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Prints: The tactile emissaries of cultural aesthetics

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At the core of all existence lies communication, aided by touch, smell, sound, images, text or sign languages. The act itself aims to build a communion between individuals, with the objective of collective development through knowledge transference. Printing or imprinting motifs and symbols, as a mode of communication may be traced from the Pre-historic Caves to later civilizations across the world. As the cultural fibres strengthened so did the means of communication, traversing over time local topographies to reach foreign terrains beyond. Among all other creative practices, Prints are perhaps the most democratic of all mediums, as it is meant to reach out to the masses through a system of multiple editioning, irrespective of social standings or political ideologies of the viewers. The medium therefore became an effective tool for mass awakening, to become the core of some of the greatest evolutions of mass consciousness across the world. The history of printmaking becomes a narrative of the amalgamation of world cultures, reaching towards the cohesive brilliance of shared aesthetics. This paper concentrates on the history of printmaking in India with selective parallel references of developments beyond its borders which strengthened the identity and scope towards the progression of this medium. In view of the dwindling connoisseurship of Prints in contemporaneous times, it becomes essential to enquire, understand and divulge the history, character, and possibilities

that this medium still has to offer and to unravel the biased conundrum that collectors harbour regarding the aspect of editioning of prints.

Key Words: *Print, Communication, World Cultures, Connoisseurship, India.*

INTRODUCTION

'The printmaker has something of the minstrel spirit; he sings, and in every print that is made from a single block of wood, copper plate or lithographic stone he repeats his song, over and over again. It does not really matter if the occasional sheet gets lost or stained or torn; there are copies enough to convey his thoughts, and if there are not sufficient available he can print a new series, in which each individual work is equally perfect, original and complete, as long as the plate from which it is printed is not worn.'

M.C. Escher (from 'Regular Division of the Plane', 1958)

Communication as an essentiality for subsistence, has manifested in multiple ways over time with the objective of connecting multitudes in a communion of shared knowledge. The intent of the tactile experience of mark making, as a testimony of lived experiences, is an inherent human nature evinced by the hand stencils and hand stamp imprints at numerous Prehistoric sites world over. Whatever may have been the purpose, the existence of these marks aspires to communicate the presence of humanity and herein begins the history of '*imprinting*' or '*printing*' of multiples.



Fig. 1. Prehistoric Hand Stencils Sonari, Hathajodi, Chhattisgarh, MP, India.
Image source:

https://www.bradshawfoundation.com/rockartnetwork/hand_stencils_chhattisgarh.php

Fig.1 features 10,000-year-old Hand Stencils from a Prehistoric cave in Sonari, Hathajodi, located at Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh in India. Fig.2 is a 30,000-year-old Prehistoric Hand Stamp impression from the Chauvet Cave in France, and Fig.3 is a contemporaneous image showing Handstamp impressions on a Temple wall at Rajasthan in India – an example of the continued legacy of mark-making in ritualistic traditions.



Fig. 2.

Fig. 2. Prehistoric Hand Stamp, Chauvet Cave, France.

Image source: <https://www.donsmaps.com/chauvetcave.html>



Fig. 3.

Fig. 3. Hand stamp impressions on a Temple wall, Budha Pushkar, Rajasthan, India.

Image source: <https://www.brettlephotography.com/media/79d50275-f0c6-46f6-a556-9839e58026b3-hand-prints-on-a-temple-wall-budha-pushkar-rajasthan-india>

Printing impressions by the way of stencilling or stamping enacts a way of personalizing a space, be it a structure or an object, the tactility of the process itself adds further meaning and significance to its existence. The hand impressions on the Prehistoric cave walls reminds us of our predecessors who strived to exist against the fury of nature, leaving behind their personal marks on the walls of the space they inhabited. In a similar manner hand impressions of people on the sanctified wall of a Temple creates a personal connection between the space and the people who built or visited this structure. In India the system of stamping impressions was also practised for more personal usage like imprinting motifs on body, garments and even food - embodying a culture of *joie de vivre* by celebration and sanctification of a space through embellishment.

