

Articulating Suffering, Voicing Protest: Visual Art in Solidarity with the ‘People’¹

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Both Chittaprosad and Somnath Hore had been active members of the Communist Party, and had enthusiastically shared the political ideals and ideology associated with the movement, which had formed the basic framework for their search of a valid language of visual expression. Both of them had, at various points in their life, subsequently discontinued their political membership, though their concern for a suffering multitude had remained undiminished. This presentation seeks to articulate the characteristics of their practice during — and after — their active political involvement, in an effort to identify the significance of the same in their creative endeavour.

Allow me to begin with what I personally perceive to be an illuminating – and significantly self-critical – after-thought, from one of the most noteworthy cultural activists of the period. Khaled Chowdhury, a renowned theatre personality connected with Bengali stage performance and design, wrote the following in a later-date recollection, on the issue of the Bengali song-tradition of the nineteen-forties and fifties popularly identified as *ganasangeet*:

With the best of intentions, urban lyricists, reaching out to the rural folk, have failed to touch them with their simulated folkism, e.g. when Tagore writes, *Ay re mora phasal kati, math amader mita...*? (O come, let’s cut the

[I sincerely apologise for not being able to attend this conference in person; recent and unexpected health reasons and a consequent medical advice hold me back from travelling. But I must thank the organisers of this conference, because despite my absence they have nevertheless entrusted me with the serious responsibility of speaking on the work of two artists, Chittaprosad and Somnath Hore, from within the parameters of the present conference. I must also thank right at the beginning the volunteer who will read out this presentation on my behalf.]

harvest, the field's our pal...); or when Jyotirindra Maitra, one of the brightest stars of the I.P.T.A. writes: *Eso dhan kati, kastetey di shan/ kasteey moder mita re bhai, kasteey moder jan* (Come, let's cut the grain, and sharpen the sickle/ The sickle's our pal, brother, the sickle's our life) We have never heard a peasant sing any of these songs, even when we have pleaded with them 'How can I sing, babu, if it does not come from within me?'²

I would like not to be misread for beginning with this quote; I am not intending to adopt an against-the-tide, critical counter-position to the basic proposition of this conference — rather my intention is merely to draw attention to the fact that what is spelt out in the statement is an issue of content-language conflict. The nineteen-forties and fifties in Bengal were decades when the central debates in all forms of cultural expression shared some of the most fundamental parallels. The very same content-language dichotomy that one identifies in the domain of Bengali music, was the same divide that characterised the dual position adopted by the formal-modernist artists' collective called the Calcutta Group on the one hand, and the small group of individuals who committed themselves to a social-responsive articulation on the other; the latter included such artists as Chittaprosad and Somnath Hore.

And it is precisely in this context of this dichotomy that one feels the necessity to take cognizance of not only what the two artists did while they were officially full-timers of the political party, but also what characterises their visual expression even after they had discontinued their active membership. With a deep humanist concern for the suffering multitude and a conviction in the role of visual language to voice dissent and difference and thereby generate opinion by compelling the viewer to take note of a situation, their life-long practice needs to be comprehended as a whole.

II

By now it is fairly well known how Chittaprosad came to prominence with his series of sketches executed during the infamous man-made 'Famine' of 1943-44.³ His first-hand experience of the Famine in Midnapore district culminated in the account titled *Hungry Bengal*. As an eyewitness report of his travel through the district in November 1943, it comprised of a written text and profuse sketches. In the published version selected twenty-two of these drawings were reproduced, but unfortunately as soon as *Hungry Bengal* was published, as many as five thousand copies of the book were confiscated and destroyed, presumably because of the potential of its contents. *Hungry Bengal* holds a position of significance in the

history of Indian visual-art practices not only because of the notorious incidence of its destruction, but because it spelled a distinctive relation between ideology and visual expression, between text and image, and the role of art as reportage. To this, we shall return shortly.

In the capacity of an artist connected with the Communist Party, Chittaprosad did a significantly large number of posters and caricatures of propagandist nature. These social commentaries along with the *Hungry Bengal* set the initial tone of his personal visual language.

Chittaprosad's propaganda posters for the Party are marked by detail and preciseness. Taking recourse to the satirical mode of caricatures to represent the oppressors, these pictures employ an emphasised anatomical realism for the protagonist who stands in as a representative of the suffering countrymen. Invariably, in facial expression as well as muscular strength these figures, often blown up in gigantic proportion to the rest of the picture, signify constricted energy that intends to burst open all bondage. The rousing propagandist image of a farmer (symbolically standing in for rural economy), over and around whose body has been constructed a military air base, and ammunition storage, is shown grimacing and clenching his fists at the humiliation of bondage, as the turbaned guard salutes the military general driving in to the fenced enclosure.

