A Melancholic Archive

Chittaprosad and Socialist Art in Postcolonial India

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DOI
10.5040/9781350187474.0006

Publication date
2022

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Forms of the Left in Postcolonial South Asia

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Citation for published version (APA):
FORMS OF THE LEFT IN POSTCOLONIAL SOUTH ASIA
Aesthetics, Networks and Connected Histories

Sanjukta Sunderason & Lotte Hoek
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A melancholic archive

Chittaprosad and socialist art in postcolonial India*

Sanjukta Sunderason

A melancholic archive

In this chapter, and in the spirit of the questions we are pursuing in this volume, I am focusing on the postcolonial trajectory of the communist artist Chittaprosad. I will work with drawings, paintings, prints, draft sketches, book illustrations, correspondence and miscellaneous writings that the artist produced between 1948 – the year of his dissociation from the Communist Party of India (CPI), of which he was a dedicated member and artist-cadre since the early 1940s – and 1978 – the year of his demise.

In the early 1940s, Chittaprosad had shot to prominence as what can be called an ‘artist-cadre’ – a politically committed artist and a working member of CPI. In a lengthy piece titled ‘Chhabi-r Sankat’ (roughly translatable to ‘crisis/dilemma of the image’), written in 1943 for Arani – one of the left’s cultural organs – Chittaprosad had called for turning art into an ‘agitator and organizer’.¹ Within the documentary conventions of journalistic drawings, his famine sketches – trailing death, displacement and grassroots relief-work across famine-ravaged districts of undivided Bengal (from Chittagong in the east to Midnapore in the west)² – had introduced a new expressionistic realism in Indian art, a drift he both

* Parts of this chapter have appeared in my book, Partisan Aesthetics: Modern Art and India’s Long Decolonization (Chapter 4: ‘All the more real for not being preached: Forms and Futures of Socialist Art in Nehruvian India’).

¹ Chittaprosad, ‘Chhabi-r Sankat’, Arani, October 1943.
² The famine is known to have killed and displaced more than three million. Chittaprosad's visual diary – Hungry Bengal, A Tour through Midnapore District, by Chittaprosad, in November 1943 (Mumbai: New Age Printing Press, 1944) – remains one of the most iconic documentations of the famine. The British government is said to have burnt 5,000 copies after its publication in 1944, as recalled by Gouri Bhattacharya, the artist’s sister in a collection of reminiscences on the artist and
pioneered and shared with some of his peers. Through the 1940s, he organized and composed for ballets of the Indian People's Theatre Association – a front organization set up during the famine years of 1943–4. During these heydays of the left’s cultural movement, idealized retrospectively as the ‘Marxist Cultural Movement’, Chittaprosad also became the first and complex protagonist of socialist realism in Indian art, a visualizer of the communist rhetoric of culture as front, art as weapon, artists as cultural workers and touring collectives of performers as cultural squads.

As India became independent, Chittaprosad quit the CPI in 1948, when the party’s general secretary and his mentor, patron and confidant, P. C. Joshi, was expelled at the party’s Second Congress in Calcutta in 1948, on charges of ‘bourgeois reformism’. His post-1948 works were made almost entirely in withdrawal, with next to no patronage, as the artist lived in isolation in his ground-floor room in the working-class neighbourhood of Andheri in Bombay/Mumbai. None of these works were exhibited in India in the 1950s to 1970s, outside perhaps the occasional exhibition in Calcutta among the artist’s limited circle of friends and admirers (as we see in his letters). They never entered art critical conversations or published profiles on postcolonial Indian artists either, beyond a few stray pieces. Many works from the period are in fact lost and damaged in mishandling and property disputes since his death, as the artist’s sister notes in her memoirs of him in 2002, in a volume I will begin with here.

A critical minority of the material I will discuss here – the artist’s letters, memoirs of his friends/comrades and sister, and his own (unfinished/undated) essays – were published in 2002 in Calcutta in a volume titled Kshudarto Bangla, a reprint from an earlier little magazine edition from Jogasutra. A lion’s share of my material, however, comes from the decades long excavation on the artist undertaken by the private art gallery circuits steered by the Delhi Art Gallery (DAG) since the 1990s and Osian’s in Bombay/Mumbai: the culmination of this was the monumental retrospective on the artist in 2011, with accompanying...
publications of catalogues/essays/sketchbooks/letters. The DAG’s substantial retrospective on the artist displayed an entire paraphernalia of objects (sketchbooks, leaflets, catalogues, photographs, book illustrations, tools, pens, puppets, fragments from the artist’s book collection, among others) alongside the art works: the more familiar 1940s’ works on famine and popular protests that he had published in the CPI organs People’s War and People’s Age (and their regional editions); but more importantly, a host of never-displayed material from the 1950s to early 1970s. The objects and works that the artist held on to dearly during his lifetime – now exhibited for the first time in this scale – made Chittaprosad an active name as reporters and critics hailed the artist of “hunger and resistance”. Yet such celebrations ironically revealed also, the unconscious of such belated retrievals – the artist’s own unique withdrawal that he had held on to till his death.