As civilization progressed imprinting symbols gained a more layered meaning with the origin and usage of Seals which became a formal system of codification. In case of terracotta seals, impressions were stamped onto wet clay and later fired to add strength and durability – a method that continued to be in practice in later years as well. Fig.4 is a Terracotta Seal from Indus Valley Civilization (1st millennium BC.), while Fig.5 is a Terracotta Seal from Nalanda, Pala Dynasty (9th century AD). The same method of stamping impression was also used in printing garments, except that the *matrix* (surface from which print is taken) was wood instead of terracotta, as seen in the engraved Wood-block in Fig.6.



Fig. 4.



Fig. 5.



Fig. 6.



Fig. 7.

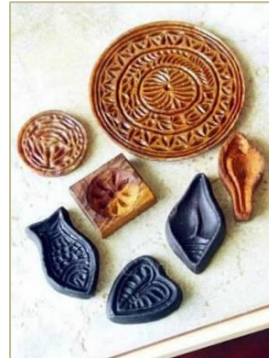


Fig. 8.



Fig. 9.

Fig. 4. Indus Valley Terracotta Stamp Seal, c. 1st millennium BC.

Image source: <https://www.reddit.com/r/AncientCivilizations/>

Fig. 5. Terracotta Seal from Nalanda, Pala Dynasty, 9th century AD.

Image source: National Museum, New Delhi

Fig. 6. Engraved Wood Block for printing Textiles, Kathiawar, Gujarat.

Image source: Personal documentation

Fig. 7. Mehendi impression applied on body from an engraved Wood-Block matrix.

Image source: Personal documentation

Fig. 8. Carved Wood-Block matrix to imprint motifs on food. Sandesh

Fig. 9. Moulded impression on Sandesh (Sweetmeat) from carved Wooden matrix.

Image source: Personal documentation

Matrixes made of engraved Wood-block were also used as a tool for religious propagation and knowledge transference. Evidence found in the form of baked and unbaked clay seals from Nalanda in Bihar, establish the use of clay tablets to record Buddhist inscriptions that were necessary for scholastic practices at the University. The 6th century clay tablet inscribed with Brahmi script from *Nidana* or *Pratittyā Samuṭpada* Sutra from Nalanda (Fig.10) is a case to the point. Built in the shape of palm-leaf manuscripts,

it is a precursor of carved wooden matrixes used for printing *Pecha* or Tibetan manuscripts (Fig.11) of later times.



Fig.10. Terracotta tablet with text from *Pratittyā Samuṭpada Sūtra*, 6th cent Nalanda

Image source: Nalanda Museum

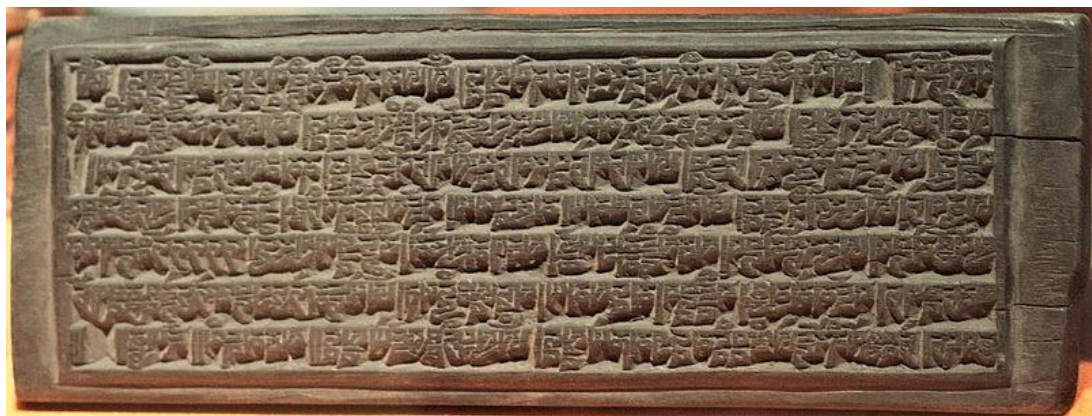


Fig.11. Carved Wooden matrix used for printing *Pecha* (Tibetan manuscript)

