

A Tribute to Renowned Printmaker and Art Activist Maneswar Brahma and Contemporary Art in Assam

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Abstracts:

The 20th century in India and other parts of the world, the circumstances of contemporary, relatively recent genre artists' works have been far more complex, encompassing personal, collective, and frequently political elements. In contrast, individual and social suffering emerged during the creation process, as did emotional longing for the distant birthplace of Assam. My goals are to research modern Assamese artists, with a focus on the gap left by the tragic death of celebrated printmaker and art activist Maneswar Brahma in the middle of his career. I also hope to write about his outstanding artistic creations and other artistic endeavours for the benefit of the larger artistic community, society, and humanity.

Keywords: Contemporary, modern art, printmaking, lithography and Maneswar Brahma

OBJECTIVES:

- To identify twentieth-century artistic endeavors as a representation of people, livelihoods, and environments with heightened consciousness of humanity and world issues
- To study origin and development of twentieth century art in Assam
- To discuss life, philosophy of Maneswar Brahma and his various activities
- To find out prime credentials of Maneswar Brahma's oeuvre and essential factors behind social, cultural and political milieu

METODOLOGY:

The study's methodology is determined by interviewing each artist, scholar, and academician individually. The site is visited to gather the required data and pictures, and the study is conducted online, among other methods. This study is descriptive in nature, and because it focuses on the stylistic shifts and technical advancements of contemporary art and artists in Assam in specific to Maneswar Brahma, it has visited a number of institutions and taken pictures of individual and group art activities in Assam and other parts of India. It has also gathered secondary data from books, journals, and online sources.

INTRODUCTION:

Traditional art forms such as miniatures, manuscript paintings, murals, traditional sculpture, and crafts, which flourished for centuries before beginning to decline as a result of political unrest and other circumstances, completely changed with the advent of "Modern art" in the early 20th century.^[1] Some young people from Assam attended the Calcutta Government School of Art before to independence. Although some of them finished the course, none were able to practice enough to produce work that was mature enough, let alone of modern character. In the second decade of the 20th century, Lakhi Ram Baruah, who was arguably the first graduate from the entire northeastern region, attended Government College of Art in Calcutta.^[2] Sobha Brahma wrote for few distinguished personalities such as Suren Bardoloi, Mukta Nath Bardoloi, Bhavesh

Chandra Sanyal, Birendralal Bhowmik, Jagat Singh Kachari, Sashidhar Saikia, Tarun Duara, Hemanta Misra, Asu Dev and Jibeswar Baruah .^[3]

AN OVERVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS IN ASSAM:

Most people who live in other regions of India perceive the northeast as a region characterized by border conflicts, tribal wars, and sociopolitical instability. The picture frames just half the reality, as is the case with most preconceptions about individuals and places. Seeing artists take on new challenges is encouraging. However, a trip to Assam and other North- Eastern regions forces us to confront the stark reality that the environment there is not totally conducive to the creation of art.”^[4] The present artists of Assam are exploring various issues through their visual languages and also investigating the conceptual discourses and manifestations. Artist of Assam are exploring the local politics of topography, history, memory, identity, violence and human rights in their works.^[5] The political environment of Assam is moving phenomena of globalization, terrorism, and violence, migration and displacement. Insurgencies in North-East India reflect its social, cultural, ethnic, political and economic milieu of an area.^[6]