Chittaprosad’s works have since circulated in auctions, exhibitions, biennales and indeed increasing scholarship that have been made viable due to the visibility of the works (my own trajectory in writing on the political in Indian art has been a product of that visibility). Chittaprosad is celebrated now as the artist of hunger and humanism, a hallmark in contemporary (transnational) curations on art, decolonization and Third World solidarity movements of the twentieth century. Yet this miscellaneous archive of his works/letters resonates beyond the artist’s recent art world salvage of the 2000s. The salvage/visibility itself, as I will argue here, is laden with a shadow history of absence.

Growing up in India in the 1980s to 1990s and across my university life in the 2000s, I encountered or chanced upon Chittaprosad’s iconography in random sites and flashes: amidst peeling political graffiti on Calcutta street walls (before their sanitization over the 2000s); pastiches of (far)left student activist posters, graffiti and wall-writing in university campuses; most memorably, on walls in India’s tribal hinterland caught during train journeys (travelling across India’s Maoist ‘Red Corridor’ in the Bastar region, for instance); or indeed, in the sudden find amidst bristling counters of little magazines in Calcutta’s annual book fairs. For the longest period, it can be safely argued, Chittaprosad’s art thrived in serendipitous encounters, almost in absence, rather than in (its current) dynamic visibility. What produced his absence in postcolonial India, particularly after his immense popularity in the 1940s? And what works – artworks or thought-works – did this absence produce? Along the same grain, what questions can

such absence pose – for art history/historiography of twentieth-century India, and for a transnational understanding of socialist art itself?

Elsewhere, I have pursued some of these questions to understand the peculiar (after)lives of socialist art in postcolonial India, particularly after its high noon in the 1940s under a Marxist cultural movement. In this chapter, I want to dwell more specifically on the question of absence, by remaining as close as possible to Chittaprosad’s letters, writings and artworks. My purpose is to listen in (amidst his letters), to trace (from the marginalia of his drafts and sketches) and to see in his terms (and hence, via the artist’s deeply personal vantage points) how socialist art was imagined and experienced by an artist both committed to and torn from the legacies of the left.

Chittaprosad’s letters here date mainly from the early 1950s until the early 1970s. They were written to his former comrades, his family (his mother and sister), friends – old and new – in the United States, Denmark and the then Czechoslovakia. Given his own withdrawal from the cultural circuits of postcolonial India, such letters carry unique entry-points into the terrain of associations, and thoughts that he sustained; they also very significantly help us trace the different projects he engaged himself in, or failed to pursue, or even rejected. The letters are steeped in his wishes, plans, frustrations and euphoria; most persistently, they reveal his loneliness and disillusionment, that are, I argue, at once deeply personal and ideological. They are also, in Stuart Hall’s words, a ‘living archive’ that is made alive by the heterogeneity and multiplicity of discourses – ‘[…] not only of practice but of criticism, history and theory, of personal story, anecdote and biography […]’.8

Chittaprosad’s correspondence and the artworks/drafts from the 1950s to the 1970s also present, as I propose here, a melancholic archive of the cultural left – a field of personal reflections and negotiations from the CPI’s cultural activists that negotiated both the dreams of a socialist culture and the disappearing or at best limited political patronage. They reveal a dialectical affiliation that captures both intimacy to and longing for the lost realms of solidarity, as well as a rejection of the politics of the present – what Walter Benjamin had called the regression of left-wing melancholy.9 Yet, along Enzo Traverso’s arguments, while the ‘memory of the left is a huge, prismatic continent made of conquests

7 Sunderason, Partisan Aesthetics.
and defeats', melancholia is a ‘feeling, a state of the soul and a field of emotions’. Pursuing the analytical thread of left-wing melancholia, Traverso argues, suggests therefore ‘going beyond ideas and concepts’ and into ‘imagination, not doctrine’. This realm of the personal and the imaginational – of hopes and frustrations – is also a uniquely individual entry-point into a structural question, an artistic negotiation of a political transition, even failure.

What remains of Chittaprosad’s belated archive, I will argue, is a (potential) discursive field that constitutes the individual histories of a collective aesthetic of the left’s cultural movement, and thus carries deeply subjective vantage points that can refract monolithic, celebrational narratives – whether of national culture, or ideological cultures. They help us conceptualize both the aesthetic and individual forms that political histories of the left took during the 1950s to 1970s – decades steeped in postcolonial state-building as much as of the ideological horizons shaped by Afro-Asian decolonization and the Cold War. They might even offer a (continued or potential) agency for a cultural left in its dialectic with the political left.