The promise and possibility of an uprising is coded within the anatomical emphasis; the potential for an armed uprising is even more pronounced in a picture of the almost strangled farmer, whose sickle drops to the ground as he reaches out for the rifle lying just outside the framed border of the picture. And finally in the February 1946 poster of the R.I.N. uprising, we find a successful amalgamation of the elements of such a language resulting in an image of lasting impression. On the mast of a ship flutter three flags representing the three major political parties — in a gesture of united strength — while from behind rises a single powerful muscular figure, gigantic in proportion, the snapped shackles held up in triumph, and the rifle firmly gripped in the other hand, eyes burning with determination.

In these images, the linguistic mode identified as 'realism' operates primarily at the level of anatomical exactitude of the human forms. At first glance, the firm musculature and a concurrent respect for the underlying skeletal structure form the basis of a faithful representational adherence to the visually perceived. Such evocation of a correlative to the visually observed, usually accompanies a logic, that being inscribed in accordance with relative proportions derived from perceived nature, the image thus constructed would 'naturally' resonate with implications

of the 'real' invoking thereby the possibility of easy identification with the represented. However, what is simultaneously evident and therefore needs to be acknowledged and emphasised is the *over-emphasis* on the very same aspects of anatomy and proportion, the amplifications and distortions of which lead to a schema that is in essence as much an idealised perfection. The monumental, in all these instances, arises invariably through contrast, often induced by the difference between the representation of the protagonist in a linguistic code of 'realism' while there is a simultaneously intentional and deliberate degradation of the oppressors through the mode of satiric caricature.

It is evident that the visual language in Chittaprosad's posters is distinct from any definition of realism espoused by academic practice. At the same time they are even more distant from the nationalist indigenism of the so-called Bengal School mannerism. A parallel trajectory to the propaganda images are the sketches that accompany the text in *Hungry Bengal*. *Hungry Bengal* followed the simple narrative of a journey from Calcutta to Midnapore, and back. Chittaprosad's account is not so much a meticulous daily diary, rather it is a broad impression punctuated with a collage of prominent individual memories, albeit in a chronological sequence. Significant experiences, encounters with people, and his empathetic response to the famine ravaged rural community, constitute the narrative.

Throughout the account, Chittaprosad continually emphasised his strong political identity, commitment and partisanship. His monologue gives us a picture of the artist as a political activist convinced of his Party's perspective and guidelines, and not just an uninvolved pictorial-reporter of the scene. His commentary is transparent in his analysis of the man-made food shortage. For instance, his comprehension of the situation is evident when he refers to the emotional upsurge of nationalistic resistance in August 1943, when the farmers of Midnapore, in their refusal to hand over a single grain of rice to the British, had either burnt their barns of paddy or sold all their produce to hoarders of Indian origin. Little did they realise, wrote Chittaprosad, how suicidal such an act would turn out to be, till the same hoarders changed their chameleon-shades by tying up with the police forces once the very same farmers came begging for rice.

Amidst such political dictum, are moments when the acutely sensitive artist in Chittaprosad observed and recorded purely pictorial details in word-pictures, like the brief moment of disbelief when amidst endless desolate fields of death and destruction, the team stumbled upon an incongruous small patch of glowing golden paddy crop in a field, with a dark-skinned emaciated boy hiding within that brilliant yellow.

The text of the narrative has an attention-arresting flow despite the grimness of the details of the Famine. One is left to wonder when and how, amidst the laborious trudging on foot from village to village, did Chittaprosad pull out his ink, pen and brush. He certainly did, but probably could spare no more than an extended moment for each swift record, and a sort of abbreviated notation evolved as a pictorial language out of this compulsion. The urgency of the situation he faced, and the necessity to swiftly grasp the totality of the disaster, brought about a characteristic modification of the drawn line. He caught the essentials of the emaciated forms in swift strokes that terminated in brisk turns and sharp jabs. In places the strokes became broader, the thick black mark emphasising the skeletal frame beneath the skin. Through such modification the *Hungry Bengal* drawings achieved an unflattering directness, factual in details, like a record. Effective as a mode of representation that evolved from the immediacy of the situation, Chittaprosad's drawings produced scathing images of the famine through the very linguistic possibility of an abbreviated notation.

