

The tradition of printmaking has a longstanding history in Bangladesh, and in South Asia. Though the technique originated in China, printmaking quickly became a popular mode of artistic reproduction in the subcontinent. Woodblocks dabbed in paint, for example, were used to stamp patterns on fabrics—a design form known as “block print”.

The technique gained further popularity once the need for multiple copies arose in the ever-expanding market of cultural capital—be it the printing press or for creating image replicas. When it came to artistic technique, printmaking had the appealing characteristic of reproduction—artists took well to the idea that their works could now easily reach mass people, without them having to individually recreate the piece.

So, what is printmaking?

It is an intricate technique where one carves into a surface, often called a plate, made of any range of materials such as wood, zinc, copper, etc, creating hollows and dents. Once ink is applied to them, it leaves varying impressions on paper. There are primarily two techniques—depth print and surface print. Depth being the style where the pattern is carved into the plate to create a sunken space. And surface being where the pattern is carved out of the plate to create a protruding space. Different sub-techniques then were developed through the idea of image translation such as

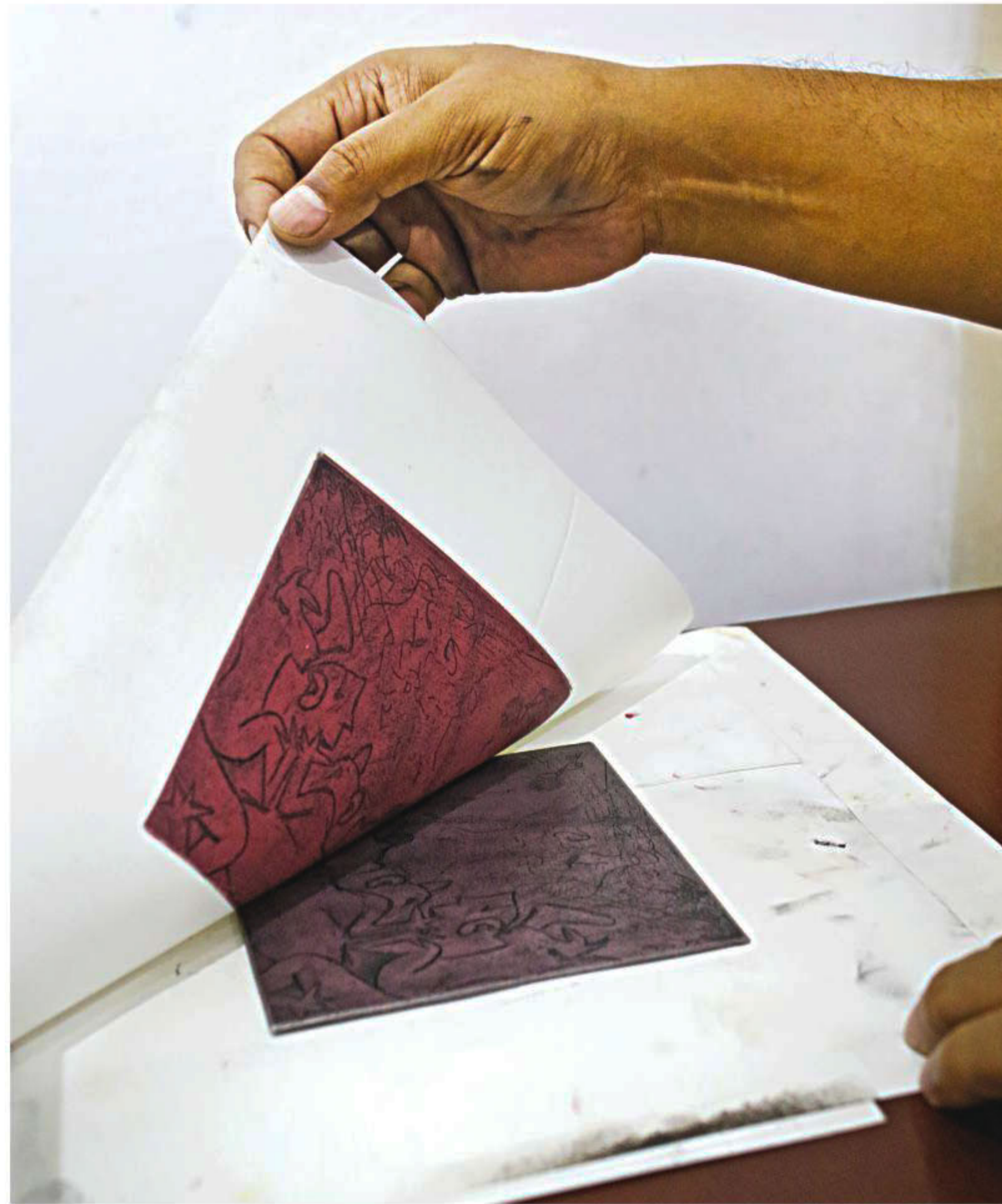


PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

The mass effect of prints

“The speciality about printmaking is that since there are multiple editions, the price of the artwork comes down and it’s much more accessible to general people,” states Sultana.

