and still admired. He tried to retain in his works the sheer beauty of life that is unobserved by presenting the simple and inexhaustible joyous moments of family life, music, dance, festivals and community celebrations. He could also reveal his excitement at them through gaiety of expression and rhythmic composition, capturing them with freshness and precision.

Though, basically a self-taught artist, his genre of expression had always the power to surpass others. He considered life itself as the best teacher and believed that he could learn everything from the school called world, and from his own manner of leading life. He admits that during his childhood, the countryside artists and artisans were influential in his developing such an attitude. He preferred to be unsettled during his entire life, as he used to be in the formative years. Though as a child, he had spent many hours with those village artists of Bengal, it was his mother, who drew out her son’s hidden natural talent for fine art and encouraged him a great deal to develop in his own way. He remains indebted to his mother, for imbuing him with the spirit of nationalism too.

In 1939, the Second World War broke out. Unprepared for the war, the British government in India panicked and initiated harsh, cruel measures, especially in sensitive border areas. “The scorched earth policy after the Japanese invasion in 1941 of Chittagong countryside brought untold misery to the people. For months together, Chittaprasad moved from village to village with teams of voluntary workers who were trying to bring some succor to the suffering multitude. During this period, he came to know the people intimately and their rich folk culture, he drew and painted them with great devotion and
fell in love with them." It was since then that he started sketching and making prints concerning the village life, more particularly with emphasis on children, women, their festivals as well as other cultural activities along with their struggle against all discords in life. Perhaps it is worth knowing what Somnath Hore wrote about Chittaprasad's particular concern for people: "He was my first mentor. He took me to draw portraits of hungry, sick and dying people.

Whenever he was in Chittagong, Chittaprasad gave me company. From morning till evening, I used to accompany him on his rounds. At night, I would watch him deftly fill out the pencil sketches done throughout the day with brush and Chinese ink in the light of a lantern. I remember him saying - "Somnath, see this poor girl standing here, how big her eyes are and what a hair! How long has she had something to eat? Her burning eyes seem to pop out of their sockets. Her collar bones, her ribs, the poor girl is sticking out of her skin." These words as recounted by Somnath Hore exhibit the depth of intimacy and relation between him and Chittaprasad which with all possible potential and effectiveness continued to shine between them. Not surprisingly, this influential friendship made a definite impact on Somnath Hore's artistic career too. Recalling yet another incident with Chittaprasad, Somnath says, "I would listen making vague sounds of agreement. I could understand he was talking to himself, reliving the scene in his mind and breathing life into the picture. Once he came back with a large number of pictures; sitting in the commune, he would hold them up one by one and describe the circumstances. Listening to the descriptions and watching the pictures, I would become entranced. He was quite ill from a month's irregular living, but he did not care."

As we track Chittaprasad's innovations and contributions in the printmaking field, the period from 1946 to 1965 seems to be the most hectic and vital period in his entire artistic career. This phase may be considered as the second phase of his career. During these years, he came up with substantial amount of outstanding works, which he could never repeat in any other phase of his career. Although he possessed a strong, unsurpassable personality, he respected and admired his colleagues and masters. By masters, we mean the senior artists of Bengal. We have enough evidence to state that Chittaprasad was a great admirer of the doyen of Shantiniketan - Nandalal Bose. One can, therefore, see a glimpse of Nandalal's influence on him, in his drawings and

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linocuts. But, as we probe further through Chittaprasad's woodcut prints, notwithstanding the influences, we discover the quality of a very advanced method and approach achieved by using bold figuration, evoking conflict between light and dark areas; at the same time using the expressive inter-play of lines to add further dimension and effects to highlight the difficult and tragic atmosphere. His output of woodcut and linocut prints from around mid-forties up to mid-fifties still have the ascendancy that perhaps could compare only with the prints of Somnath Hore, Chittaprasad's eminent disciple. Both of them, undoubtedly, have left an indelible mark in the history of Indian creative printmaking.

The significance of Chittaprasad's work lies in his profound understanding of the human predicaments at various levels as well as the in-depth knowledge and command over the cultural traditions to which he belonged. His contemporaries were engaged in debates, still wondering as if to identify with the classical Indian tradition or to draw inspiration from the Western idioms, especially from expressionism movement. At such a juncture, Chittaprasad and a handful of his contemporaries alone faced the overpowering social realities of their time and portrayed them ably with natural ease, power and conviction.

Before we embark on a detailed analysis about the nature of Chittaprasad's and his friends' works, let us, in brief, understand his two distinct phases. As it seems to be, in his artistic career with reference to Amit Mukhopadhyay's point of view, "In the first phase lasting from 1935-46, he painted and drew with gusto from the direct experiences of the working class people's struggle and suffering. There was no single political line of struggle, which could evade his attention. The work of this phase bears a close resemblance to that of the 'patta' painting tradition of Bengal. In the 'India in Revolt' series, in the face of political oppression, the identity of national leaders and workers are clearly established by deft handling of the characters." Despite the deep passionate feeling for the poor and suffering, there raged a fire in Chittaprasad's mind against the oppressing class, which perhaps he imbibed from his belief in the Marxist ideology. The feelings intensified particularly against the British authority and autocratic measures during the famine as well as the Japanese invasion. "His deep conviction in the ideals of international Communist movement and its dream of a world society without exploitation, helped him to overcome his lack of formal training and to mature into an innovative artist"
handling different media and tools of artistic expression with great facility and charm. His strong desire for easy communication with the common people and his familiarity with our rich folk art forms endowed his work with dynamism and simplicity, says Prabhas Sen.

Chitta Prasad’s first-hand experience of the famine in Midnapore culminated in the account ‘Hungry Bengal.’ An eyewitness report of his travel through the district in November 1943, comprising of a written text and profuse illustrations, the book carried twenty-two of those pictures. But only a few rare copies of this document had survived. It is reported that as many as five thousand copies of its first and only-edition were confiscated and destroyed as soon as it was published. Chittaprasad was already associated with the Communist party. He came in contact with the party around 1937-38. However, Chittaprasad was recognized for his flair with political caricatures and posters. In fact, he has had effortless skill at providing the venue of a party convention at Calcutta with thousands of hand-drawn posters. During 1943-44, his accounts and sketches were appearing regularly in the party periodicals, notably the ‘Janajuddha.’ He was very much a member of the party engaged with its cultural front.

By mid-fifties onwards, the fine art scene in India, as we observe, became optimistically lively and with it too the artistic careers of some senior and junior artists obviously began to take shape. Those who were present on this new premise were ready to take their assumed roles in the social and political spectrum of the country. For instance, Zainul Abedin, who did a lot of expressive sketches depicting the human predicament at its depth, and also swore his allegiance with Chittaprasad’s approach towards the social and cultural ethos. Later on, we will see some other active artists, whose prints will be discussed in order to highlight their importance at a particular turning point of contemporary art and their significant in the field of Indian printmaking.

The second phase in Chittaprasad’s artistic career started in 1946, which continued till 1960. As one examines the crux of his works, there appears a substantial variation, though not in their content, but in the subjects and themes. His entire work can be divided into three groups as: illustrations, landscapes and events from daily life. From these three, I would consider the first one as the most important group of depictions. In such themes, Chittaprasad has done some striking and expressive prints concerning the life of children.
during colonial India, wherein he has not depicted the playfulness of childhood moods, but
has hauntingly portrayed their life of misfortunes. We will further refer to some of his
woodcut prints such as illustrations for children’s books, depiction of orphans, domestic
child-labour*15 and peasant’s apprentice,*8 to mention a few. The second group of his
depictions, as I have mentioned, consists of landscapes,*16 which personally I do not find
very significant or interesting. The third group of his depictions comprises of some select
events from daily life, which have been considered as the most inspiring from his entire
career. Since we have already discussed them, they do not require any further special
elaboration.