The sketches in *Hungry Bengal* did not necessarily replicate the text in all instances. But when they did, they produced an amplified impact through complementarity. In a sketch of the metal-ware dealers from Kanthi buying off the farmers' final belongings, the viewer is made to look diagonally from over the shoulder of the plump trader, as he sits calculating on a piece of paper, while the accomplice sits to his right weighing the hoard on a pair of scales. Featuring prominently amongst the pots and vessels, as in the artist's description, is a metal idol and other ritual objects of worship. The artist played with the contrast as he emphasised the neatly brushed hair of the businessman against the dishevelled appearance of the people who surround him, as much as a pair of naked children contrasts with the cluster of accumulated forms in the foreground. The tonal contrast between the patches of ink on the lean torso of these children and the otherwise basically linear mode of drawing in the rest of the picture serves to form a pictorial focus as well as a comment on the paradox of the situation. Operating from within the linguistic code of an abbreviated realism, Chittaprosad nevertheless guided his pen and brush to pick out the requisite details — such details, transcribed through a broken, nervous-jerk characteristic in the linear strokes could sufficiently index, for instance, the pathos inherent in the gesture of a man resting his head upon his hand, as well as in the resigned slump of the body.

More penetrating as images are Chittaprosad's sketches of the dead, of corpses and broken pots lying in front of a cyclone shattered hut. But the ultimate ghastliness of the Famine is perhaps frozen in the sketch of a

jackal (or is it a dog?) feasting upon an already half-devoured corpse, as vultures await their cue in the background.

Hungry Bengal could in effect become a generic term to refer to sketches in an identical linguistic mode with which Chittaprosad continued beyond his Medinipur assignment, between June and August 1944. A number of these sketches however, indicate a tendency towards greater control and preciseness of drawing. There are single images of suffering individuals, mostly supine, but notably there are compositions that evidence his attempt to integrate and situate human figures in a setting, filling in the earlier empty background with details of a rural backdrop. In these, a wider diversity of linear strokes attempt to match the observed object reality of human figures, plants and foliage, the straw-mat and bamboo structures with almost equal attention, and an increased patience.

Hungry Bengal introduces the scope of considering the role of an artist as an individual with a proclaimed political identity and conviction, and the concept of art as “chronicle” or “reportage”, envisaging a “documentary” role for art, one that possessed a “recording function”. Documentation and chronicle invariably call up the category of “realism” and the need to define its distinctive characteristics with specific reference to these drawings. This becomes even more pertinent if one considers that the Party periodicals in which Chittaprosad’s sketches and accounts were being published also carried a parallel record through the photographs of Sunil Janah.

From 1946 onwards Chittaprosad had settled more permanently in Bombay with occasional visits to Calcutta. But following the 1948-49 internal transformation within the Communist Party, and realising his increasingly differing personal perspective, Chittaprosad dissociated himself from active political engagement, and eventually found himself more in tune with the newly evolving world peace movement, dedicating a large part of his pictorial efforts henceforth to the cause of peace. His images now spoke of happiness and plenitude, the fullness of beauty and bounty, rather than the earlier elements of struggle or protest. This is also remarkable in a personal sense. Since his detachment from the Political Party, financially he had been barely able to survive, having “shut himself up almost like a recluse in his modest room in Andheri, a suburb of Bombay”, staunchly refusing all offers of help from friends and well-wishers considering them to be grants of pity. It was from this period onwards that we find Chittaprosad expressing himself more in the medium of black and white prints taken from the linoleum sheet or wood block. Amongst these are the 1952 prints depicting children of the poor and oppressed sections

engaged in daily labour and thereby denied of their childhood. But more significantly, there are his images of the family, of lovers and couples, and of motherhood. Should one psycho-analytically infer within these images of healthy abundance, a personal longing?

It is fascinating to realise that the the 1969 Danish UNICEF publication of Chittaprosad's *Angels without fairy tales* was actually the publication of his 1952 linocuts, which given the nomenclature, emerged as a body of work that was sharply critical in its comment on the then-current social disharmony. *Angels without fairy tales* drew attention to the deprivation and denial of childhood for poor and oppressed children who have to toil as working members of their families. A fun game of rowing a boat with their father then turns into a not so enjoyable laborious struggle; the solemn silence of the *bidi* workers can no longer hide the plight of lost innocence. These linocut pictures are "real" to the extent that their themes are inseparable from the reality of the immediate times. They are also "real" to the extent that they are constructed in a pictorial language marked by identifiable and recognisable forms that correspond with the natural. But the deviations are equally evident the simplification of forms have been linked with Chittaprosad's admiration for Nandalal Bose, and to the latter's illustrations for Rabindranath Tagore's Bengali primer for children, the *Sahaj Paath* (Easy lessons). Prabhas Sen narrates that Chittaprosad used to tell friends that his understanding of Nandalal's creative experiments with his feet firmly in Indian traditions, coupled with his own commitments to socialist ideals, are the two coordinates that combined to formulate his own pictorial language.