Dialectical affiliations: Art and the party

The relation of the left with India’s post-independence government under Jawaharlal Nehru was complex. After the Second Congress of the CPI held in Calcutta in February 1948, the party had adopted a political hardline that echoed a rejection of the idea of independence itself: ‘Yeh azadi jhooti hai’/‘This freedom is false’, the incoming party secretary, B. T. Ranadive is known to have said. While the CPI under P. C. Joshi had pledged support for the national leadership under Nehru, the new party line in 1948 took an anti-Nehru line, in support of the Telengana movement (for regional sovereignty in the princely state of Hyderabad), and remained at war with the Indian state until the movement was officially withdrawn in 1951. By 1949, the CPI was banned in Bengal and its activists jailed, as the new nation state remained ever cautious about communist action. For the cultural movement itself, the impact was disastrous; political opposition to the nation state disbanded the cohabitation of liberal and communist cultural workers within a wider rhetoric of social

11 Ibid., xv.
responsiveness of art – what Joshi had crafted in the 1940s; at an international level the formation of the Cominform and consolidation of the political line of Andrei Zhdanov made ideological control over cultural expression more active. Apathy towards the cultural movement saw many artistes leave the party during the late 1940s and early 1950s; some were expelled for critiques, and those who remained struggled with disillusionment.

Ranadive drove the party into a blind lane, writes the poet Subhash Mukhopadhyay, in his recollections of Chittaprosad published in Kshudarto Bangla (2002); those who could escape, removed themselves completely, and some others became sensitive, and then there were those who while retreating completely still struggled with hope and disillusionment, Chitta being the latter. Mukhopadhyay calls this Chitta’s ‘abhiman’ – untranslatable in English, but coming very close to dejection/disappointment, a melancholic withdrawal from (or complaint against) the object of desire itself, not a renunciation of a cause. His separation was neither simple nor complete, as his letters show, resonating with disappointment with the party and the stifled potential of the cultural movement, while he remained in conscious isolation, half-expecting the party to acknowledge his art. While his commitment to art’s social address was perennial, there were degrees of tension that he negotiated with the legacy of the left itself. Despite an active and permanent rift from the party, an artist like Chittaprosad, writes his former comrade and lifelong communist activist Hirendranath Mukhopadhyay, was a socialist at heart: ‘what Marx had called “The party in the grand historical sense of the term”’.14

Chittaprosad’s dissociation from the party appears across his letters as a curious dialectic. His letters to his friends – Murari Gupta, the poet Subhash Mukhopadhyay and his wife, Gita Bandopadhyay, the writer and activist of the international defence for children movement – bristle with the artist’s dialectical affiliation with the communist cause, at once rejecting association with the party and working diligently for its forums. He writes to Gita Bandopadhyay, for instance, about his linocuts for the International Conference for the Defence of Children, with which Bandopadhyay was closely involved: ‘I have already sent 22 illustrations to Tara (Yagnik) in Berlin. . . . Before leaving Berlin Tara has handed over the illustrations to Madame Simone. They are going to be published in a women’s bulletin apparently [. . .].’15 Yet when the couple invite him to

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decorate the conference for the defence of children in Calcutta with his works, he refuses, writing that that his involvement with an event would immediately give it a ‘partisan’ character; it is much better, he writes, if they invite veteran artists like Jamini Roy, or Ramendranath Chakraborty, or Ramkinkar Baij: ‘If you begin the work with artists outside the party, then I can get involved as a general worker.’16 ‘The main issue’, he notes, ‘is that until the party gives leadership, it will be difficult to find people who will think and work hard in organizing. And without that, even if a couple of people sacrifice themselves in the process, nothing can be built.’17

Writing in 1952, we see him drawing for party journals like *Unity*, getting weekly commissions from *Crossroads* (the journal of the communist activist and entrepreneur Romesh Thapar), and taking photographs for IPTA conference exhibitions – for which he is often not paid, or his works used unacknowledged.18 During the same period, in 1952–3, he writes to Murari Gupta about the new sketches of famine victims he was doing in the hunger-ravaged districts of Maharashtra. He had returned from a famine-ravaged district of Mangi with 70 sketches and more than 650 photos, hoping that the party would exhibit his works. He was met instead with a dithering party response, which to him revealed more than financial backtracking on exhibition costs. ‘The route to an artist’s link with his country, in this land and these times’, he notes lamenting the failure of Mangi famine drawings to draw patronage, ‘is so unfathomably far that it fails my sight, energy and intellect.’19 ‘And even if it were possible’, he writes referring to the exhibition the party had promised him, ‘I doubt whether it would serve its purpose because it amounts to challenging Nehru. Had there been a support from the Kisan Sabha it could have been successful.’20 What seemed revolutionary art in the 1940s appeared to him untenable to the party in independent India. The Mangi sketches remained invisible in his lifetime. His letters to his former comrades and friends resonate with a sense of disappointment with the party and the stifled potential of the cultural movement. Even the annual conference of the IPTA, where he hoped to show his works, had become, he notes, ‘merely a dance-of-the-ghosts’, ‘people’s theatre minus the people.’21

20 Ibid., 11.
His frustrations with his own initiated works ring through the letters; to Murari Gupta he writes in 1953:

My experience in trying to materialise the children’s album of linocuts only increases my fear and worries about the party and this country at large. Not because they could not comprehend my worth, but because they have forgotten to put good work, relevant and necessary work, to good cause. This can only be called unsophisticated savagery; and that is frightening. Had my efforts alone been sufficient I wouldn’t have despaired, for I know despair is an illness.22