Image source: Tibetan cultural museum of Qinghai at Lushar

The discovery of '*Diamond Sutra*' (Fig.12) - the earliest dated printed book in the form of a 16-foot scroll created in 868 AD establishes the urgency in creating multiples to propagate the sermons of Buddha. The book is a translation of the Buddhist manuscript *Vajracchedika Prajnaparamita Sutra* in Chinese script, replete with elaborate images and text that indicate an absolute mastery of craft; a sophistication which alludes to a long and matured expertise in printed scroll-making.



Fig.12.



Fig.13.

Fig.12. Wooden Matrix replica of the 'Diamond Sutra' created by Wei Lizhong of China.

Image source: <https://www.shine.cn/feature/art-culture/2104127295/>

Fig.13. 'Diamond Sutra' – the original 16ft. printed scroll created in 868 AD. China.

Image source: The British Library Collection, London, UK.

The propagation of Buddhism was especially achievable since the religion did not discriminate the right to knowledge transmission based on caste or nationality. Establishment of educational centres like Taxila, Nalanda and others further spearheaded the propagation of Buddhism while inspiring scholastic progression across the borders. The Silk Route not only paved the way for merchandising but also the pathway for exchange of theosophical ideas and technological inventions. It was through this route that Buddhism had reached China from India, and the art of papermaking came to India from China, where it was discovered in 105 CE. by Ts'ai Lun during the Han Dynasty rule. Knowledge about the method of papermaking reached Central Asia through a trade route via Samarkand which was 'experiencing a golden age of science, mathematics, and literature' in the 8th century CE. The 'inexpensive production of paper allowed that knowledge to be recorded and spread' From Samarkand the skill for production of good quality paper reached Baghdad, where the 'water-powered paper mill' was first established in 794 CE. From here

papermaking spread to other parts of the Islamic world. The cheap production of paper expedited the art of Book making in the Islamic world, resulting in hand-written copies of Quran being published with elaborate decorations. The skill of papermaking eventually reached Europe in 11th century due to the conquest of Spain and Sicily by the Arabs. In 1454 AD Johannes Gutenberg established the first commercially functional Printing Press in Germany with movable metal types and printed 42-line Gutenberg Bible (Fig.15) in the following year. The Gutenberg press (Fig.14) galvanized the Printing Revolution in Europe by allowing scholars and religious heads to reach out a larger mass, thereby democratising the process of knowledge transmission.



Fig.14.

Fig.14. Gutenberg Press.

Image source: <https://www.printmuseum.org/gutenberg-press>



Fig.15.

Fig.15. Gutenberg Bible, Germany 1455 AD.

Image source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gutenberg_Bible

The Revolution that was triggered by Gutenberg's Printing press, eventually spread to the rest of the world. In India it commenced with the arrival of the first Printing Press from Portugal at Goa in 1556 AD, the same year as Emperor Akbar's accession to the Mughal throne. The Press was procured by the Jesuit missionaries

with the intent of spreading the Christianity among the natives, as envisaged by St. Francis Xavier. The Press with movable printing types was set up by Spanish Jesuit João de Bustamante at the St. Paul's College in Goa. St Xavier's '*Doctrina Christam*' and '*Conclusões e Outras Coisas*' were the first two books to be printed from this Press. The necessity for printing books in vernacular languages was however advocated by the Jesuit Priest Henrique Henriques, who established a printing press at Quillon, which was instrumental in printing the first book in vernacular language from engraved metal plates in 1578. The book titled '*Thambiran Vanakkam*' (Fig.16) was a Tamil translation of St Xavier's *Doctrina Christam*. Henrique was the first Tamil scholar of European dissent, also attributed for writing and publishing the first Tamil-Portuguese dictionary. For the effective evangelisation of native populace, it was essential to educate them and to speak in local dialect, aided by vernacular publications.