If it is true that Chittaprosad was moved by Nandalal's realisation of the efficacy of folk simplifications in reaching out to the heart of young souls, then this becomes a major clue to our comprehension of the intention and realisation of pictorial efforts in Chittaprosad's works. It is perhaps the ideal note on which to end this paper for even though Chittaprosad did not possess a fascination for the mannerisms of the so-called Bengal school, his attempt to bring about a fusion between his own concern with social-realism and Nandalal's internalisation of the folk traditions, would be pertinent index to the formation of his personal visual diction.

III

Somnath Hore was an younger contemporary of Chittaprosad and he has acknowledged the latter as his mentor, one who taught him to sketch directly from the suffering people he has been observing all around.

He was my first mentor. He took me virtually by the hand and guided and

encouraged me to draw portraits of the hungry, sick and dying people. Whenever he was in Chittagong he gave me company.⁴

Somnath Hore had lost his father at the young age of thirteen; obvious financial and social crises apart, he completed his Intermediate examinations with a merit scholarship, and joined the City College in Kolkata for a B.Sc. course in 1940; this was when he came into contact with the Communist Party. The onset of War and a personal financial crisis forced Somnath Hore to leave Kolkata for his native Chattagram⁵. Chattagram in 1942 faced the threat of Japanese bombardment, and Somnath Hore observed his first sight of devastation and the strewn dismembered bodies in a village near his own. The desire to document the ghastly sight turned him to the world of visual records – these sketches are said to be his earliest essays in picture-making. Through Purnendu Dastidar who was the chief functionary of the Communist Party in Chattagram, Somnath Hore came to know Chittaprosad, and initially began by following in Chittaprosad's footsteps. When Chittaprosad was asked to tour Midnapore, Somnath Hore took up the charge in Chittagong, and his sketches began to appear besides Chittaprosad's in the Communist Party journals; the Communist Party soon discovered in the young Somnath Hore a flair for hand-drawn posters as well.

The early sketches and drawings published in the Communist Party journals were mostly scenes of hapless victims of Famine and portraits of peasants. They were executed in what Pranabranjan Ray calls the "definitional lines following representational contours of the objects depicted"⁶, with occasional tonal devices in portraits. Two of Somnath Hore's early drawings reproduced in the 1992 catalogue reveal that in the published version these were inevitably accompanied by short notes; the first example shows an emaciated man seated at a frugal meal by the roadside at Chattagram, the other, is a portrait of eleven-year old Manohar.

The Communist Party must have realised the potential in training Somnath Hore in an institution of technical proficiency and the year 1945 saw Somnath Hore back in Kolkata for a formal training as a student of the Government School of Art⁷. Here he met Zainul Abedin as a teacher, as the second person crucial to his artistic development, who encouraged the young artist's endeavour to develop a skilled hand for powerful drawing. Some time in the year 1946⁸, the cultural activists of the Communist Party received an album of contemporary Chinese woodcut prints that caused comprehensible excitement. Somnath Hore shared the enthusiasm and made it a point to learn the medium at the Art School from Safi-

uddin Ahmed. It was from the Art School, as a second year student, that Somnath Hore accompanied Party members to North Bengal, to document the peasant movement “Tebhaga”, the sharecropper’s claim to two-thirds of the produce in place of the existing rule of half-share. But 1946 was different from the grey days of the Famine, and the Tebhaga has been called “the outgrowth of the Left-wing mobilisation of the rural masses ... the first *consciously* attempted revolt by a politicised peasantry in Indian history”⁹. Like Chittaprosad’s famine-account the *Hungry Bengal*, Somnath Hore’s record of the peasant movement took the form of a text accompanied by sketches, called *Tebhagar Diary*. “His intention perhaps was to do the kind of visual reporting that he had done in 1943-44”¹⁰. Also perhaps, the concept of a diary was an inspiration from the precedence of the *Hungry Bengal* which, it is highly possible that he must have known, if not actually seen, and which must have gained his admiration. There is an obviously optimistic tone in the text¹¹ and this becomes the essential difference between the *Tebhaga* drawings, and therefore the diary, and its presumed role-model. The optimism is marked in the diligently mentioned dates for each day’s entry – “a day-to-day record of living with the people who were undertaking unusual actions with great enthusiasm and expectations”¹². The pictures of the *Tebhaga* are thus mostly affirmative images, of faith in the endeavour, of enthusiasm and expectation. The determination is evident in the faces of the people whose portraits Somnath Hore drew. It is also marked in the pictures of collective group-activity, of harvesting, gathering at a meeting and marching in processions of protest. These drawings show him as a much more technically mature and skilled artist whose training at the art school had obviously equipped him with a systematic and methodical working process, an increased ability to portray likeness, and arrange the elements in an effective composition.¹³