Elsewhere, in the same letter, he writes:

my heart and life lies in the country’s revolutionary struggles. I am dying because nobody seems to have any need of me. Nuts and bolts come to life only if the whole machine remains active and if the nuts and bolts are accorded their proper spaces [. . .] And having joined the party I have learnt one thing, that it is impossible to realise what is to be given and how it is to be given unless one knows whom to give [to] and why.23

We also see in the letters that he is invited off and on by the world of left-wing theatre and film practitioners in Bombay, many of who had IPTA lineages. For instance, for a week-long celebration around the ‘Paul Robeson birth anniversary’, he makes a ‘mural-like oil, 7 feet high and 12 feet long’: ‘I visited on the inaugural day of the meeting – wasn’t looking too bad in the Jehangir Hall.’24 It is likely that his former comrades Balraj Sahani and K. M. Abbas would have invited him to work on the Robeson anniversary. Yet, in his own writings he admits his difficulties with market-driven commercial art commissions. In a brief unfinished essay, he writes that he has been told by ‘friendly agents’ that artists like him have consciously destroyed their own potential by being ‘too artistic’ and ‘uncompromising temperamental’; that a little bit of adjustment to suit the ‘client’ would benefit both him and the cause of modern art.25 Yet his rejection of the ‘culture-barons of this nation’ remains strong, even as he copes with the reality of having next to no income.26

In a letter to Chittaprosad in 1967, the Marxist poet and Chittaprosad’s former comrade-in-arms, Jyotirindranath Moitra writes: ‘Bhule jao byarthota-r nesha – obokshoy tomar shaje na’ – roughly translated as ‘Abandon your addiction

23 Ibid., 14–15.
to failure – disintegration is unbecoming of you’. Failure, however, is in itself a form of affirmation; failure carries a tension between ‘non-fulfilment and expectation’, and is therefore, a complex form with ‘connotation, symbolic charges and cultural roles, which are often diverse and contradictory’. Chittaprosad’s failures echo contradictions that drove the transformation of socialist art in the post-colony. Desire and despair were as much a part of the dialectical aesthetics of the postcolonial left as were the new artistic negotiations between socialist commitment and modernist experimentation.

Chittaprosad’s dialectical affiliations echo similar voices from the cultural left in the 1950s. Striking, for instance, is the auteur Ritwik Ghatak, who in 1952 was expelled from the CPI upon submitting to the party his programmatic text – *On the Cultural Front: A Thesis Submitted to the Communist Party of India* – where he laid out a foundational critique of the left’s cultural patronage, and raised the call for a cultural agenda rooted in formal rigour and participation in collective art-making as much as in political address. ‘Reshape the past, hammer the present and forge the future’, Ghatak writes in the thesis; the ‘problem of culture’, he notes, is a problem of organization, not ideology, and hence rooted ‘at the levels of the Party, the Platform, and Art’. The ‘use’ of ‘Culture’ to the party is mechanistic, Ghatak notes, either as a ‘money-making machine’ or as ‘mobilizer in meetings and conferences to keep the crowd (and not the masses) engaged with whatever the artists can offer’. His appeal, on the contrary, was for participation in the pursuit of form: ‘Our comrades must creatively work among these artistes in order to learn their “melody and speech” and “method of their utterances”; that is, to learn their form, their mode of handling philosophic content.’

In his thesis Ghatak addressed the slippage of left-wing artistes into nostalgia; the habitation of the past for Ghatak is not one of nostalgia (an echo thus of the Benjaminian critique of left-wing melancholy), but an unrelenting commitment to the dialectic of the past and future: ‘We are not seeking a “golden period,” but a proper place in the body of the Party, and our share in Party rights and responsibilities.’ This denial of cultural nostalgia or revolutionary promise is

30 Ibid., 15.
31 Ibid., 14.
32 Ibid., 16.
33 Ibid., 15.
striking: 'Drop the idea that Revolution is round the corner. It is not. Forget about that former previous “elation”, former “enthusiasm”, and that romantic feeling of Revolutionary “zeal” – in a word, all that guided us up to at least 1950. Form, he insists, ‘is of decisive importance today’:

‘To understand this form means learning the trade, in its variety of uses and approaches. It means studying the past with scrupulous care, and learning the experiments and achievements of the past; it means learning the whole process; from the inception of ‘theme-content’, through stages of development, to the final product.

This aesthetic labour, he argues, cannot be hasty, or steeped in sloganeering: ‘slow, methodical, tenacious work is what is necessary.’

Ghatak had joined the IPTA in 1948 and remained active through the party’s underground years since 1949. This document was his reflection, manifesto, programme statement on art, party and the people. It triggered at first no response, and finally a rustication from the party. Ghatak's material, he admits, is directed mainly towards what he calls ‘collective’ arts – theatre, opera, ballet – and not ‘individual’ arts like poetry, painting, crafts; yet, the crisis – of both patronage and imagination – that he raises, can be seen to entangle – even if in slightly divergent ways – with Chittaprosad's own thoughts from the same period. In both, we trace a frustration that is both individual and collective, as much organizational as formal. In Chittaprosad, this formal unrest would result in a host of experimental works that he did in isolation, morphing at each turn as if in response to a lack of party interest, reaching out for wider horizons of transnational solidarities and ending up in deeply personal story-worlds of children's illustrations that can be seen to carry the (transformation of) socialist affiliation he himself negotiated via desire and dissociation.