In Assam, the remarkable numbers of contemporary artists are practising their diverse creative practices. All artists in Assam has been surrounded, concern by the idea and environment of changing times. It depends on whether they select to work inside or attempt to break out of their bondage and be free. In this context art and artistic phenomenology of Sobha Brahma, Madan Lahkar, Hemangini Bardoloi, Benu Misra, Neelpawan Baruah, Mukunda Debnath, Kandarpa Sarmah, Atul Barua, Janak Jhankar Narzary, Saleha Ahmed, Noni Borpujari, Samiran Baruah, Moinul Haque Barbhuyan, Sonaram Nath, Aminul Haque, Champak Barbara, Rabiram Brahma, Biren Boro, Ajit Seal, Shyam Kanu Barthakur, Jabeen Rehman Ghose Dastidar, Hela Das, Utpal Barua, Dilip Tamuly, Atul Baruah, Durlav Bhattacharjee, Madhusudan Das, Lutfu Akhtar, Munindra Narayan Bhattacharjee, Nikhileswar Baruah, Sundar Saikia, Prabin Kumar Nath, Raj Kumar Mazinder, Tridib Dutta, Sobhakar Laskar, Maneswar Brahma, Kishor Kumar Das, Ganesh Gohain, Santana Gohain, Rashmi Nath, Parikshit Baruah, Debananda Ulup, Lwhir Lwhir Mushahari, Keshab Narzary, Myno Basumatary, Bidukhi Muchahary, Doja Brahma

Mriganka Madhukallya, Swapan Paul, Sansita Gogoi, Manika Devi, Aditi Chakraborty, Shyamali Chaliha, Moushumi Kandali, Meghali Goswami, Parismita Singh, Samudra Kajal Saikia, Rikimi Madhukallya, Chandan Bez Baruah, Priyom Talukdar, Anga Art Collective, Anupam Saikia, Bhaskar Hazarika, Mantu Das, Pinak Pani Nath, Binoy Paul, Phanindra Talukdar are more prominent and diverse. [7] (Fig. 1) The majority of the violent socio-political repercussions in modern Assam are paradoxically founded in these contradictions of modernist experiences, according to renowned art historian Dr. Mousumi Kandali, in such structural circumstances of political upheaval, the competing dichotomies of masculinizing vs feminism, rural against urban, or tribalism versus non-tribalism become even more problematic. [8]

CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS IN ASSAM: A STUDY ON EMINENT PRINTMAKER AND ART ACTIVIST MANESWAR BRAHMA:

As eminent artist, journalist Athreya talked hours with Maneswar at our group show titled undo objects at Karnataka Chitrakala Parishath, Bangalore from 23rd April to 29th April, 2006 (Fig. 2) and wrote after seeing his lithographs at THE HINDU, May 02, 2006, In Maneswar Brahma's artwork, a terrifying personal experience frequently resurfaces as imagery. North of the Brahmaputra valley is the small, isolated settlement of Hallimpara Subhijar, which is still without power. Born in this area in 1967, Maneswar Brahma came from a huge farming family. Following his initial education, Maneswar took an unprecedented step for his situation: he enrolled in a BFA program in printmaking. Then his life's most dramatic incident occurred. "I had returned home for Puja holidays in 1995, when I was in my third year at Santiniketan," Maneswar remembers. "Everything seemed to be pleasant and tranquil. However, my companion and I were riding a motorcycle one morning when unknown terrorists encircled and kidnapped us. He was taken from his friend, who was later released, and forced to trek through villages all day in a matter of minutes. A young lad, no older than ten or twelve, who was armed was one of the kidnapers. "I was able to inquire as to why he had turned to violence. According to him, it guaranteed good food and clothes, which are normally considered a luxury. It was in the middle of night that his greatest nightmares nearly came true. He was forced to stand on a college

campus just after midnight and was shot. Several gunshots had grazed me in a matter of seconds. Blood was all over my right arm, leg, and belly, and there was loose flesh falling from my chin. They left me believing I was dead when I passed out. For a long time, I, too, was unsure about my life's status. Additionally, he doesn't know how or when he got assistance after dragging himself to the local boys' hostel. He fought for his life in the hospital for a month. According to medical accounts, he was wounded by twelve bullets in his arms, legs, belly, and jaw; one bullet even penetrated his right thigh. Fortunately, none of his important organs were damaged. Maneswar laughs when he remembers that a day after his kidnapping, a local newspaper said he had been dead. Santiniketan even heard the news and organized a meeting to offer condolences! Maneswar received a hero's welcome at his alma institution after being discharged from the hospital. My right arm was stiff and had lost a lot of its strength. I still have trouble bending my fingers. The palm and forearm frequently grow numb and lose feeling for extended periods of time. I therefore questioned whether it would be feasible to pursue a difficult medium like printing under such circumstances. However, Maneswar's friends and instructors in Santiniketan were very supportive and encouraging.