In the past, this technique was used to produce posters, pamphlets, manifestos, and propaganda material—a function adapted widely and favourably in socialist countries in particular. In a Bangladeshi context, however, printmaking has not taken up that social function, and in fact reserves itself for art buyers and collectors. But within the limits of the art market itself, the community is trying its best to make editions more and more accessible for the Bangladeshi mass.

“If an artist values their work at 1 lakh, for example, and the artist decides to create 10 editions, then the price of each print comes up to Tk 10,000 only—which is more affordable than a 1 lakh piece by the same artist,” states Wakilur Rahman, who curates the artist-run space Kalakendra and manages the associated Kibria Printmaking Studio. “Several master artists, such as Michelangelo, have chosen to do graphic reproduction of their works on the side because it enables them to reach masses,” he adds.

Visual artist Shubho Saha also believes that the accessibility character of prints can introduce new audiences to the idea of collecting itself—starting with

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practises. “If we want to survive while producing art through printmaking, we must put some decorum in place and perhaps create an association of printmakers and printers who can provide authentication for prints and editions,” he suggests.

Several inconsistencies exist within the community which often make it more difficult to establish trust between buyers and sellers. “The studios do not want to go into the trouble of creating authentication certificates. And the artists are sometimes reluctant to state how many editions exist. New artists coming into printmaking from other disciplines are most times not made aware of these practises either,” Saha adds.

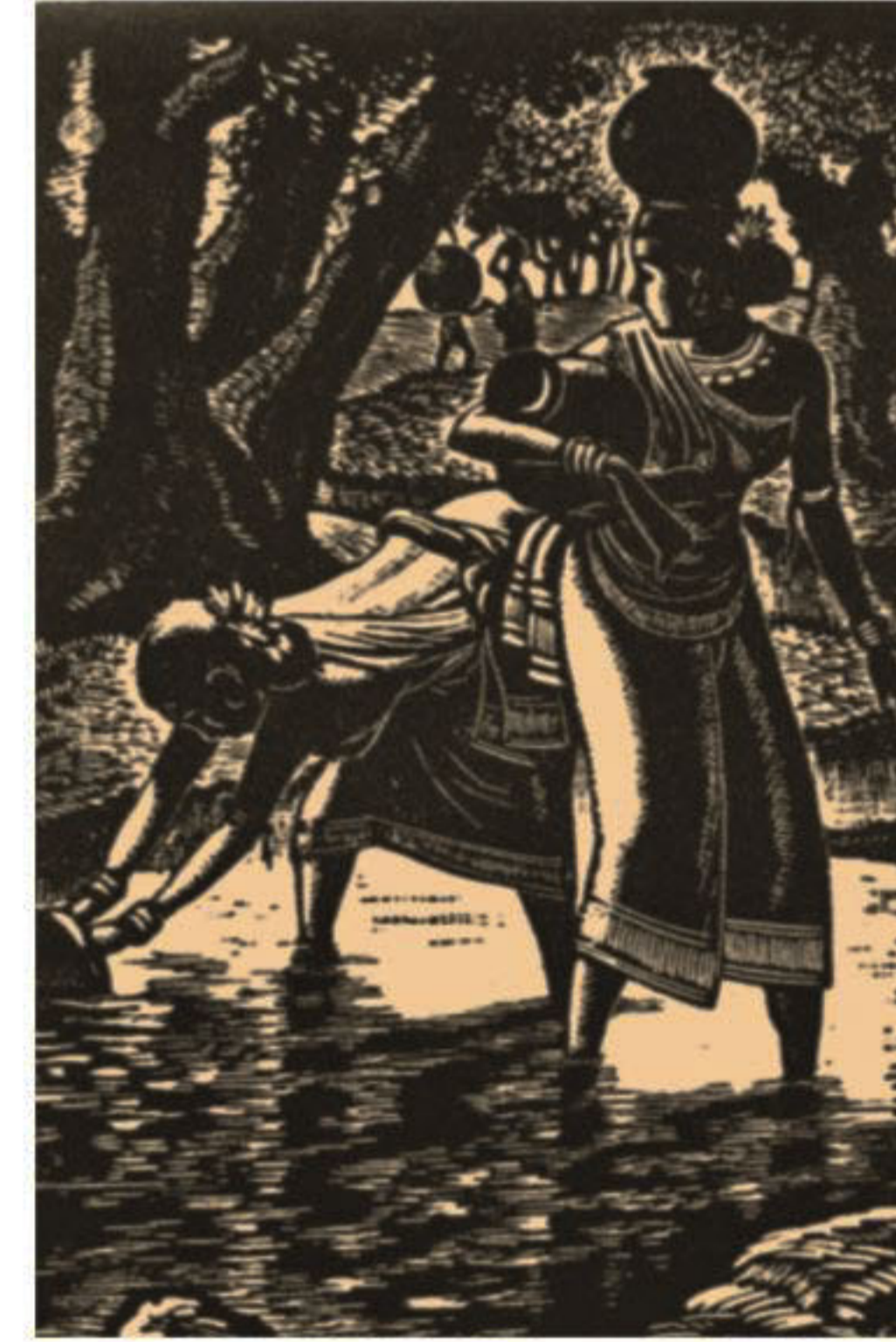
Jafar Iqbal, chief executive of Shunno Art Space, one of the few commercial printmaking studios providing authentication certificates, opines, “For the artists to be trusted, you need authentication that clearly states properties such as quality of paper, dimension, number of editions, etc. And after declaring all that information, you have to destroy the plate to maintain the work’s uniqueness.” However, he quickly adds that, “Shunno usually preserves the original ‘cancelled’ plate because often collectors do not even trust the authentication certificate and they want to go a step further and examine the original plate,” adds Iqbal.