Somnath Hore had begun to print his first couple of wood-block pictures around 1947, and in the fifties, the sketches of the Tebhaga formed the source material for a series of wood engravings by the artist. These show his understanding of the possibilities of the medium, with the solid mass of black and the minimum cut-away areas of white effectively building up the anticipating excitement of the meetings at night, or the almost impressionistic view of the villagers rallying out in procession with flags, along the banks of a pond.

Unlike Chittaprosad, Somnath Hore did not immediately feel a distance from the Party when it underwent a transformation in its political agenda, shifting away from the liberal progressivism of the era of P.C. Joshi. He even went “underground” along with other leading members

in 1949 when the Party was declared banned. His studies were disrupted and he did not resume regular classes at the Art School when he came out of hiding in the following year¹⁴; much later, in 1957 he finally took his diploma from the institution as an external candidate.

Continuing with the print medium in wood as well as linoleum sheet in the fifties, examples like “Pavement Child” and “Mother and child” (both 1956) reveal his conception of a picture not merely as a dramatic chiaroscuro, but as a balanced distribution of black and white areas through the bold incision of the block. 1956 was also the year when Somnath Hore and his wife Reba did not renew their membership in the Party; “But”, he wrote, “we remained close sympathisers of the Party and the cause”.¹⁵ In the first of the two examples, the persistence of thematic concerns directly related to human suffering is evident; but in the latter, a lyricism evident in formal rhythm and movement, as well as in the gestural expression of filial affection overrides any overt statement of social concern. The inherent potential in the pictorial language and the medium for an incisive and critical social comment about a suffering humanity had been considerably muted down for the moment, to an expression of the possibility of a hopeful future.

The mid-fifties was a period that saw Somnath Hore’s work begin to shift decisively from topical immediacy of the past years into transformed images of a suffering humanity irrespective of the specificity of incidents. Elimination of the inessential, determined by the artist’s propensity for the essential, went hand-in-hand with his exploration of the line as an expressive device, especially in the etching prints of this period. Consider the 1958 print titled “Children”. Tonal planes defined by linear textures offset the nearly untouched faces, sharp needle-thin lines constitute the facial contours, with eyes that are vacantly blank. The configuration derives from direct observation, but the incidental specificity of bleakness has been erased to a universal and iconic statement of deprivation.

Similarly, *Genesis* (1959) reveals how the visual turmoil encircling the mother-and-child is markedly different in tone even cosmic to a certain degree producing an image that invokes a distinctly different response. The turmoil can be read in the scrambled patches of colours and lines encircling a slightly off-centre, oval, neutral and non-specified space wherein the mother-and-child lie. The non-angular lyricism of the lines that define the form of the mother-and-child tend to give the feeling of an eternal embrace amidst the encircling aura of the swirling textures. *Genesis* therefore, despite the acid-bitten textural roughness, is an image that is not too directly concerned with inflicted wounds and scarred suffering.

Such a formal exercise in exploring the possibilities of a medium¹⁶ subsequently extended into an implication of wider significance. Technical possibilities of the etched print proved to be pregnant with meaning implications, and the very process of an acid bath that “bites” into the metal plate was suggestive enough for Somnath Hore to henceforth read into it his recurrent metaphor of the “wounds”. A few years after having shifted to Santiniketan in 1967, he found a large section of the youth in Bengal involved in a phenomenal political upheaval that pushed his artistic response further towards an engagement with the “wounds” as a recurring motif.

*Wounds is what I see everywhere around me. A scarred tree, a road gouged by a truck tyre, a man knifed for no visible or rational reason.*¹⁷

The decade of the seventies was the period when Somnath Hore evolved the distinctive pulp-print series that bear the generic title *Wounds*, a term that has hence come to assume the status of a generic name for his entire oeuvre as a whole. On the one hand it would be customary to call these works abstract, in the sense that one cannot find identifiable natural forms in these works; they appear to be extreme close-ups that do not allow specific individual identity. On the other hand, the pulp prints themselves, and by extension the clay or wax sheet on which the initial marks were made, as well as the cement matrix onto which they were transferred for paper to be cast on them, literally *became* the body on which the wounds were reflected; the scars were inflicted through the process of image-making, the thrust of a knife, the scorching heat of a blow lamp or a hot rod burning or melting the wax. And in the process, Somnath Hore virtually came to a cross-road where printmaking and sculptural process of casting merged into an integral whole as a communicative gesture.