Chittaprasad left Calcutta for Bombay in 1946, to work for the leftist press. Discovering the possibilities in Bombay, he decided not to go back to Calcutta. The particular developments and flow of his life make an interesting, revealing study. His stay in Bombay is chequered with many bitter and less sweet experiences, both in his artistic career as well as in his personal life. He started experimenting with new media; his favourite wood-cut gave way to linocut. He also dabbled with other materials like pastels, tempera, oil and watercolours, and the peculiarity being that he was least familiar with them.*16 Another noticeable change in him was the abrupt and definite shift from overt political statements that was the inherent nature of his works, to more or less social and humanitarian*11 causes. “In 1949, Chittaprasad responded to the call of the World Peace Movement and gradually devoted his artistic pursuit to the children’s cause - their suffering, their anguish and happiness, their participation in the day-to-day working life. He made a series of telling linocuts,*15 depicting children’s miseries*15 in 1952, which was later published as ‘Angels without Fairy Tales.’*14 His devotion to the cause of children finally culminated in his magnum opus ‘Children’s Ramayana,*18 for which he himself made illustrations and wrote the text.”*8

Somnath Hore has aptly visualized Chittaprasad’s blooming career in Bombay in following words, “He used to do a lot of paintings of common people of Bombay such as fishermen, vegetable sellers, boys and girls, men, women and labourers. Once, at his request, I showed a set of these pictures to Nandalal Bose in Shantiniketan Nandalal was very pleased seeing the paintings and personally wrote to him in appreciation. Deeply moved, Chittaprasad wrote to me a highly emotional letter, which is fortunately still with
me in almost perfect condition."9 Overwhelmed by Nandalal's appreciation, Chittaprasad did quite a number of paintings that somehow got a medium success. Though nearly successful in his attempt at painting, it was but short-lived. He also made up his mind to branch out into some other media. He worked with some success as a backdrop painter and costume designer for the internationally reputed 'Little Ballet Troupe' of Maharashtra. Later, he founded his own puppet theatre. Talking about this venture, Amit Mukhopadhyay says, "In the late fifties, he founded his own puppet theatre in collaboration with the traditional Indian puppeteers. He wrote the plays and made puppets out of wood, coconut shells, rope and paint. Besides, he also made posters, political caricatures and a large number of book illustrations."\textsuperscript{10}

It was in the early sixties when we start to see the immense change in Chittaprasad's personality and attitude. The decade of the sixties may be considered as the neutral phase in his artistic career. In fact, it is his third phase when he pulled himself up from the root of being an exceptional printmaker and planted himself again in unsuitable and even polluted soil. This unpleasant phase led him to his fourth phase, which is full of turmoil and pushing him to his tragic and fatal end.

In order to highlight these serious events and the change that started from around the mid-60s till his death in 1978, we should assume a comparative perspective. Compared to the artistic activities of his early days, this kind of drifting placed the artistic genre of his early days on a plateau that was mismatched and irrelevant to his natural flair and aptitude. This great artist, who was a spectacular product of the Bengal famine, fashioned out by its tragedy and misery, was dragged into the whirlpool of deep turmoil. If one were to think that it was Chittaprasad's ebullient nature and unnecessary quest to grab things, one would be mistaken. This trait developed in him sadly, during his stay in Bombay, leading to unexpected ebb in his life. His efforts to have the prospect of a multifaceted career, pulled him down to the level of a mere artist,\textsuperscript{16} though this was not what was expected of him.

Remarking on this particular aspect, "From the early sixties, Chittaprasad was then beginning his experiments with puppets. I have heard they were exceptional creations. He looked after these puppets as if they were his children. He was in dire straits financially. Yet, if anyone extended a helping hand out of real fellow feeling and love, it only earned him his ire. He would drive him away, considering it an expression of pity and choosing
even to break off the friendship. At the same time, there were people, who cheated him in many ways, taking advantage of his bad times,"¹¹ says Somnath Hore.

There is an Arabian proverb, which says “Grasp all, lose all,” i.e., when you try to gain everything, in actually, you gain nothing! This was the case with Chittaprasad too. What actually happened was that he had involved himself with various tasks that could as well be done by talented local artisans. I suppose, by involving in activities regarding the foundation of theatre, the administrative and financial complications, he literally dragged himself into a grave. The burden affected his physical health, literally bending down his erect spine. The once handsome and tall build gradually lost his backbone, its forte, lovely shell and distinction!

Just before migrating to Bombay in 1946, Chittaprasad had informed Somnath Hore about some of his plans and projects to gain money. “I am going to paint” said Chittaprasad, “a painting sold today for three hundred rupees. I used all the money to buy this bouquet, oil paint and brushes,”¹² spending the entire amount as soon as it was earned. During that period, he did quite a lot of work in oil. But he moved away from the subject of war and famine and instead worked on historical and secular themes. Printmaking became secondary to him and he was even ready to give it up, unless it could be a monetary source. Finally, it happened that he turned himself into a full time painter, which was a wrong decision. What really happened was that he stepped down from the pedestal of a first class printmaker, master of printmaking techniques and powerful delineations of high quality of graphic art, to a third class painter with mere subject-matter; his techniques of painting were not really appreciated! Alas, nobody criticized and advised him on his change suggesting that such a move was a wrong one and would turn against him someday.

Even at the beginning of this venture, Nandalal Bose had appreciated him; perhaps, Nandalal had expected something different as he already knew about Chittaprasad's genius. But, still, he could have advised him to re-think, as I personally feel that he had the right to do so, being a master to whom Chittaprasad paid his respects. It seems to me, that all of them, though not intentionally, perhaps tried to drive him into a disastrous course by being ‘faithfully unfaithful’ to plunge him into a ditch. Perhaps, they were amusing themselves beholding Chittaprasad’s self-destruction. None seems to have a hold on his
will during this time and apparently if anyone tried, it only would have made him furious! He turned to alcohol, at such a juncture, and that became his inseparable companion. He seemed to have lost his mind, when he was forced to live in a shabby rented room in a clogged, working class area of Bombay. He lived there deeply frustrated until his death. Somnath Hore has this to comment about, “I have, however, never seen him drinking, had any woman love him; I would rather say she did the right thing. One cannot but love such a wonderful man, a man who had so great a heart. Yet the torment that entails is no less great. Till death, for a long time, this suffering bestowed a great deal of fame on him, but it extracted a lot from him as well. No blame can be attached to such a tussle between giving and receiving in the life of so sublime an artist.”

Howsoever tragic the events turned out to be in the last years of his life, the place this man holds as a printmaker amidst modern Indian art scene is undoubtedly dignified. He came up on Indian art scene during the days of a great social disaster, viz., Bengal famine communal riots and struggling against the hardships and that very struggle ironically prolonged till his death! The splendid opportunities that he got from Calcutta, working and experiencing with his prominent contemporaries, helped him a great deal to mould his personality. As he was able to imbibe and internalize the new thoughts and awareness that had spread among his generation in art, particularly with people like Zainul Abedin, Haren Das, Hore, Benode Bihari Mukherjee and Ramkinkar Baij, there grew in him a strong concern that art should not be something devoid of the spirit of life, i.e., the life of suffering. This burning spirit for life and art, he carried in his bosom almost throughout his life. With his unsurpassable skill and command over printmaking medium, the depth of human emotions and feeling, and the outstanding power of expression, he has indeed carved a niche for himself in the history of printmaking.