With grit and determination, he obtained the BFA degree in 1997 and went on to complete his Masters. He has, since then, gone to win many including the National scholarship during 1998-2000 and the Kejriwal young Artist Award in 1999. An Unfinished Story-III, his lithograph, won the coveted Lalit Kala Akademi Award. His pieces have appeared in a number of exhibitions in Finland, Japan, and India. It was clear from viewing his most recent lithographs, which were currently on exhibit at the Chitrakala Parishath, that the terrifying event had permanently altered the 38-year-old printmaker. His eerie pictures appeared to convey a persistent inner conflict. I make an effort but am unable to forget the horrible event. The recollections show up in my writing and thoughts. But for all the pent-up angst and rage, Maneswar, is always a perfect picture of calm and gentle poise”^[9] (Fig. 3)

When one sees the lithographs, woodcuts and etching prints of Maneswar Brahma that deal with victimhood, it traces effects of colonial and post- colonial occurrences in his home-

state, Assam. Locating his practice through a personal and political lens, Brahma frames victimhood both as selfhood, and also the self in a system of relationships with history and remembrance. ..While Brahma represents his inhuman experience in autographical ways, he also brings attention to the larger human condition of terror and violence that marginalizes minorities, regionally and globally.^[10] In his artwork, Maneswar Brahma's passion for playful limestone is exquisitely displayed. Despite the fact that lithography is currently losing ground to new media works in the current trend of attention, he fervently declares that he has an enormous and addicting affection for this medium that he hopes to always embrace. In comparison to other regions of India, the artist claims that the weather in the northeast is ideal for lithography, which uses limestone. The artist creates some striking red lithographs with recurring themes of corpses or bullets while expressing his personal lived experience as a terrorist victim (with too many bullets piercing his body) through his politically reflective words.

Renowned writer Rupanjali Baruah articulated in the catalogue for the group exhibition of Undo objects at Karnataka Chitrakala Parishath, Bangalore in 2006, regarding Maneswar Brahma's work. She highlighted the audacious exploration of socio-political themes presented in monochrome, alongside the exceptional skill demonstrated in the lithograph technique of his piece titled *An Unfinished Story- III*, which embodies the aspiration of attaining the National Award from Lalit Kala Akademi. There is an overshadow of fear and helplessness that still grip his psyche that he is simply unable to dispossess and perhaps here is art has come to his rescue so that he is able to face it rather squarely though he cannot shrug it off as an indifferent thing.^[11] As demonstrated in the Untitled etching print (Fig. 6), his lithography series "victim" (Fig. 5) can be seen as a continuous weaving of the complete act of symbolic meditation on his own awful experience of violence suffered by the artist himself on a very intimate individual level. His creations nearly take on the meditative posture of a Buddhist monk reciting recited hymns in an attempt to find solace from the world's misery!"^[12]

Maneswar Brahma completed his Ph.D. study in the Department of Design, Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati, under the supervision of Prof. Utpal Barua, throughout the

past two years. He recently turned in his thesis just one week before his sad demise. Cultural Diffusion, Handloom Design, and Changing Dynamics Among the Bodos of Assam is the title of his doctoral thesis. I wish in future his thesis in book form definitely would be an important document for research on art and culture of Bodo community in Assam. “Worth to mention as, his joint research paper with Prof. Utpal Barua titled *Understanding Bodo Identity in Their Handloom has been published at Design for Tomorrow- Volume 2 Proceedings of ICoRD 2021, published by Springer Singapore.*”^[13] His tireless service at Lalit Kala department of Srimanta Sankardeva Kalashetra, Panjabari, Guwahati as Coordinator since 2005 had not only boost up art scenario in Assam and also benefitted whole artists’ fraternity of North Eastern India. Over the years, he has successfully completed a number of significant projects at Srimanta Sankardeva Kalashetra, including a well-equipped printmaking studio, invited art shows, North East art exhibitions, senior artists’ retrospective art exhibitions, art workshops, seminars, and Kala Mela in which he has occasionally led from the front and also participated from behind silently. Several artists from all over India, Prof. Nandadulal Mukherjee, Prof. Abhimanue, Suhas Nimbalkar, Sobha Brahma, Rabiram Brahma, Satish Sholapur, Lalhming Mawii, and many others including myself, participated in his 2007 National Level Painting Workshop at Bhairabkunda, Odalguri, Bodoland, Assam.