Chittaprosad's withdrawal – from the party and the art spheres of postcolonial India – was symptomatic, both of his own personality and of the prerogatives of such spheres. He is indeed the split subject of the afterlives of the left-wing cultural movement, half caught in the visual ethics of committed visual reportage from his famine years with the Joshite CPI, and a growing sensibility of the futility of the cultural agenda of the party under Nehruvian India. Chittaprosad's anxiety reveals the culpabilities of both the CPI and independent India, producing in him an ironic eye, rare in the national-modern aesthetic of Nehruvian India.

34 Ibid., 65.
35 Ibid., 16.
36 Ibid., 17.
Through the mid-1950s, Chittaprosad produced linocuts that etched and drew this irony.

‘Bhejal itihash-er desh-e’: In the shadows of Nehruvian India

Chittaprosad’s cartoons all through 1947 visualized a nation in transition, fraught by an arrival of political independence the cost of partition, genocide and displacement. Decolonization appears in his works as a complex battlefield – of people and state, class and capital. Workers, peasants, Hindus and Muslims tower over territories hacked apart, as they fend off duelling politicians and unholy ententes of capitalists, princes and bureaucrats. Elsewhere, a Khadi-clad politician wields the axe of the Public Safety Bill over protestors agitating for food, clothing and housing, while British and Indian capitalists perched on a steam-roller crush their bodies. In another work, a monumental barricade of Indians, Turks, Arabs, Vietnamese and Chinese fighters towers over scorched lands, thwarting stealthy Anglo-American forces with the triumphant flag of ‘Quit Asia’. These cartoons were some of the earliest expressions of people’s struggles that continued under the shadow of political independence. Across 1947, such cartoons revealed movements that marked the complex questions and scopes of freedom at the hour of independence. For instance, a cartoon made in April 1947 at the hour of the All India States Peoples’ Conference held in Gwalior in April 1947 foregrounds the right of the people of Kashmir to seek their own relation with the Indian Constitution, and against the dominance of the Hindu ruler Hari Singh. Made under the shadow of Sheikh Abdullah’s imprisonment during the conference, Chittaprosad’s sketch here is resonant of a people’s movement that was both integral to the arrival of Indian independence and yet at threat of being subsumed under a new hegemonic narrative of the nation state.37 Resonance of this can be seen till date in the burning question of freedom/azaadi in contemporary Kashmir. Other cartoons feature, for instance, stances that the left took over partition – support for the cause of sovereignty of the ‘Muslim people’ and a fight for the provision of popular mandate for a future Pakistan parliament – vis-à-vis ‘princely interests’ and those of the ‘upper classes’.38

Chittaprosad’s dissociation from the party is a critical turning point, not necessarily in the work the artist was doing, but indeed for the forums in which

37 People’s Age, 13 April 1947, 12.
38 People’s Age, 3 August 1947, 3.
such work would appear – a crisis of (political) patronage thus, rather than the impulse of creating (politically) committed art. The late 1940s or the early 1950s reveal a curious period in Chittaprosad’s postcolonial trajectory, where he can be seen to continue the impulses of documentational art from the margins, drawing from sites of hunger and labour, from the shadows as it were, of postcolonial freedom. In the early 1950s, he did a series of linocuts around suburban Bombay, capturing rural hinterlands and working-class neighbourhoods. Somnath Hore – a fellow communist artist – recalls meeting him in the residences of Prabhash Sen and illustrator Khaled Chowdhury in the early 1950s, when he would still visit Calcutta – something that would reduce increasingly; he recalls Chittaprosad’s ongoing works with the subaltern peoples around Bombay: fisherfolk, vegetable vendors, labourers, urban youth.39

Chittaprosad’s letters carry traces of some of the works he did during this period, and the forums in which they got circulated. In his letter to Gita Bandopadhyay, for instance, he complains about the quality of reproduction of his work on the coverage of Parichoy, edited by her husband, Subhash Mukhopadhyay: the image looks grim, he writes, unfit for reproduction in red and too big for the cover page.40 Reproduced here (Figure 1.1), this Parichoy cover page shows one of the most iconic sketches of Chitta that he is today known for – a vagrant boy snatching morsels of food from the garbage bin, fighting off crows – an echo both of famine years, but alive not only in the India of the 1950s but indeed of 2021. From these letters, we also see that Chittaprosad illustrated Subhash Mukhopadhyay’s early collection of essays: Amar Bangla and Jokhon Jekhane. These drawings illustrated Mukhopadhyay’s journalistic writing, and upheld labour in integral ways to foreground national and capitalist extraction, a striking illustration from Amar Bangla for instance, showing tribal women pushing a cart for extracting coal from the mines.