Presently, one observed that there are artists who aim for material gains, media popularity - all in order to gain so-called ‘social status’ in the society. Art is for such persons just a means to achieve the fake glittery of high society. But Chittaprasad remained on the contrary, far away from all this, though he too had, at times, to seek financial considerations. His fatal obsession with painting and betrayal of his natural forte - printmaking - is the only eclipse of his illustrious career. He is cherished as one of the finest printmakers that modern Indian art has ever produced. Prabhas Sen’s comment aptly
suns up the conclusion on this great printmaker, “Chittaprasad was one of the most significant artists, a colourful personality of the mid-twentieth century India. His life of self-imposed poverty combined with the most scrupulous honesty, a stern sense of self respect, an unbounded capacity for love and warmth, and his towering handsome personality makes his career a fascinating and inspiring study. His works are of lasting value; his creations have a message of hope for the humanity. If properly preserved, they will convey the artist’s message for generations to come.”

**SOMNATH HORE**

**The Patriot and the Humanist; A Retrospective Approach**

In India, printmaking today has made spectacular progress in unraveling the mysteries of creative minds. There have been so many artists working and experimenting with this medium as to effuse out their creative potential onto the ethereal demonstrative. This progress has allowed us to gain deeper insight into the different aspects of the medium, methods and, above all, about the artists and their differing temperaments. Somnath Hore, being one of the major printmakers in the country, has proved to be a genius in the field with his vital expression and audacity. He has pursued printmaking for more than forty years, and used the medium to express mainly the political feelings and attitudes towards the inhuman and tragic events of the great Bengal famine of 1943.

In the early 40s, Safiuddin Ahmed and Haren Das were Hore’s teachers of printmaking at Calcutta College of Arts and the mentor of them was Zainul Abedin, the senior painter, who later on took to printmaking with different themes. At the same time, there was Runkinkar Baij at Kala Bhavan, inspiring all the blooming artists, at least, those who wanted to change and see the world from a different perspective, into some new and relevant ethos. Meanwhile, India was fighting for her freedom, while Bengal was still striving to survive the tragedy of the great famine. It took a long stride for Somnath to arrive at his own pavement and a language with his own vocabulary. Perhaps, because there were a lot of people to inspire and instruct, equally strong and bold as Somnath in their visions and understanding. But, Somnath was steady, though slow, from the very beginning with his firm steps.

The great Bengal famine of 1943 had seminal influence on him to develop into a more humane artist and man. The concerns and fetishism, that the famine had created in
him, to show us how striking was the impact of famine, to recollect and remember the human predicament into an artist’s expression. His beginning was with quite a number of academically realistic works, even though they were of an outstanding quality as seen in his earlier wood carvings, woodcuts and drawings, they are done in a more descriptive and narrative manner with an abbreviated academic realism. But, later on, we see that he had changed into a more powerful style and language that are appreciated. There are only a few artists, who could objectify their personal and social experiences in terms of sufficient emotive potential to evoke in the viewer a sense of value and judgment of the situations. In that way, Somnath Hore seems to be an exceptional man, not only as an artist, but also as a patriot and humanist. This distinguished artist was born in 1921 in Chittagong. As he was growing up, he sensed he was surrounded by the indescribable miseries of the poor that toiled endlessly, but the fruits of their toil were enjoyed by the rich. That evoked an ‘intuitive’ sympathy to raise in him for the poor and the suffering multitude. It touched the depth, when he was uprooted and moved over to Calcutta.

Art in Bengal, however, acquired a new social and political orientation in the 40s, when a large number of artists were shocked at the devastation wrought by famine and war. R. Siva Kumar has a specific vision about these events, “The suffering they witnessed all around them compelled many to leave their romantic arbour, at least temporarily, while others discovered their mission and were permanently transformed. That the alarming proportion of the famine is owing to the inhuman policy of the government gave vent to straightforward portrayal of victims and a sharpened political diatribe. The response to the famine often merged with different reactions.” However, no common style or aesthetics emerged and artists like Ramkinkar, Zainul Abedin and Chittaprasad employed folk, academic and modern formal devices respectively. Paritosh Sen, a member of Calcutta Group responded to the famine and carried it forward into his later work, taking expressionist, witty and satirical views of the scene by turns.

Somnath Hore was interested in producing posters, which gave him an opportunity to express himself, though in a naive way. “My posters were usually put up in market places, shops and on trees. Soon in 1943, there was a wide spread famine, which lead to scarcity of food, starvation, and venereal diseases. People were dying due to lack of food and medical care. In such an atmosphere, it was exhilarating to produce political posters
with slogans and illustrations.” Meanwhile, Chittaprasad, the renowned artist and party activist, was engaged in wielding his pen and brush to record the human misery; exerted a remarkable influence on Somnath Hore. He initiated Somnath to sketch the suffering people, whom they used to meet on streets and in hospitals. He was also encouraged by the district committee of the Communist Party to work even overnight in order to make more posters. In this way, he was able to execute many successful posters with powerful expression. During this time, with the help of his comrades, he exhibited and displayed these posters in the villages and small towns. Chittaprasad’s sketches along with those of Somnath were published in ‘Peoples’ War,’ the weekly journal of Communist Party of India.

The turning point in Somnath’s career and life was when he started living in Calcutta around 1945 and meeting the senior artists. There, he entered the Calcutta College of Art and became a pupil of Zainul Abedin, who had made a name by depicting the victims of the famine with powerful emotion in his works. Somnath felt inspired by Abedin and his works as well. “The way he taught and talked to us was a treat for us, the first-year students,” says Hore, “Although he was not actively associated with the Communists, his brush was free of partisanship. His empathy for the exploited was immense and he was sympathetic to the cause just because an enthusiastic pupil of his was intent on mastering the technique of drawing and painting. Often a monotonous exercise, doggedly pursued, this aim of sharpening my perception, coming as I did from a rural background, I had difference about my vision and capabilities, which is still with me.”

One may observe that it was quite natural to Somnath to be attracted to Zainul Abedin and his works that were based on the great famine. As he himself had the same deep concern for such themes, he could find himself captured in Abedin’s work more in a perceptive way.

Somnath’s sketches, posters and portraits started to be published in the year 1944. These expressive artworks were portraying the scenes of the ‘Famine’ with the pictures of suffering and dying peasants. All these works were line drawings that showed contours and enhanced by tonal devices. “Even in his hesitant sketches and drawings, there were certain elements, albeit, in archaic form, which were to become lifelike motifs for Somnath’s later days’ works. Though those elements were very much real and when he experienced them
during the famine in his drawings and sketches, they assumed almost symbolic qualities portending of the whole. Somnath's human and animal figures were almost skeletal with thorax appearing as a cage of ribs with each rib jutting out prominently."

The Bengal Famine of 1943 and the communal riots of 1946, between Hindus and Muslims and particularly the second partition of Bengal in 1947 also had stirred the soul of creative artists of Bengal and their pictures projected the predicament of hunger, decay and death. This had made a sentimental influence on Somnath as was reflected in his works. Generally speaking, we can say, in Somnath's generation, the artists were growing up through endless turmoil as the country was passing through an era of crises. There were things that always used to give them painful shocks as to dismantle their whole mental construction and as a result, they often could not keep settled. In 1943, they fell amidst the famine and war and their fragile results followed even thereafter for a long time. Then there came the partition and communal riots that were more severe and inhuman. They were equally worst and ravaging as the famine. The young Somnath, along with other prominent artists of his temperament, started depicting the grim tragedy in their works. Prominent artists like Zainul Abedin (1917-1976), Ramkinkar Baij (1906-1980) and Chittaprasad (1913-1978) were there with the younger artist Somnath to share this prefix of a powerful beginning with a reliable understanding of the circumstances. This start had given an admirable dimension to the then vivid changes of plastic language in India.