Somnath Hore recalled that his initial attempts for a sculptural expression began during the summer vacation of 1974¹⁸, through modest attempts at working with bits of wax. This culminated in the 1977 sculpture in response to the 1975 Vietnam War, a 40 inch high 40 kg bronze image of a mother clutching on to her child. The unfortunate theft of the sculpture marked a break in Somnath Hore’s sculptural explorations till he could resume after retirement in 1983. Working directly from sheets of wax, torn, cut and attached to each other, the metaphor of the “wounds” is inseparably ingrained within this method of execution – each cut, gash or termination of a form, transliterates into acts of violence and mutilation, sometimes even the suturing of the dismembered strips back to form the figure produces wounds of a different kind, with persisting scars that simply refuse to disappear.

When Somnath Hore renamed his 1989 bronze *Compassion* to include a subtitle *Draupadi Holding Abhimanyu*, for his 1995 exhibition, the sculpture alluded to the epic narrative of the *Mahabharata*, qualifying the initial title. A close look at the sculpture reveals that the emphasis is primarily focused on the only completely defined form in the sculptural ensemble of human forms the mother's palm as she cradles the head of her dead son.

The rest of the sculpture is a minimal expression where parts of the human anatomy are reduced to the barest, simplest essentials of folded sheets of wax-cast metal and thin cylindrical units. On the one hand, the figural ensemble refers to a generic theme of the mother holding the body of her dead son it may not be too erroneous if one is reminded of Michelangelo's *Rondanini Pieta* on the other hand, there is no strict iconographic specificity for the figures' identification as *the* mythic characters that the title suggests.

What primarily emerges from the sculptural form is a concern with humanitarian expressions and feelings a *secularised* 'Pieta' extending the implication of the theme beyond the realm of mythic narratives to relatively immediate and contemporary relevance. *Compassion: Draupadi Holding Abhimanyu* definitely deals with pain and suffering, but not necessarily with obviously visible inflicted scars of the 'wound'. The scars are no doubt present, but subdued consider the three 'shreds' of metal that join the two halves of the limp torso of the son, or the abrupt termination of the mother's palm and arm a little beyond the wrist but the dominant tone is of compassion which almost stills the mother into immobility.

A closely similar feeling is encoded in a 1977 untitled lithograph¹⁹. Though the reclining man in the print is obviously lean and emaciated, as is evident from the frailty of the body indicated through the linear treatment that stresses the skeletal structure, the expression of the posture is not exactly that of anguished pain. On the contrary, there is a surprisingly relaxed feeling in the way one leg is supported atop the other knee, and the hands support the head beneath, combining apparently contradictory opposites in the expression of contentment and the deplorable condition of the body.

For Somnath Hore to have us experience the world as he experiences it, to constantly hold up to us the evil we haven't overcome but we would like to wish away, to protest against the unjust even when victory is not in sight, are both a political and a moral responsibility. And even in the darkest labyrinth of hell 'hope is a dream worth living with'.²⁰

In varying degrees in Somnath Hore's sculptures, prints and paintings, besides the haunting sight of an anguished struggle, a sustained feeling of the possibility of endurance and hope permeates the work, whereby all is not altogether bleak. The work-process allows technicalities to lead on to a more forceful statement, rescuing them from immediate topicality, thereby harnessing experience into expression. Somewhere across the thematic concern with a suffering humanity, there is a simultaneous possibility of the element of hopeful regeneration, the battered bodies are nearly blasted open, but they often contain a degree resilience that promises the possibility to strive ahead despite the wound. We know that there do exist wounds that refuse to heal, but it is also true that Somnath Hore's engagement with the theme probably involved a nurturing of those very wounds that would eke us on, keeping us constantly aware of a world that continuously inflicts scars on one another. He refused to let the wounds in his memory heal, he refused to allow himself lapse into unproblematic complacency. His statements are dialectically positioned between a near-factual utterance of inflicted suffering, and an optimism for deliverance: as images of suffering and pain they are extremely poignant expressions, yet on the whole do not spell dejection or fatalistic surrender, the more they make the viewer aware of the wound, the more they inspire a will to persevere and overcome.