Fig.16.



Fig.17.

Fig.16. A printed page from the book '*Thambiran Vanakkam*' - 1578 AD.

Image source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Printing_in_Tamil_language

Fig.17. Akbar in religious assembly with Jesuits at Ibadat Khana in Fatehpur Sikri. Detail of painted illustration from Akbarnama - 1605 AD.

Image source: <https://painting-mythology.blogspot.com/2015/09/14-christian-themed-mughal-miniatures.html>

The Jesuits first arrived at the Mughal court of Akbar in 1580 as seen in the illustration from Akbarnama (Fig.17). The reign of Akbar, considered to be the golden age of Mughal rule in India, saw the burgeoning of maritime trade with European merchants visiting the court to seek trading licenses. Due to his eclectic demeanour Akbar permitted these merchandising, while adapting newer technologies to strengthen the economic and martial resources of his empire. He attempted to create similar confluences of theosophical ideas and artistic practices by directing the indigenous artists in his *atelier* to refer to the printed European publications (presented to him by visitors in his court) and make paintings after the engraved illustrations (Fig. 19 and 20). The convergence resulted in a unique synthesis of Oriental and Occidental aestheticism, by introducing European perceptions of delineating perspective and *chiaroscuro* in paintings, thereby enriching Mughal art.



Fig.18.



Fig.19.



Fig.20.

Fig. 18. 'Madonna del Popolo' Engraving by Giovanni Battista de Cavalieri (1560-1600)

Image source: <https://blogs.bl.uk/asian-and-african/2015/11/further-deccani-and-mughal-drawings-of-christian-subjects.html>

Fig. 19. Mughal depiction of the Virgin Mary and Jesus (1630), British Library coll.

Image source: <https://painting-mythology.blogspot.com/2015/09/14-christian-themed-mughal-miniatures.html>

Fig. 20. The Virgin Mary holding a book (1585-90) – attributed to Basawan.

Image source: <https://painting-mythology.blogspot.com/2015/09/14-christian-themed-mughal-miniatures.html>

The decisive victory of the British East India Company at the Battle of Plassey in 1757 firmly established their supremacy as a Colonial power in India, with Bengal becoming the centre of their political stronghold. It prompted the urgency of setting up Printing Presses in the region. Around 1778 Sir Charles Wilkins, the English Orientalist, began producing publications in Bengali vernacular language at the Hooghly region in Bengal. A master typographer himself Wilkins trained Panchanon Karmoker, a local metalsmith, in cutting metal types for Bengali fonts. The Serampore Mission Press was established in 1800 by William Carey at the Danish colony of Hooghly. Carey put to use the typographic expertise of Wilkins and Karmoker to develop an extensive range of types, resulting in the Press to become a publishing hub for books in foreign and vernacular languages.

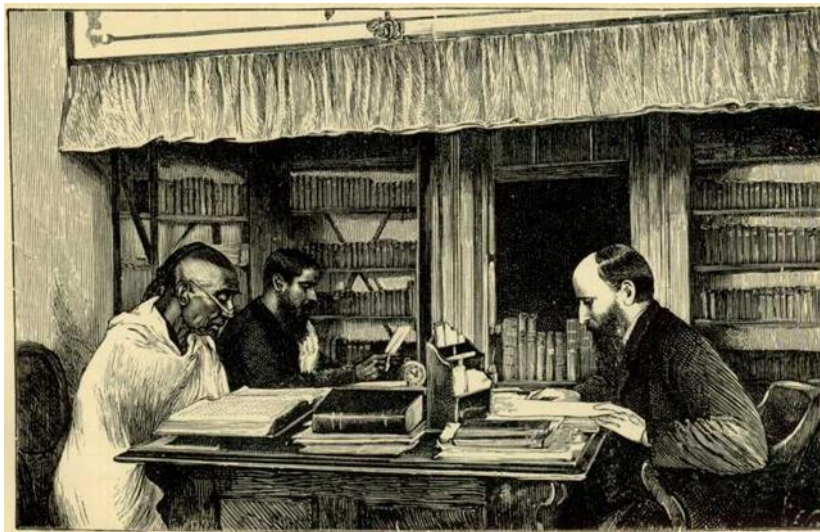


Fig. 21. Scholastic collaboration of indigenous and European academicians
Engraved illustration