However, Bengal was in despair. On 4th January 1947, the police opened fire on peasants in Dinajpur district, killing some landless peasants on the spot. Several of the peasants received bullet injuries. The Communist party in India showed a genuine interest in forging connections between writers and artists and peasants and working class insurgency. In December 1946, Somnath was a student in the second year at Calcutta Government Art School, but he was eager to go to North Bengal to make sketches directly from life after having a look at the Tebhaga movement. Somnath's 'Tebhaga Diary' consisted of mainly sketches and portraits of the local leaders of the Tebhaga movement. Some of these drawings were done in a photographic naturalism that only hung on the surface and their stylization often tended to make them quite evocative of meanings that were made explicit. The later development of Somnath as a printmaker and sculptor fully bear out what was not so apparent, but was a surmounting possibility in the drawings and
sketches of the Diary. To clarify the impact of those early sketches on the later works of Somnath Hore, we better go through the words of Pranabranjan Ray: “The illustrated Diary acts as a key to the fuller understanding of Somnath’s later work; here a note of caution must also be sounded. Somnath began his career as a visual artist by drawing sketches of the mutilated, dead bodies of victims of Japanese bombing in 1942. In 1943, he sketched the skeletal figures of the starved and dead victims of the famine. Since then, all through his creative career, it is the suffering of the wounded and the humiliated, to which Somnath has reacted with all his being and all his creative resources. His imagery is replete with indicators of wounded and suffering.”

We can refer here to Hore’s bold and effective wood engravings ‘Peasants’ Meeting I’ and ‘Peasants’ Meeting II’, both executed around the late 40s. Such expressive prints give meaning to the ‘Tebhaga’ movement that had remained unfinished and been abandoned. What the sharper opposition of black and white in these pictures underscores is a kind of illumination, a light glowing on the faces, chiselling them out of the darkness... “Hore brings to the experience of the night meetings the glow of awareness and faith that blazed in the villages he visited in 1946. Unlike Chittaprasad, who gave it all up from a sense of betrayal, Hore persisted with a dogged determination in his penetration of a reality, which he defines in terms of man’s inhumanity to man, power riding roughshod over people, leaving them destitute and broken, with no fresh mobilization in sight. To penetrate into that reality, Hore set up for himself the barriers of material which he has to break into.” It was the late 60’s, when Hore acquired a new process for his career, his vision of wounds bears within it the experience of Tebhaga movement and the way it has receded into the past and memory, leaving only the impression of an enormous wound. Samik Bandyopadhyay has a close approach to these wounds; “A wound created by a kind of betrayal, which was not just political, but moral in the deepest sense. Hore has travelled a long way from those early, sunny sketches of a rural community in its first flush of a sense of power and achievement; to his dark evocations of the same experience, now already irretrievably lost, in the wood engravings; to the white paper pierced with a knife or the metal with gaping wounds in all their pain and horror.”

It is relevant to mention here that there is more conscious style in the Tebhaga works of Hore’s contemporaries. Chittaprasad (1915-78) and Debabrata Mukhopadhyay
(b. 1918) reproduced also some expressive woodcuts. While Chittaprasad uses mass and weight to convey the strength of the fighting peasants, Mukhopadhyay chooses the rhythm of sinuous lines for the same purpose. They load their images with meanings. Hore stands apart, in his cool objectivity, in his uncompromising commitment to the immediate truth of the experience. A few years later, Hore acquired a more historical view of the movement. So we find his subsequent treatment of the Tebhaga theme is marked by a different outlook and a different approach as well. Those were the critical years of the 40s, when the process of partition starts to take place in 1946 and the criminal waves of riots had reached the highest point and had severely shaken the whole province of Bengal. The traumatic experience of millions of people caused by the partition and the riots compelled the artists to rethink that their search for an image would only be meaningful if they could absorb the chaos around them into their expression and that their art ought to be relevant to the immediate situations. With it, they understood that it would be vain to restore the dead art, unless it could express the present vortex of their time. Then, seeking a powerful idiom was the only way out and that they had to introduce a powerful method of telling things.

In 1949, his academic career suffered a setback as the Communist party was banned. As a party activist, he was forced to hide and go underground. During this period in exile from the public, Somnath did hundreds of hand painted posters, hundreds of linoprints, untiringly and with no sense of frustration or lack of fulfillment. He was fighting for a cause and using whatever abilities at his command, “I had to do so,” Somnath says. Though Somnath had made significant change and progress in the beginning of the 50s, but due to some incomprehensible events, he left the party in 1950. This critical decision was disappointing and had given him bitter feelings. But he, however, could not find any other alternative as to continue in the party. So he combined the bitter with the sweet as to make a new starting towards another innovative epoch in his career, which ultimately turned to enrich the years that followed. They were full of creative activities and India thus got a powerful artist. Since then, we could find him creating a rich variety of works.

The works he had done from the year 1951 to 1954 had a firm grip of craftsmanship. Among them were portraits of peasants, women and children, heroes...
lighting and resisting etc., with academic precision, yet pressing a mood to bring out, through a very careful and selective exaggeration of figural gestures. Though Somnath was using light and shade for chiaroscuro, he was, in fact, trying to use this effect for expressing the moods of the characters. He had already achieved the mastery over cutting and engraving techniques, which were required to bring about the aforementioned two-fold functions of light and shade. The effects of the cut and uncut planes of the wooden blocks created a rhythmic pattern. When that had come into prints, it could correspond to the rhythms of marching procession and of waiving hands and heads in congregation.

The exactitude of the language of visual objectification started demanding more of his attention and at that point of time, Somnath met the eminent artist and teacher Benode Behari Mukherjee. "It was Benode Behari, who awakened in Somnath the necessity of recognizing the vital role of pictorial space in any composition and also of the necessity of not treating the pictorial space as representing the natural space. This bit of advice proved to be of seminal consequence in Somnath's later works." In regard to this, by 1951, Somnath had entered a phase of research and experiment based on his own idiom and worked with complete mastery over different media of printmaking. Though right from 1947, he had been making prints from wood engravings and woodcuts, it took him a long time to start with linocut. In 1952, he made his first pictorial linocut 'A Chokna Mother and Child,' was done on the basis of an old drawing of 1944. However, it is relevant to refer here to his 'Pavement Child' linocut, 1956 and his wood engraving entitled 'Mother and Child' 1958.