Shunno hosts community-based events that allow artists and non-artists alike to explore the technique. Iqbal explains, “Our aim is to familiarise the process with the general people. When

difficulty in expanding the buyers’ market for prints. “A few studios and galleries have an existing list of loyal clients but other than that, we are not being able to create new buyers or audience who will follow these ethics and get into the habit of collecting prints,” he says.

Why are artists not using printmaking as their primary medium?

One of the reasons, according to Sultana, is the lack of infrastructure supporting this medium. “A studio space is extremely necessary since we are dealing with chemicals, instruments, and a press. Due to lack of such studios in the past,



Woodcut print by Safiuddin Ahmed



Shahabuddin Ahmed, *Speed*, etching print, 2011



Mohammad Kibria, *Composition Blue, Green and Red*, lithography, 1976.

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Will this traditional medium survive the pressure of an art market?

SARAH NAFISA SHAHID

relief, intaglio, lithograph, dry-point, offset monotype, and monoprint—including a few local variations as well.

A printmaking press usually produces multiple copies, commonly labelled as “edition” and considered equal to an original piece. The artist, in collaboration with the studio or gallery, decides beforehand the number of editions to be printed and states it on the edition itself so that buyers know how many copies are out there apart from the buyers’ copy. The plate is then usually destroyed or discarded and never used again, thus maintaining the uniqueness of an edition.

The technique formally entered into Bangladeshi fine arts academe through the efforts of pioneers Mohammad Kibria and Safiuddin Ahmed who helped establish the printmaking department in Dhaka University’s



PHOTOS: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

Faculty of Fine Arts—but not without adversaries. Veteran artist, Rokeya Sultana, who graduated from the department in 1987 and was amongst one of the first batches of printmaking students, says, “Back then, there was no appreciation for art. The initial printmakers were mostly trying to establish an appreciation and value for artistic work. The art market was informal to almost non-existent.”

The industry has developed since then. “Plenty of new galleries and studios have sprung up who support local artists in developing their craft,” she adds. What the current printmaking community is facing is finding a proper reception in the art market for printmaking—and also having enough artists who use printmaking as their primary medium.



PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

people experience how manual the process is, they start to value and honour the craft. The visitors create prints next to an artist who is working on their own project. The knowledge exchange between the two groups can inspire both the artist and the non-artist mutually.”

However, spaces like Shunno, which are now planning to open a café that can generate revenues, is finding it increasingly tough to survive solely through printmaking. Iqbal cites the

many students have left this line of work even though they have training in it,” she says.

Iqbal and Rahman, both of whom manage studio spaces, have expressed similar concerns regarding the logistically taxing circumstance of the artists. Rahman further suggests that the spatial limitation can impose restrictions for creating large-scale projects, the likes of which are usually favoured by international biennales and exhibitions.

These varied voices from the printmaking community hint to a looming concern—that the discipline's development is hindered due to its dependency on the market and on international trends. It needs a push from local institutions that can support research and creative expansions within the community to help it grow.

He says, “Biennales often favour works done in a huge scale which is a disadvantage for printmaking techniques. Printmaking is done on paper and most times you cannot even find long-lasting paper in such a large dimension. And if the scale is not big enough, it won’t attract the audience’s attention so artists lose on getting their art noticed.”

Moreover, the contemporary art scene favours certain techniques, themes, and images when it comes to curated exhibitions or museum shows where printmaking may not be fully suitable. Therefore, in order to perform in those exhibitions, artists are delving into different mediums and disciplines. Saha adds, “When we submit to competitions,

applying with an old-fashioned and traditional medium such as printmaking is risky. People then use other mediums to create their proposals.” He feels that “printmaking will only survive when bigger galleries, institutions, and studios will support it.”

These varied voices from the printmaking community hint to a looming concern—that the discipline’s development is hindered due to its dependency on the market and on international trends. It needs a push from local institutions that can support research and creative expansions within the community to help it grow. A massive awareness campaign popularising the medium with mid-income buyers, for example, will need support from larger foundations and institutions that can umbrella their losses during the initial phases. Unless bigger institutions take an active interest in developing this discipline, which has strong roots in local heritage and global history, the medium runs the risk of soon becoming obsolete.

Sarah Nafisa Shahid studied Art-History at McGill University, Canada and is a columnist of Star Weekend.