Image source: <http://ceias.ehess.fr/index.php?3557>

The extensive scholastic collaborations between indigenous and European academicians, as demonstrated by the engraving (Fig.21) created enlightened passageways that attempted to bridge the cultural chasms between nations. Printed publications of prominent books translated into indigenous and foreign

languages paved doorways of mutual respect, having profound impact on society in the years to come. As the world opened up to information coming in from foreign shores through European traders and travellers, the curiosity to know about these fabled lands and its people grew among the European populace. Developments in printing technology (advent of Intaglio and lithography printing) coupled with skilled craftsmanship allowed the fulfilment of such aspirations by facilitating colourful production of printed Albums of depicting lives of indigenous people and their customs; local flora, fauna and festivals; as well as important archaeological sites and historical events. It drew artists like François Balthazar Solvyns (Fig.23), Thomas and William Daniell (Fig.22) and many others to travel to the virgin territories of India and document the distinctive character of the land. The tactile beauty of the Albums of Colored Engravings, as seen below, greatly intrigued the audience in the West and remain crucial sources of documentation in the time preceding the advent of photography.



Fig.22



Fig.23

Fig.22. 'The Observatory at Delhi' Colored Engraving, Thomas & William Daniell (1808)

Image source: <https://scroll.in/article/1035118/the-art-of-conquest-images-of-india-on-the-verge-of-british-rule-as-seen-by-two-travellers>

Fig.23. 'Costume of Hindostan' Colored Engraving, François Balthazar Solvyns (1807)

Image source: <https://sarmaya.in/objects/rare-books/the-costume-of-hindostan/>

The fabled perception of India as an exotic land of excess however received a rude shock with the 1857 Rebellion led by the Indian soldiers serving in the British army. The glorious image presented to the West stood challenged by the prints that recorded the gruesome details of the massive uprising as seen in Fig.24. Publication of political satires in periodicals like '*Punch*' caused much debate and furore on the atrocities of the East India Company.



Fig.24. 'Storming of Delhi' - Lithographic print, 1859.
Image source: British Library Collection



Fig.25. 'A dish of mutton-chop's' - hand-coloured Etching by James Gillray (1788)

Image source: <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections>

The political cartoon 'A dish of mutton-chop's' (Fig.25), a hand-coloured Etching by James Gillray shows the Governor of Bengal Warren Hastings, gluttonously feeding on a plate of mutton chops along with his allies. The barbed satire is a scathing comment on the crimes of Warren Hastings for abusing his position to extract

huge amounts of money to from sovereigns of Indian states. The caricatures had profound impact on society with people crowding in front of Gillray's print-shop to catch a glimpse of his printed cartoons. Warren Hastings was finally prosecuted on corruption charges at the British Parliament and the British Crown took explicit control of the British colonies in India. 'Disputed empire!' (Fig.26) another illustration by John Tenniel printed in Punch in 1877 is a cryptic comment on the 1876-78 famine that took a huge toll on native lives in India claiming five million lives soon after Queen Victoria assumed the title 'Empress of India.' The crowned skeleton alludes to the regent governing a disputed empire bereft with inequalities. Fig. 27 is yet another representation on famine from a later time is a Linocut print titled 'Famine – Calcutta streets' by artist Somenath Hore (1940) while Fig. 28 is a Linocut print by artist Chittaprosad Bhattacharya (1952). The poignancy of all three images speak of the crude reality of an unyielding world, layered in onerous socio-political complexities.



Fig.26.



Fig.27.



Fig.28.