IV

As a post-script, or perhaps you could call it an after-thought, I wish to end with a couple of statements in quotes, running one after another nearly like a numbered list; nevertheless, their relevance to what has just been discussed should be too self-evident to require the banality of further commentary.

The first is a 1928 statement from Yuri Pyatakov quoted by David Elliott in his introduction to the section titled 'Moscow' in the publication *Art and Power/Europe under the dictators 1930-45*²¹. It reads:

Since you believe that people's convictions cannot change on a short period of time, you conclude that our statements ... are insincere ... that they are lies ... I agree that people who are not Bolsheviks, the category of ordinary people in general, cannot make an instant change, a U-turn, amputating their own convictions ... We are a party of people who make the impossible possible ... and if the party demands it ... we will be able by an act of will to expel from our brains in twenty-four hours ideas that we have held for years. Yes, I will see black where I saw white, because for me there is no life outside the party.²²

The second statement is from Eric Hobsbawm, who in his foreword to the book *Art and Power ...*²³ expressed the opinion that though art has been used to reinforce political power since the ancient Egyptians, the least happy period in this relationship happens to be the years 1930-45, which has been called the 'Europe of the Dictators'. This includes Hitler's Germany (1933-45), Stalin's USSR (c. 1930-53) and Mussolini's Italy (1922-45). "Communism", wrote Hobsbawm, "... claimed to be democratic in theory and nomenclature, but was in practice an unlimited dictatorship". Both the Fascist and Communist regimes claimed to derive from and operate through 'the people' and to lead and shape them, and held on to these common characteristics despite fundamental differences and mutual hostility. What is customarily cited as the ideal example of this commonness comes from the 1937 International Exhibition in Paris, where "the National Socialist German pavilion, with its vast classicizing Aryan heroes, directly faced the Soviet pavilion topped by Vera Mukhina's monumental Socialist Realist figures of *The Worker and the Collective Farm Woman* raising the issue far more forcefully through its focus, not on peace, production and leisure but on war — was the Spanish Republic's installation, in its pavilion, of Picasso's portable mural *Guernica*".²⁴

The final quote therefore, is from John Berger's illuminating analysis of *Guernica*:

When Picasso painted *Guernica* he used the private imagery which was already in his mind ... For *Guernica* is a painting about how Picasso *imagines* suffering ... here in *Guernica* he is painting his own suffering as he daily hears the news from his own country.....

Guernica, then, is a profoundly subjective work — and it is from this that its power derives. Picasso did not try to imagine the actual event. There is no town, no aeroplanes, no explosion, no reference to the time of the day, the year, the century, or the part of Spain where it happened. There are no enemies to accuse. There is no heroism. And yet the work is a protest — and one would know this even if one knew nothing of its history. Where is the protest then? It is in what has happened to the bodies — to the hands, the soles of the feet, the horse's tongue, the mother's breasts, the eyes in the head. What has happened to them *in being painted* is the imaginative equivalent of what happened to them in sensation in the flesh. We are made to feel their pain with our eyes. And pain is the protest of the body."²⁵