Human suffering as a basic theme and content appeared more strongly in his works since the mid-fifties. In order to get the piteous state of those suffering human beings in his works, he had to do necessary exaggerations and distortions in his forms. The human figures became extremely linear. They seemed like the skeletal torsos of huge malicious rib cages with the thoraxes supporting empty bowls devoid of any spleens. They were delineated by strong, definitive lines of straight linear propensity and seldom an attempt was made to get the chiaroscuroistic effect. The linear attempts were made to suggest the bone structure of the forms, hidden under their skin, performing the two-fold function of giving the figures a solid existence, at the same time, expressing the effect of malnutrition of human anatomy.
During this period, Somnath was striving hard to evolve an artistic language of his own. He attempted this, mainly through his favourite medium, printmaking. The search for any genuine language would take its own time to evolve out and, Somnath was not only aware of this, but was also quite keen about what was going on in the field of art, particularly in graphic art in India as well as abroad. His attention turned to the Chinese wood engravings and he became quite fond of them. At the same time, he came to read through the German artist Kathe Kollwitz's prints, the power of expression of agony and desolation of life. That inspired Somnath and he deeply felt in his heart the need to stress more and more on man and his strife to exist and overcome. But he did not yet have the requisite know-how or the skill to bring about all that he wanted to do, which had made it a little difficult, though that was solved as he had started some conventional prints that depict genre themes. With it some antique studies too had helped him to feel sound in techniques.

In 1953, Somnath took up a job as an assistant teacher at the Calcutta Corporation. There he had to teach almost all subjects, from drill to drawing. A year later, he was invited by Atul Bose, the academic portrait painter and the then principal of Indian School of Art and Draughtsmanship, to build up a graphic department at his school. He heartily received this invitation as he had found that it was an opportunity to devote his entire time to immerse in his art only. That became a distinctive turn. Within a year, the change became perceptible in his work. He carried out a number of works of wood engravings, woodcuts as well as some monochromatic etchings, in which their manner of execution and effects were quite different from his earlier works. Still his works in their content expressed and restored the tragedy of the famine of 1943, as if that were a phenomenon of human predicament, that would continue in different forms through out the rest of his life.

As we think, all these qualities of creating the real tragic influences that he himself had lived and experienced, had helped Somnath to breathe the deep inner feeling into his works. It also helped him to use some narrative quality, without taking recourse to placing the figures in a situation for supporting visual data through following a reduction and simplistic method. It seems to us that Somnath was not much concerned with construction of linear shapes on flat two-dimensional trans-limited surface quality, but was serious with
the problems of the most expressive construction. "Any genuine search for language and idiom of objectification is bound to take into consideration medium too," says Pranabranjan Ray. "In 1954, Somnath began a long period of experimentation with methods and materials of a variety of printmaking media. By the mid-50s, Somnath had achieved mastery over the relief printing media like wood cuts, wood engravings, linocut and multi-colour woodcut. Although by employing the devices of hatching and cross-hatching and by deploying more than one matrix, the relief printing media are basically tonal. As Somnath was feeling the need to do tonal works, he turned to the intaglio techniques." 

Somnath made his first black and white etching in 1954 and his first dry point in the following year. His relentless endeavour to master the craft of intaglio began to yield its results by 1957. The lure of soft velvety lines of dry point and the enchanting movement of the needle over the metal sheet covered by hard ground were taking Somnath away from strong and definitive straight linear effects and therefore from the angularity defined figures. Lines were becoming alluringly curvaceous and were getting freed from their function of defining shapes and motifs. Somnath, in some few cases, goes beyond his expressive images to convey some other passionate representations that may reveal his inner feeling towards the intimate relation between man and woman. 

**Somnath’s Delhi Phase: 1958-1967**

As a pioneering artist in his career, Somnath left for Delhi from Calcutta to join the Art Department of Polytechnic. From this time on, his most significant phase - i.e., his second phase - in his career as a forerunner in the field of printmaking started in this energetic city. He lived in Delhi for ten splendid years: being a teacher at Delhi College of Art and at the same time an artist of indefatigable temperaments. He was also awarded the top National competition prize three times in painting and graphic art as well. In fact, Delhi gave Somnath a new turn in his career. His appointment was the significant factor that gave a new turn in his career. There, he worked in association with teachers like B.C. Sanyal, D.R. Kowshik, Sufoz Mukherjee, Dhanraj Bhagat, Biren De and Jaya Appasamy. Somnath probed the newer elements in modern gravure and lithography technique. This brought a change in his attitude to art as his conception of art and aesthetics widened. Along with his colleagues, Somnath ushered in an era of change in his graphic department,
creating enthusiasm amongst his students and colleagues alike. He set up studio facilities, introduced an efficient class routine that enabled a student to learn printmaking. For Somnath, Delhi phase was an experimental phase. Most of his etchings were done in soft ground using different methods and techniques to achieve more expressive images. He often prepared the materials he needed, rehabilitating old etching processes and experimented by mixing inks and colours. Though he was interested in technical effects, he did not depend upon them to achieve the emotional content, which was more due to his restrained handling of the print process. Also, one can observe that in etchings, his earlier works were extensions and distortions of figurative images.

In 1958-59, Krishna Reddy made his first colour etching prints from a single plate that was etched at different levels with each surface manipulated further. The unique method of colour application deeply impressed Somnath, who was eager to learn the method, as he was able to foresee the possibilities in it. He too produced his first multi-colour etching prints from a single plate that had colour ink of varying viscosity at different levels in 1959. He was able to achieve a wide and varied range of relief that was perhaps possible by the time-honoured method of acid biting onto the metal. He used the technical process of paper block or mounted board plates, engraving the relief building with additives such as resins, polymers, Araldite, etc. By studying the specific qualities of additive ground and taking into consideration the incisional possibilities of the surface, he could achieve outstanding results. The effect of aquatint was thus achieved by the application of carborundum powder. Somnath finally came to his own conclusions, while mastering the complications of the techniques. He developed a kind of effective and fruitful colouration to produce fascinating results by using his selection of colour inks into the given areas that were laid in various degrees of transparency on the raised surfaces. This particular method was capable of bringing out the desired texture and depth by successfully employing the collage and cutout, the selection of rollers added further more quality to the print. It is widely known and accepted that it is not so much the plate, but the preparation of the plate that is responsible for making good prints. This particular quality is evident in Somnath's prints that make him stand apart from other printmakers and his prints characteristic for their strength and expression. Somnath also explored the possibilities of lithography and stencil prints from wood planks. Meanwhile, he...
employed the process of relief-intaglio combining prints on paper-pulp from moulds and intaglio prints from copper plate engravings.*24

As he searched for expressing empathy with the wounded humanity, during the transition period, Somnath’s involvement and urge to portray the tragic calamities of the world and humanity increased. These experiences also served as inspiration for his later creations. Somnath could never forget his initial sketches based on the victims of Japanese bombing during the World War II; in particular, one tragic scene of a thirteen year old girl, who lay with her bowels out and body parts severed and scattered. In the background were broken houses and bridges blown up. Not only Somnath, but anybody of a similar vision could perceive the wounds that were created by the manmade Bengal famine and the forces of socio-economic anarchism. Somnath never knew, as he went further sketching that these very images would haunt his later works with wounds as the destined theme.*22