CONCLUSION:

Eminent Art historian Amit Mukhopadhyay describes as, “*Maneswar is one such printmaker who has just not remained a printmaker but has successful in establishing authorship of the singleness of the unique elements of social issues that has dominated his oeuvre. These social/political issues make Maneswar’s prints as NOTABLE.*”^[14] I think, untimely death of Maneswar Brahma would create a void, emptiness among all artists’ fraternity in Assam and beyond. Eminent art historian Moushumi Kandali speaks as obituary to Maneswar Brahma at inaugural speech of Retrospective art exhibition of Gokul Chetri in Nagaon as, *He is no more, although he has the light, the light of his works of art....* Worth to mention as Pragjyotish Centre for Cultural Research has organised a Solo Exhibition of Maneswar Brahma, curated by eminent

art historian Amit Mukhopadhyay entitled as “*UNCEREMONIAL Notable Prints of Maneswar Brahma*” curated by Amit Mukhopadhyay at Assam State Museum, Guwahati in collaboration with Assam State Museum from 27th March to 4th March 2019 which was appreciated by critics, artists’ fraternity and art lovers. As concluding my writing with an excerpt of A writing by Phanindra Talukdar published in the catalogue “*UNCEREMONIAL Notable Prints of Maneswar Brahma*”, in which he writes as, “*Though we think that since the post –independence the art practice of North-eastern region has been in progressing state or manifested into divers’ voices rendering individual self-reflexivity, but the core subjective and visual linguistic analogy is yet a question of intervention. Intervention or enactment is itself a seeing; the seeing is indeed need of an open institutional pedagogy by questioning the fundamental proposition of collective dialect and cultural location. Perhaps, the mode of questioning or seeing is only a path to have its own cultural location, the identity, the political representation and aesthetics.*” [15]

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Fig:1: Printmakers of Assam (Image courtesy to Prabin Nath)



Fig:2: Maneswar Brahma



Fig. 3: At group exhibition undo objects, Karnataka Chitrakala Parishath, Bangalore 2006



Fig. 4: Maneswar Brahma, *Unfinished story III*, lithograph, 2004, 70x55 cm

(Image courtesy to Swrji Brahma)



Fig. 5: Maneswar Brahma, *Victim*, lithograph, 2004, 70x55 cm

(Image courtesy to Swrji Brahma)

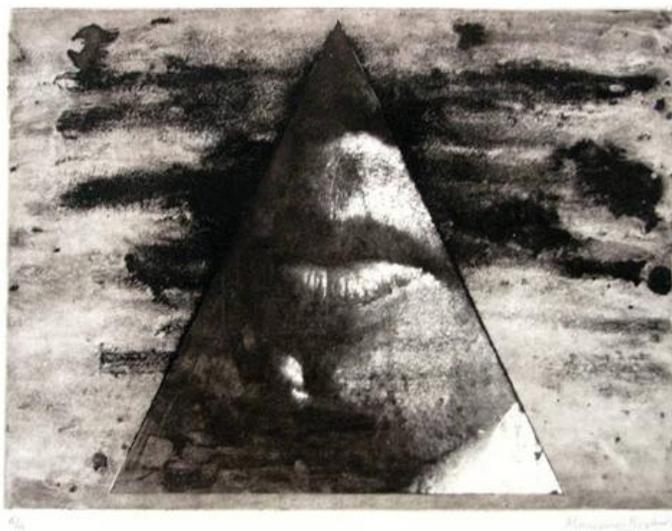


Fig.6: Maneswar Brahma, *Untitled*, 2010, etching, 35x50 cm

(Image courtesy to Swrji Brahma)