Notes

- 1 This presentation combines texts of two earlier presentations, the section on Chittaprosad is drawn from a presentation delivered at the DAG, and the section on Somnath Hore from a presentation at the MPCVA.
- 2 Khaled Chowdhury, "Questions about Ganasangeet", English transcript by the author of his essay "Lokasangeet Ganasangeet Prasanga", *Sharadiya Pratikshan*, 1400 *Bangabda*.
- 3 Chittaprosad was born in 1915 at Naihati (present district of North 24 Parganas in West Bengal), elder son to Charuchandra Bhattacharya and Indumati Devi. As a civil servant, Charuchandra's government service involved transfer from one location to another. Therefore, Chittaprosad grew up in Chattagram (Chittagong in present Bangladesh), attending the Municipal school and later the Government College for a degree course in the humanities. From an initial enthusiasm for the nationalist movement, participating by painting cartoons and posters as well as independent drawings, he came into initial contact with the rising Communist movement while at college, around 1937-38. Since 1940, with a personal introduction from the secretary P.C. Joshi, who had come to admire his artistic proclivities, Chittaprosad became a whole-timer for the Communist Party, working in the capacity of an artist for their publications and propaganda. It was in 1941, following the Japanese threat and subsequent "scorched earth" policy adopted by the British, that Chittaprosad accompanied a team of volunteers to Chattagram. This brought him face to face with the rural community, and initiated his active engagement with posters and drawings for the Communist Party. Thereafter, the Party sent him (from Bombay, where he had been deputed in the meanwhile) to Medinipur (Midnapore) to cover the ravages of the 1943 famine.
- 4 Somnath Hore, "Chittaprosad — the humanist", Lalit Kala monograph, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, 1993.
- 5 "... as I did not have money to cling to Calcutta...", Somnath Hore, *Wounds*, Seagull Books, Kolkata, 1992, p.6.
- 6 Pranabranjan Ray, "Hunger and the Painter: Somnath Hore and the Wounds", *Cressida Transactions*, Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 203. Ray mentions the portraits of "Devicharan" published in the *Janajuddha* of 11th January 1944, and those of "Sheikh Gomhani" and "Ramesh Seal" in the 15th March 1945 issue
- 7 "...P.C. Joshi, who had come to know me in Chittagong, advised me to join the Government School of Art in Calcutta ...", Somnath Hore, *Wounds*, op.cit., p.10
Pranabranjan Ray mentions the assistance of Communist party individuals like Nikhil Chakraborty and Snehanshu Kanta Acharya, who "saw to it that he not only got admission to Government School of Art and Crafts but got all other forms of assistance he needed. (Pranabranjan Ray, op. cit., p. 204)
- 8 Pranabranjan Ray, *ibid*.
- 9 D.N. Dhanagare, "Peasant Movements In India, 1920-1950", New Delhi, 1983, p. 155. as quoted in Samik Bandopadhyay's introduction to "Tebhaga/ An Artist's Diary And Sketchbook", trans. by Somnath Zutshi, Seagull Books, 1990, p. vii.
- 10 Pranabranjan Ray: *ibid*, p. 205.
- 11 Samik Bandopadhyay and Pranabranjan Ray differ in their opinion on the issue.

- 12 Pranabranjan Ray: "The political in art", *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, New Delhi, 1992.
- 13 The development is obvious if one compares these drawings with the earlier attempts published in the pages of the "Janajuddha", two or three years before the present ones. Ray differs with Bandopadhyay regarding the "photographic" in these sketches, and sees in them "an ontological endeavour, the gradual progression of which we see in the seventies, in the *Wounds*, made in pulp-relief". (Ray: "The political in art" op. cit.)
- 14 In 1951 Somnath Hore even designed the election symbol of the Party.
- 15 Somnath Hore, *Wounds*, p. 12
- 16 In November 1958, Somnath Hore left Calcutta to join the Graphic section of the Art department of the Delhi Polytechnic (later the Delhi Art College). Though the artist does not mention the incident in the 1992 catalogue, Pranabranjan Ray relates in considerable length, that a Krishna Reddy exhibition in December of the same year had an immense impact on Somnath Hore, initiating an urge to try out multi-colour viscosity prints from a single metal plate. Aided by references from published books he not only grasped the technicalities of the process but was able to master it with sufficient confidence to hold a solo exhibition of his prints at the A.I.F.A.C.S. gallery by 1960.
- 17 Somnath Hore, *Wounds* ibid., p. 16
- 18 Somnath Hore, *Wounds* ibid., p. 18
- 19 Image number 3 in the monograph on the artist published by the Lalit Kala Akademy
- 20 R. Siva Kumar, *Somnath Hore: Images of Discontent*, "Somnath Hore/ Bronzes", CIMA Gallery, Calcutta 1995, p. 39
- 21 *Art and Power/Europe under the dictators 1930-45*, compiled and selected by Dawn Ades, Tim Benton, David Elliott, Iain Boyd Whyte, Foreword by Eric Hobsbawm, Afterword by Neal Ascherson, Thames & Hudson in association with Hayward Gallery, London, 1995
- 22 Quoted from Mikhail Heller and Aleksandr M. Nekrich, *Utopia in Power: The History of the Soviet Union from 1917 to the Present*, New York, 1986, p.289. Incidentally, Elliott points out that Pyatakov who was originally head of the Ukrainian Bolsheviks and a member of the United Opposition against Stalin in 1926 was executed for 'Trotskyism' in 1938.
- 23 *Art and Power...*, op.cit, p. 11-15
- 24 Briony Fer, David Batchelor, Paul Wood, *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism/Art between the wars*, Yale University in association with the Open University, 1993. *Guernica* commemorated the bombardment of the urban civil population of the Basque capital during the Spanish Civil War by the German Condor Legion on the 26th of April 1937.
- 25 John Berger, *Success and Failure of Picasso*, Pantheon Books, pp. 167-169