Somnath’s sympathies have always been with what he calls “the injurious side of humanity.” Almost all his prints carry the common title ‘Wounds.’ He was attracted to printmaking because the cutting of a wood block or the action of acid on the plate became a kind of metaphor for suffering. “Later, when he became interested in the ‘Wounds’ series, he realized that the cuts and marks in plates took on the character of wounds. He found printmaking is the best to express the injurious side of a person, because it went along with the medium itself. He found a kind of harmony between his ideas and the medium.” Meanwhile, Somnath divided his time equally between printmaking and painting. Somnath’s approach and concerns were never formal, as evident from his works that were never monotonous or repetitive. He could always delve into his inexhaustible creativeness to bring forth a fresh creation. The noted critic Pranabranjan Ray has also observed, “Subtle and unpredictable are the ways of his art. The deep furrows etched by acid into the virgin bodies of the metal plates, especially where quick gestural lines have been drawn, began to bear for Somnath, resemblance to stab-wounds, which were tormenting him since long. His human concern has not stood in the way of his building up a rich repertoire of works of different tastes in a variety of media. He never had an ‘apriori’ theory about visual language.*11 He could objectify different aspects of his worldly concern and its different ramifications by using the formal language*14 differently, henceforth expressed in his distinct individual idiom.”10
However, Somnath was able to stride forward using his progressively increasing know-how of printmaking medium and also his insight and power of creating new images. The intrinsic quality of a medium and the available technology of objectification have a dialectical relationship. Although from the general run of Somnath’s works of 1957-1958, it seems that he was being somewhat carried away by the intrinsic qualities of both dry point and etching media. He was, in fact, being awakened by the media and technology. His personality was found enough to be dominated by any external force, be it aesthetic, technological or ideological and this was amply reflected in the ‘Abandoned Children,’11 a black and white etching with aquatint, done in 1958. “It was a close knit composition with five standing figures having no defined background, or perspective or surrounding situation. Yet, the figures spoke for themselves; in their very defined geometricity they had appeared as real, besides, though they were sort of typological beings, in the morphological association of the limbs, with weightless leaves, foliage and cut fruits, their existence appeared to be precarious. The gestural lines that etched each rib of the thorax and each cheekbone appeared as a deep gashing wound. The aquatint which was adopted to, did not serve any purpose in terms of light and shade, the aquatinted areas appeared as irregular organic masses with impatient gestural propensities.”11 Furthermore, we can say that they endowed the statically drawn figures with some kind of inner restlessness. They no longer were the children of the famine, but were representative of the most vulnerable section of humanity.

In the late 50s and early 60s, Somnath took up lithography and intaglio printing at Delhi, along with Jagmohan Chopra, Kanwal Krishna and Devyani Krishna, under the influence of Krishna Reddy. They all together are the pioneers of the new movement in graphic art in India. Anita Dube points out in her brief historical background of printmaking in 1984, “Excellent draughtsmanship and a growing control of the medium helped Somnath to abandon the earlier ponderous approach for a spontaneous experimental one, in which abstract and formal values were prominent. Every graphic mark was delineated with acute awareness of its expressive potential. He also subsequently arrived at a stylization of the human form, sculpture in its conception, where the armature of bone stretched the skin into a landscape of hollows and protrusions. His images expressed a sentimental, passive fatalism, which was rescued only by their formal strength.”12
If we look deeper at the qualities of Somanath’s intaglio prints, we can see that there is the pain and restlessness of his human mind and his empathic attitude for the world, which are effectively etched into playing their chords and discords together with an alarming resonance. Later on, as he was still continuing to do the thematic works, all of a sudden, he began to realize that the themes embellished with skill was not enough for true art and that one has to cross the boundaries of themes to create meaningful work, which was something an artist can not achieve with sheer will power. An artist has to be meditative in order to get rid of the subtleties of the mind that perhaps would predominate to destroy the quality of expression of a work. Somnath, at this stage, could realize that too much sentimentalism that could often be seen in his earlier works, was a barrier to the fuller understanding of pictorial values. This predominating sentimentalism can be seen in many artists’ works at the Bengal school.

Gradually we can see Somnath’s works became deeper in its pictorial values; his composition became semi-abstract and rendering of powerful figures that reflect high quality of new expressions enhanced by an impressive colour scheme. While these colours became softer, they also got richer in its values. Though he maintained the melodic quality, there came to be an increasing use of textural variations that included the embossed and deeply etched areas. Earlier, the figure of man seems to be a dissolving shape, the space enveloping him as if he was caught up in the web of destiny. This pessimism was cleverly achieved by the use of mat colour or black and other dark colours. This is amply evident in his etchings ‘The Child,’ ‘The Dream,’ and ‘Birth of a White Rose.’ All these works were done in the first half of the sixties, while in the second half, his compositions became more clear and elemental. There existed in them new juxtapositions of forms or their comparison with each other with a flatter arrangement. Soinnath’s style is characteristic of his radical approach in depiction of man and nature.

In the mid-sixties, Somnath changed his sphere of interest. He gave up painting to concentrate more on printmaking, choosing intaglio print as his major medium. His compositions now became increasingly simpler. The human figures began to loose entirely their temporal identity, except for the necessary suggestions to indicate their sex and their age, specifically if they were in childhood or in adulthood. They were then given new identities. The figures were no longer skeletal in the anatomical sense, but retained the
basic geometricity of the contours. The ribs etched by deep biting of acid and the other bones now appeared more like stab-wounds. The enormous skulls holding small faces with prominent bones and the inevitable cage-like thorax with ribs would immediately identify them as skeletal beings. Some ribs at times would appear as stitches over the skin which had been sliced by sharp instruments and then stitched.*13 We can refer here to his etching 'Weary' 1966.

The suffering and death still haunted Somnath’s works. The colossal human suffering and tragedy he witnessed convinced him further to express them with deep conviction. “Wounded and helpless humans and animals*19 were indeed like the rusty-orange and rusty-brown falling leaves of autumn, often a mass of textural embellishment would have a resemblance of undefined and unformed organisms, like cancerous growths and killer gangrenes, taking tortuous gestural shapes, subversively suggesting of situations of turbulence and inner turmoil.”13 These tormented feelings of his were embodied in his various prints. ‘Refugees’ 1964, is one among them, in which he has depicted a dead body, a father with his dead child. Again in 1964, yet another print, depicting ‘A Beggar with his Pariah Dog’21 The ‘Mourners’ and the unclad beggar family praying to the sun for little warmth, were done in 1966.14 All these works were firmly rooted in the great famine of 1943.

In Delhi, Somnath struggled to come out of these subject matters and themes, but he could not cut off himself completely from them. As he himself asserted, “All these tragic events of the 40s as well as the wounds and wounded I have seen, are engraved on my consciousness. The burn mercilessly cuts the surface of a wood block, acid ferociously attach the zinc or copper plate”30 He continued to experiment with techniques and themes without any premeditation, but the tragic themes resurfaced again. In order to express the inhuman situation the deserted, starved and tortured, but in the end an icon of wounds emerges. Let us now quote Jaya Appasamy’s point of view concerning Somnath’s active phase in Delhi, “Indeed an entire crop of young Delhi graphicists owe their training and technical knowledge to Somnath’s guiding hand and eye, for he was among the most encouraging and painstaking of teachers. This period was also one of growth and self-discovery in his own work. He progressed from thematic compositions to prints based predominantly on abstract values. Though his works continue to be figurative or imagist,
they are not merely so, rather they consist of an association of forms and motifs in space, in colour juxtapositions, in line and texture play and in experiments through which he could discover for himself what could and could not be done. He developed a loyalty to the media.  

The period between 1962-1966 was years of intense research and experiment for Somnath, primarily in colour intaglio and its ancillary techniques. It also led to the development of his personal idiom by transforming suitably the pre-existing stylistic conventions and then internalizing it. During this period, Somnath approached an expressive use of colour. Most of his work had one or two hues of somber colour with another one or two cool colour with slight tendency towards being bright. The colour etching - 'Birth of a White Rose' won him his second National Award in 1962. In 1963, he won the subsequent National Award for his print 'Dream.' Both were detailed, intricate compositions, reflecting the emotions of elegance and sadness through technical expertise. After both the awards, he stopped entering his works for competition in any National exhibition, as he felt the need to give the younger generation a chance. This indeed was a magnanimous gesture, which perhaps only Somnath is capable of. Since this period, as time went, Somnath distanced himself from the details of the situation and his immediate experience that was intensified through internal cognition. By this time, his colours became more subtle and sophisticated as one can witness it in 'Eclipse' and 'Destitute Child,' done in 1966.  