Fig.26. 'Disputed empire!' Illustration by John Tenniel - Printed in Punch (1877)

Image source:

<https://www.granger.com/results.asp?image=0043792&itemw=4&itemf=0001&itemstep=1&itemx=4>

Fig.27. 'Famine – Calcutta streets' - Woodcut Print by Somenath Hore (1940)

Image source: Seagull Foundation for the Arts

Fig.28. 'Gone Mad' – Linocut by Chittaprosad Bhattacharya (1952)

Image source: <https://collection.waswoxwaswo.com/early-bengal-gallery.php?galleryid=26#prettyPhoto>

Despite the long history of indigenous past that this medium is associated with, it lacks connoisseurship in recent times. Following is excerpt from an interview with the artist and print collector Waswo X. Waswo that tries to understand the reason behind this reluctance.

Q1) Why did you specifically decide to collect prints?

WXW: *"In my younger days I worked for years in an industrial screen-printing company. It was demanding and precise work, and through that experience I learned how challenging printmaking could be. So, I developed a great respect for just the mechanics of printmaking, quite aside of the artistic qualities, but I also always loved the look of etchings that I would find in the local art museum, and especially fell in love with woodcuts."*

Q2) What prompted you to collect prints from artists in India?

WXW: *"When I moved to India it was the early 2000s, and the Indian art scene was really taking off. I'd always been a bit of a collector, but soon realized that most Indian artists were already beyond my means during that art bubble. I remember sitting at my Goa house and taking mental stock of what I had already collected. It occurred to me that in my collecting tastes I had a preference for works on paper, and already had some nice etchings and lithographs by Braque, Wifredo Lam, Rufino Tamayo, and Roberto Matta. I had also already bought two or three prints by Indian artists. Good quality prints were still reasonably priced at that time. So, I decided that Indian Printmaking would be what I would focus on. I wanted to highlight this area of Indian art that as of that time was not getting much attention."*

3) Why do you think people shirk away from collecting prints? Is this bias only in India or does it exist world over?

WXW: "I think the bias is very much an Indian thing. One reason is that there is wide confusion here among the public as they equate a print with a reproduction. Of course a fine art print is not a reproduction, it is a unique piece of work solely created as a print in a limited edition. Yet people imagine that there is some kind of an original that has been copied. Prints in Europe, Mexico, and Japan are highly valued as the difficult and painstaking artform that they are. Why this is not understood in India is beyond me, though I sometimes feel Indian printmakers themselves just need to do a better job at marketing themselves. We can't always blame others for their ignorance, we need to blame ourselves for not conveying the message."

4) What has been your overall experience as a print collector and connoisseur?5

WXW: "I totally loved the experience of buying each print. It is a deeply personal collection, and I needed to relate to, and love, each etching, woodcut, drypoint, lithograph, and serigraph that I purchased. I met artists and gallery owners. I read books. I wanted to become very acquainted with each piece and each artist that I bought. There was an initial focus upon the old Bengali masters, such as Chittaprosad Bhattacharya, Mukul Dey, BB Mukerjee, and Haren Das. But then I moved on to the Delhi and Baroda schools, and even Kerala. I began to buy the works of young and unknown printmakers, many of which have made good names for themselves today. Watching them grow was half the fun.

With Lina Vincent Sunish's help, we travelled the collection between the India Habitat Centre in New Delhi, and the National Museums of Art in both Bangalore and Mumbai. Today the entire collection is with the University of Iowa Stanley Museum of Art,

with the exception of only a few historical works that needed to remain in India. I donated it to them some years back, and eventually there is to be an exhibition and a catalogue. This episode in my life is now over, but I look back at it with extreme fondness and joy. I wish more individuals, who have the means, would follow in these footsteps.”

CONCLUSION

Print has always been a medium for the masses due to the attribute of multiplicity through editioning, thereby remaining the most democratic process of image-making. Due to its easy accessibility to a larger audience, it became a tool of dissent, effectively aiding mass uprisings in the history of mankind across the world. The economical means of its creation makes it accessible for all. The tactility of viewing and owning an original print and personalising the essence of its aesthetic language, is the inherent charm of this medium. In that it is anti-elitist, as it induces plurality as opposed to exclusivity.

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