In series of linocuts that he did without any patronage, Chittaprosad made labour his core theme – for refracting a unilinear narrative of the promises of Nehruvian modernity, by drawing from the underbelly of the national-modern project itself. Labour morphs into rural displacement, quotidian struggles of migrant daily wage-earners in the city, working-class solidarities forged in labour and leisure, as well as urban destitution. Here suburbia’s industrial landscapes capture a grinding social disintegration that feeds urban poverty.

In the early 1950s, Chittaprosad did illustrations for Bimal Roy’s film on rural displacement *Do Bigha Zameen* (1953), where rural marginalization and displacement are shown to generate urban pauperization – another recurring trope in Chittaprosad’s works from the 1940s. The prints reveal, for instance, the journey of a rural peasant who loses his land and bearings, and is displaced to the city, where he struggles to secure livelihood, for himself and family. During these years Chittaprosad also made a series on urban labour and semi-urban construction sites (Figure 1.2) that foregrounded the corporeality of labouring bodies rather than the meta-structure of the factory itself, which had been a critical marker of Nehruvian socialist celebrations of industrialization. Linocuts were particularly suited for this nocturnal, dark landscape to emerge, or for bringing out the expressionistic rupture of displacement itself, for instance in his new works on draught and flood victims that he did in 1953 from his travels in rural Maharashtra. These works too seem to disturb, almost consciously, a very

41 Works from this series were published in the international literary journal, *The Literary Review*, Summer 1961.
similar idiom of the rural used in the current Nehruvian socialist imagery, where celebration of rural plenitude was a way of marking the hegemonic imagination of postcolonial promise. Labour captures the artist’s identifications of, and with, precarious living – street children on the edge of lunacy, child labourers in bidi (tobacco) factories in grim drudgery as mice nibble at their morsels, child newspaper vendors in frozen monotony of daily toil, a child boot-polisher sleeping by the wayside. Crows, mice, roosters and rushing vehicles inhabit these

linocuts, thrusting into the living spaces of destitutes. These works displace also
the allegorical traces of the nation in art.

In 1952, Chittaprosad put together these linocuts on tissue paper in an
album that, as he writes to Gita Bandopadhyay, were sent to Vienna for the
International Conference for the Defence of Children. The works remained
marginal to the postcolonial artistic imagination in India, and entered visibility
of sorts only in the 1970s, when the album was published in 1969 as Angels
without Fairy Tales under the Danish UNICEF Committee. His efforts to
popularize linocuts as a cheap production system to reach people continued,
despite his frustration with patronage. He sought the potential of linocuts to
reach the people, seeking to develop this genre of graphic art with ‘legends
of the country on a national scale, even on a global scale’, which he writes, ‘is
impossible with paintings that are part of an exhibition-patron circuit or the
journal dependent black-and-whites’. ‘But linocuts too require assistance’, he
writes, ‘from mass organisations, progressive printing presses, implying mainly
that there is no art-consciousness in a party – all my efforts will be a futile waste
of energy like the Children series.’

Chittaprosad’s absorption in drawing the underbelly of Nehruvian India
is reflective of a wider critique he had of postcolonial freedom. His linocuts
of displacement and child labour echo this foundational melancholia. This
is reflected, most starkly, in a couplet from a poem he can be seen writing to
Sunil Janah – noted for his photography for the CPI, of the Bengal famine of
1943 and popular movements and by the 1950s, a photographer too of Nehruvian
development projects. Nestled amidst this long poem is a sliver of what the artist
felt about postcolonial India:

[...]
Bhejal itihash-er deshe
Bhejal kainda bhejal hneshe
Bhejal deshprem-e bheshe
Dilli giya hoilam na nabab
Bharat shadhin hoilo tobu moilo na shabhab

[author translation]
In a nation of tainted histories
With tainted tears and tainted smiles

And adrift in tainted patriotism
I could not become an emperor in Delhi,
India is free but not of its afflictions.⁴⁵

The idea of tainted (also translated as fake, contaminated, or polluted) histories reveals a deep historical melancholia that marks artistes like Chittaprosad; in postcolonial film-making, this is reflected most starkly in Ritwik Ghatak’s films on partition too. In Chittaprosad, this melancholia around freedom is rooted in his own encounters with hunger, displacement, apathy and political failures; it blends also with his deep-seated doubts about a market-driven art world, and an insistence too, on withdrawal.

Chittaprosad’s marginal living in India was matched by his visibility across a defined transnational circuit of socialist art. This visibility, however, was rooted in his own non-movement. He never left India; his plans for visiting Europe were thwarted, at times by himself.⁴⁶ Yet his works on transnational commissions reveal a unique trajectory of socialist internationalism in the 1950s to 1960s – one that formed, often through ideological affiliations and friendships rather than active exchange and travel – the hallmarks of artistic internationalism that marked the Cold War years.

**Home and the world: Internationalism and stasis**

Chittaprosad’s letters reveal a tension between his desire to remain in Bombay and that of leaving – to Calcutta, or across India or to Europe. Time and again, his letters show this undulation of the home and the world. This also marks, one can argue, the curious internationalism he – and like him many other artistes who developed a locational internationalism without the global circuits of travel/exchange – sustained during the critical post–Second World War decades.