It was in 1962, when his colleagues in Calcutta had formed an association called 'Society of Contemporary Artists,' of which he duly became a member. The Society organized a printmaking workshop in 1963, in which he played a major role.  

"All of a sudden, life in Delhi became irksome. There was much that is commendable about it, but the overly success-oriented attitude, I saw around me began to jar. I felt discontent with my progress that needed perhaps another change and refreshment. By this time, I had long accepted graphic art as my primary language of expression."  

While in Delhi from 1958 to 1967, Somnath had not only worked hard to build up the graphic section of the college, but also strove to impart training and technical knowledge among a group of distinguished young printmakers. He was admired as the most encouraging and painstaking teacher. He played the same role as a teacher while later at
Calcutta and Santiniketan With his moving over to Calcutta and thereafter to Santiniketan, a new phase began in his career. He was then about forty-eight years old.

Somnath' Santiniketan Phase: 1969-1983

Somnath Hore was eager to leave Delhi for Calcutta as the atmosphere there was more congenial to him. In 1969, the desire became stronger after he was persuaded by a friend and former colleague at Delhi, Dinkar Kowshik, who took charge of the College of Visual Arts at Viswa Bharati University. Somnath joined the institute as the professor of Graphic Arts at Kala Bhavan. This was due to the ardent persuasion by Dinkar as well as Benode B. Mukherjee. Before Somnath Hore joined Kala Bhavan, there had been a decline in the printmaking activities. In 1968, a graphic camp was organized with special focus on lithography and etching. Artists like Somnath Hore, K.G. Subramanyam, A. Ramachandran, Benode Behari, Ramkinkar and Sukhomoy Mitra were invited. This camp gave impetus to the graphic activities in Kala Bhavan. But it was due to the zealous efforts of Somnath Hore in a period of just about half a decade, that the printmaking department was organized and came to be recognized as one of the finest in India. Later he called Sanat Kar, Subhas Roy and Lalu Prasad Shaw from Calcutta to Santiniketan.

It was the early 70s, when Santiniketan became once more an active hub of graphic activities after a decline of a quarter of a century. Unlike the members of the Contemporary Society of Artists, who specialized in intaglio printing, the new generation of printmakers from Santiniketan could work in a variety of media. Somnath Hore and Biswarup Bose, both great experimentalists, introduced various techniques especially of lithography and etching. They lost no time in making their students adapt at exploring graphic media creatively. This resulted in having a first batch of students who joined the department to specialize in printmaking in 1970. The popularity of the department increased as the qualitative standards of printmaking came to be appreciated. In 1973, silk-screen class was started for the senior students under the supervision of Biswarup Bose. But, the project had to end due to lack of involvement by the students, eventually Biswarup retired in 1973. In 1974, Sanat Kar joined the department giving it a new lease of life. The new generation of printmakers from Santiniketan could work in a variety of techniques and methods, as is amply evident from the big sized relief prints from woodcut of Suranjan Basu, lithographs of Nirmalendu Das, intaglio of Shukla Sen. Of course there were others too. “Due to the
serious involvement of teachers and students of printmaking section, the graphic art
deptartment of Kala Bhavan has become well known. As a well-equipped working studio,
the popularity of this department has crossed the borders of the country.

Owing to the changes taking place in the department, there were some foreign
influences too, especially of the European modern art. These influences on the students
received flak from a section of public and the press, but this could not deter the progress of
the printmaking section. At this juncture, an interesting observation was made, “Let the
future come and then there will hopefully be a correct assessment. At the moment, suffice
it to claim that printmaking studio is at the crossroads and on the threshold of breaking
new grounds.” The activities that abounded in Kala Bhavan during Somnath
Hore’s tenure. Somnath personally also had a satisfying period of creative activity. Unlike
the last phase of Delhi, his life in Santiniketan tended to be filled with meditation and
tranquillity. The works of Rabindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, Benode Behari and
Ramkinkar acted as a source of stimulating creativity in him and also a new awareness
dawned on him. He thus embarked on an exciting phase of artistic creativity. At this
juncture, Somnath had already mastered the printmaking technique, but he sought to
evolve a language of his own through innovations. His intaglio prints are representative of
this spirit. To achieve a remarkable effect in them, he used to work up his plates, stage
after stage, by etching and acid biting and sometimes scraping to change the composition.
All these efforts were not necessarily seen in the final print as a highly elaborate design; on
the contrary, the image rendered was very simple and sparse. This effect could be achieved
due to his perfectionist and discriminating attitude.

Geeta Kapoor, one of the noted critics, has analyzed his techniques with the
following remarks; “Sommnath’s figures are delicate, linear, also transparent like apparitions
on the verge of vanishing. The lines of the figure seem to move in a slow, wandering
involvement and they become entangled both emotionally and pictorially. This
entanglement seems not the result of a commitment, but a passive reconciliation to a snare
that seems thin enough. However, this is perhaps beyond the realm of aesthetic inquiry.
What is relevant is that the image should appear pictorially resolved. His colours range in
tone from pale to luminous. For example, a print is embossed white with a tint of Salomon
pink, or on the other hand, a print in brilliant magenta becomes very lyrical. The colours do
not build up the composition;"11 they remain more or less like washes. The print becomes like a colour field with a linear design etched on it creating a mood."16

The chief reason to present this critic's point of view is to show that there existed contradictory criticisms regarding his style. We do not entirely agree with Geeta Kapoor's observation that Somnath took care so much that, "image should appear pictorially resolved." Somnath did not attempt to create his human figures with real life resemblance, but with his own intimate perception of them and his awareness to use the expressive metaphorical language of composition. While depicting in his 'Wounds' series, Somnath went a long way in abstract expressions. However, Geeta Kapoor always gets to the point, there is no question of her proper understanding of the language of the Plastic Arts. However, Somnath had experimented with lithograph earlier also. But after he returned to Bengal, he once again took it up to evolve something more basic and elemental out of it, aiming at smooth and spontaneous effects. The forms in the figure now have been broken down in their constituent units, the structure remaining loose and free due to the fluid brushwork. Jaya Appasamy has characterized his work in this particular period in three major categories as follows: "Three major kinds of work characterize his present output: (a) in some, we see a composition, which is an arrangement of delicate tones - the effect is almost that of a collage of transparent tissue paper cuts, (b) secondly, there are some with bold calligraphic units, where the artist writes or draws figurative hieroglyphs, and (c) thirdly, we have compositions of textures drawn in small motifs and patterns, which become an all over pattern like a crazy quilt."17 To all of these works the artist brings his usual sensitivity and care.

Since 1971, Somnath has been engaged in taking prints, entitled 'Wounds,' from moulded cement matrices, the moulds are taken from originals made in clay on uncoloured paper pulp, which form into paper on the matrix. Somnath himself observed, "In 1969-71, society was in a state of upheaval and chaos. A section of the youth was restless. There was panic and terror amongst the common people. Wounds is what I saw everywhere around me. A scarred tree, a road gouged by a truck tyre, a man knifed for no visible or rational reason. A new concept was born. The object was eliminated; only wounds"15 remained."18 He admitted that wounds remained his recurrent concept ever since 1942 as the tragedy around him had scarred him deep inside.
An aesthetic need had compelled Sonmath to develop a medium of his very own and this culminated in the intriguing white on white series, 'Wounds.' It took him fourteen years to evolve this medium of haunting impressions, which are painfully realistic. These series, which he calls pulp prints were taken by making the paper itself and not paper mache on the mould. This was necessary as the prints were manipulated by hand to bring out the maximum details of the deep cuts, which a mechanical press is unable to transfer on to a ready-made sheet of paper. The effect was achieved by using a knife or some other implement, which was thrust into the body of clay, a blow lamp or red-hot rod burned the surface of wax sheets to reproduce the physical effects of inflicted wounds. Sonmath himself described the creations of his as follows: "I manufactured a cement matrix over which handmade paper was prepared. There was no prototype for me to follow, so the entire procedure took a long time, but finally it functioned efficiently."