Since 1949 Chittaprosad had participated in the world peace movement, and in 1951–2 he made a series of linocuts on the living conditions of children in India. Chittaprosad’s involvement with the world peace movement since 1949 is key in understanding a new series on peace that he begins in 1952. This is, in many ways, a return to the utopic trope, which dominated his works of popular resistance and collective culture from the post-1945 period. The idiom of socialist realism is strongest here, matched also by his dedication to the Soviet Union. There are

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anti-imperialist fronts and anti-war solidarities here that demand peace, yield the flag ‘Hands off Asia’, kicking away Uncle Sam – the signifier of post-war American capital and financial aid – while the British pound sterling gnaws at his feet. Post-war US capital spreads over tilled lands as vermin and worms, and a chuckling Uncle Sam crowned with daggers, dangles the atom bomb, while his pet vultures guard over pyres burning truth, freedom or progress, and fresh supplies of crime, terror, spies, filth and lies abound. Some of these, made for the World Peace Council, suggest the artist’s continuing affiliation to a socialist internationalism and the global left against a waning party enthusiasm at home. India’s prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, is a staple in many of these cartoons that mock the moral assumptions of Nehruvian non-alignment, showing him repeatedly as a dithering statesman in the crafts of the Cold War. In an undated cartoon, probably from 1950, Nehru rises over the globe with a garland held in open arms to welcome a battered Uncle Sam, who hides a dagger behind a beaming sack of dollars, while being kicked out by a Vietnamese peasant. Unlike the more widely circulated cartoons of Shankar, whose protagonist, the ‘Common Man’, shadowed Nehru’s trails and policies with satirical bafflement, Chittaprosad’s Nehru is the eager victim of US imperialism, a pawn in post-war neo-colonialism. Nehru’s recurrence in Chittaprosad’s cartoons and letters are cues to the anxieties of socialist art in postcolonial India.

Anti-imperialism gains defined socialist-realist aura in Chittaprosad’s posters for the World Peace Council. Indeed against the backdrop of a waning party enthusiasm for cultural activism, these posters gave Chittaprosad a purpose to sustain a socialist cause, and are indeed pointers towards his political subjectivity that remained deeply ideological, bordering on the dogmatic at various points. His support for Stalinist USSR, for instance, even in the early 1950s is noteworthy, as he writes to his friend and comrade Somnath Hore with great pride, of his prints being published in Ogonyok, one of Soviet Union’s oldest illustrated weekly magazines. Under the shadow of the Cold War, these posters for the World Peace Council made between 1949 and 1955 were invoking the visual rhetoric of anti-fascist cultural resistance of the Popular Front period. When the exhibition of socialist realist art from the USSR came to Bombay in 1952, Viktor Klimashin,

49 The WPC, though apparently non-aligned, was itself was Soviet dominated. See Günter Wernicke, ‘The Unity of Peace and Socialism? The World Peace Council on a Cold War Tightrope Between the Peace Struggle and Intrasystemic Communist Conflicts’, Peace and Change 26 (2001), 332–51.
Soviet watercolourist and the chief artist for *Ogonyok* visited Chittaprosad (photographs of this visit appear in the collection of the DAG) and collected Chittaprosad’s pastels and gouache works of peasant women singing during the Bezwada conference of the Kisan Sabha of 1944.50 Klimashin’s own poster-exhibit – ‘Stalin gently looking down from a poster (poster in poster), smiling friendly to the poor Indian families’ was made specifically for this show to resonate the Soviet promise: ‘We stand for peace and champion the cause of peace. Stalin.’51

In the mid-1950s, Chittaprosad was also corresponding with a wider network of transnational socialist movement, for instance, the *Daily Worker*, as his mention of Barbara Niven (an artist who worked for many years for the *Daily Worker*, becoming the head of its ‘Fighting Fund’) shows. In 1955, Sidney Finkelstein noted the monumentality of Chittaprosad’s linocuts, writing in the *New York Daily Worker*.52 His works were also published in Aufbau (Vol. 8, No. 2, p. 637, 642, 1952), a review on which appeared in the French Marxist journal *La Pensée*, where Chittaprosad is wrongly attributed to being a socialist artist from Iran. His name appears alongside Polish-born French artist Louis Mittelberg.53

*Aufbau* was a New York periodical of the Jewish diaspora. It is likely that Harold Leventhal would have been instrumental in printing his works. Leventhal – who appears across Chittaprosad’s letters – was one of the members of the Allied army who had frequented the studio of Jamini Roy and the left-wing circuits in wartime Calcutta and Bombay.54 Reaching India in 1944 he is known to have headed straight to the CPI office in Bombay, and procured a copy of ‘People’s Front’ (should be *People’s War*).55 He would later go on to form the American Friends of India (AFI). Leventhal was also the promoter for left-wing music, steering the careers of artistes like Pete Seeger, Arlo Guthrie, Phil Ochs and so on. His love for Indian art aside, his correspondence with Chittaprosad can resonate a wider world of socialist aesthetic that sustained through friendships and solidarities. These new friendships and Chittaprosad’s works for the WPA in the early 1950s fostered his visibilities in the socialist world. In one of the linocuts he made during this period, the artist shows himself with works of Nâzım Hikmet

53 *La Pensée: revue du rationalisme moderne, arts, sciences, philosophie*, 50–5 (September-October 1953), 141.
and Pablo Neruda, a staging of his own ideological and affective affiliations with the transnational left-wing cultural movement during the Cold War.