In these series, one finds a few organic shapes in low relief. The contortions of paper surface being flat or mildly textured spaces, having gestural indications, some of which are directional. All the shapes and contortions have an organic dynamism, evoking the sense of germination, birth, decay and death. The motifs are not the only depictive, functional aspect of the prints, the left-out spaces with their porous goose-skin and freckled textures also have an organic quality. These series of his, have more tactile quality as their visual sensation also gets transformed into tactile sensation. "They, with time given for observation, grow with intensity and begin to give sensations of skin and flesh pierced by bullets, grazed by shots, ripped open by knives, spiked by bayonets, battered by heavy sledge hammers, ferreted by sharpnel and spoilt by unattended gangrene's oozing blood and pus."

In some of his pulp prints, one finds the impression of yet another kind of abstract expressionism, while in fact, they relate sensuously to the reality. His aim has always been to visually objectify the unseen reality in the most effective language to communicate directly to senses. Along with the pulp-prints, Sonmath has also been taking intaglio prints from engravings done on metal sheets with burin. All the prints thus rendered are flat, linear compositions with no background or foreground, but with overt emphasis on the skeletal forms of the figures. Though the figural gestures are minimal, he has managed to present them in varied physical postures. The figures are devoid of their temporal identity.
But the cycle of life in which these beings like eating, walking, lovemaking, etc., have been depicted appears to be an accomplished final act, before the oncoming death.

It is worthwhile to mention here that Somnath along with a few others are, indeed, the progenitor of the main spirit of seventies in the Indian art. For Somnath, his primary motivation always remained his experience of the objects, the environment and the external world around him. He objectified visually his own experiences of the phenomenal world, resulting in a tangible experience to be able to share it with others. He never shied away from learning further from the pre-existent styles, irrespective of the status given to them. As a means of diversion from printmaking, Somnath tried his hand in sculpture; more specifically those cast in bronze. In the summer vacation of 1974, he was playing with bits of wax in the company of senior sculpture students. He accidentally produced some unusual figures covered with wounds, which were successfully cast in bronze by some of sculpture department artisans. “I continue to pursue my bronzes. The same wounds, with bits of broken, twisted, molten, moulded wax. A few people assist me in casting, dressing, welding and so on. My one concept has been wounds. Art, in all its forms, is an inborn faculty; politics can be abstract to the point of absurdity. Politics may inspire an artist to create great art, but it cannot turn a person without creativity into an artist. If a viewer, for example, discovers only the thematic content of the wounds and misses the aesthetic values, then the whole exercise has been futile and time will relegate these works to the dustbin of history.” For Somnath, the aesthetics of a work of art cannot be realized through a political approach. Its excellence is revealed through its own components, not because of any message or polemic for him, also dreams are part of real life. Scientists, painters, writers, poets are all equally dreamers. Truthful dream exploitation, both physical and moral is at a pitch today. How can we bring society back to its senses? Hope, however, is a dream worth living with.

One of the early bronze sculptures is his ‘Mother and Child’ 1975. This significant sculpture has an interesting story, of which Somnath narrates; “In May 1975, Vietnam succeeded in routing the Americans. This victory aroused a vision in me, an eternal mother holding her head high, a newborn child cradled against her shattered chest. It took me two years to complete this bronze, which was 40 inches high and weighed 40 kg. It was stolen on November 1977 and has never been recovered.” Somnath retired from teaching in 1983, after that he vigorously took to bronzes. Between 1985 and 1990,
he executed a good number of these expressive 'Wounds.' We select three of them: 'Starving Family,' 'Seals of Wounds,' and 'Hunger.' All these bronzes revolve around one concept - Wounds, for Somnath. Art activity mirrors the visible world. Intuitively, the artist introduces technical perceptions and innovations that create new forms. Exceptional talent is able to create great art with these tools and great art is unequivocally original.

Somnath preferred not to consider his bronzes as sculpture, as he personally felt that they neither had volume, mass or weight, but the scars of the wounds. They all were small pieces, which he produced by working directly from the sheets of wax. In fact, in these images, which were single products with no duplication stood or rested on its own. They were extension of Somnath's expression in three-dimension to give a more wholesome and holistic effect to his 'Wounds' series. “Essentially, being a printmaker, Somnath’s place in the history of modern Indian art has to be evaluated in the context of the evolution of printmaking in India. It remained for Nandalal and his disciples to be awakened to the potentialities of each printmaking medium and associated techniques and create designs in keeping with the intrinsic qualities of each medium.” But even they preferred to work with the well-known techniques and methods. The farthest they went was to adapt the techniques by relying on their inherent intelligence and sensitivity, suitably improvising them. The greatness of Somnath Hore as a major printmaker on the Modern Indian art scene has been best recounted by Pranabranjan Ray. “Somnath has not been the first to make printmaking the major media of creation. Artists like Ananda P. Bagchi, Mukul Dey, Ramendranath Chakravarti, Samendranath Gupta, Safiuddin Ahmed and Chittaprasad had done most of their works in graphic media long time ago before Somnath Hore started doing printmaking. But, however, deft users of the media, Somnath’s predecessors had been, none of them were innovators that Somnath is. Nor were they as conversant in as many printmaking media as Somnath. Somnath is the first versatile artist of the graphic media that India can boast of.”

It seems to me so clearly that the Indian artists, though extremely conscious of their age old tradition, are vivaciously open to accept values, which are not necessarily confined within the geographical frontiers, as the world is going, perhaps, to sing the same chord of music everywhere on earth as to value their meanings of existence. There are instances of experiments going on at different levels and various modes: from very pure abstraction to
very figuration, from primitivity to neo-expressionism and surrealism to highly conceptual art relentlessly. So, here we find that the true impact of the Bengal School, with its various aspects like stressing on skill to powerful spontaneity of expression, as well as the thematic relevance based on varying circumstances, etc., is being re-evaluated and adulterated by more critical approach made by various individual artists' attempts, making the Indian art scene lively with apprehensions. The significant emergence of the contemporary Indian art is characterized by a passionately experimental and boldly expressive approach, which surely resulted from the seed that was sowed by the Bengal school and its artists and among them Somnath Hore, who undoubtedly deserves his rightful courteous place in the history.

However, Somnath Hore remains not only one of the finest printmakers of modern India, but also one of the socially responsive artists. His creations clearly depict his motivation by the social forces. He can be rightly called as a socially responsive artist as he could objectify his personal, social experience with sufficient emotive potential evoking a sense of value and judgment in the viewer. As a responsive artist, he had the ability of abstraction as well as generalization, which are clearly reflected in his work. He could conceive his personal experience and translated them as perceptible images, thus communicating the intrinsic emotive value of the experience and rendering it effective. Somnath Hore had made his mark as a printmaker during the Great Bengal Famine of 1943. Since then, he has embarked on an illustrious artistic career spanning over decades.