By the late 1950s, Chittaprosad was also developing close ties with the then Czechoslovakia, a connection he would continue to nurture through friends like Frantisek Salaba, the Indologist Dr. Miloslav Krasa, or the film-maker Pavel Hobl.\(^\text{56}\) The first international exhibition of his works was organized in the communist bloc at Prague in 1954, mainly at the initiative of Krasa. Pavel Hobl would later make a documentary on his life, *Konfesse/Confession*, which received a special award at the World Peace Council in the 1970s. Chittaprosad’s friend in Denmark, Erik Stinus, continued to exhibit/publish/sell his works in the Scandinavian world. His archive is full of letters/postcards/photographs/poems (that Chittaprosad himself translated) from Stinus; a July 1968 letter to his mother, for instance, notes: ‘Erik had published some of my pictures along with snippets [of his poems].’\(^\text{57}\)

In the 1960s, we see Chittaprosad writing in his letters that he was receiving money from Europe: ‘[…] I too will receive some money from Europe in a couple of months’ time – the works have been sold – the payment is being delayed because it is a foreign transaction.’\(^\text{58}\) In the letter to his mother in September 1965, he writes that the National Art gallery of Czechoslovakia has acquired his paintings worth over 1,500 rupees, he signed a contract too, but got no further response from them.\(^\text{59}\) By the early 1970s, he writes to his sister Gouri Bhattacharya, that more and more foreigners were buying his works in the early 1970s: ‘Staying in Kolkata I would lose all contact with these foreigners’, he writes, ‘[…] These foreign friends of mine visit Bombay – hardly ever Kolkata […] If your *dadamoshai* has to survive by painting, he must continue to live in Bombay […].’\(^\text{60}\) He also notes that a new exhibition of his works was to be organized in Bombay ‘with the administration and support of his Czechoslovak friends.’ His new ‘Indian friend’ Subrata (Subrata Banerjee, the early associate

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\(^\text{58}\) Letter to Mother, 10 March 1965, in Mallik, ed., *Yours Chitta*, 75.

\(^\text{59}\) Letter to Mother, 14 September 1965, in Mallik, ed., *Yours Chitta*, 83.

\(^\text{60}\) Letter to Sister, 1 July 1968, in Mallik, ed., *Yours Chitta*, 139.
editor of the *Illustrated Weekly of India*), he writes, was ‘uppermost in convincing the Indo-Czech friendship committee’. 61

Chittaprosad laments time and again that he cannot get a passport – neither from Bombay – not from other cities: ‘In fact travelling abroad is not in my destiny – no matter how much it ought to be.’ 62 Yet apparently, when all arrangements had been made for him to visit Czechoslovakia, writes Prabhash Sen in his memoirs on the artist, he refused. Chitta, he writes, got to know the Czech ambassador to India, artists and critics from the country visited him, collected his drawings and linocuts, exhibited them in Czechoslovakia. But his trip itself did not happen; he declined to go at the last minute stating that he is disillusioned with the form global communist movement had taken by the 1960s, particularly in countries that have a communist government. Sen notes that Chittaprosad stated that he has left the Communist Party not out of disillusionment with Marxism, but in rejection of the particular form Communist Parties and in particular ruling communist governments have taken. To him Czechoslovakia was no exception; he felt there he would face the repression other artists were facing from the government. This would make him sacrifice his independence or his honesty. As a guest he would not be able to critique the government that invited him, hence it was best to not go. Sen further states that this decision did not alter despite repeated invitations. 63

Chittaprosad’s association with home itself is curious – torn between his love for the land and his deep suspicion of postcolonial modernity in India, his transnational horizons and a foundational desire to walk across the rural hinterlands of India. His absorption in his own rented Ruby Cottage room permeates his letters: ‘Should you come now you will simply be surprised,’ he writes to Murari Gupta, ‘[. . .] The puppet stage glows exactly beneath the R. I. N. painting; my “children” staring out wide-eyed at all, whichever direction you may choose to cast your eyes on.’ 64 In another letter, and indeed in many, his loneliness reverberates:

Now it’s exactly one o’clock at night. Took a bath but still no sign of sleep, a wind is blowing, I can hear murmur in the coconut-palm leaves, the curtain on the window is tense like a sail, I am feeling good, and feeling extremely lonely [. . .]. 65

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61 Ibid., 139.
He seems to be both tied to this haunt, yet yearning to leave: ‘No, not Kolkata,’ he writes to Gupta, ‘The forests, mountains, unknown cities and villages, uninhabited terrain, tell me, how do I explain it.’ Yet obstacles hinder him, he writes: ‘each day they twine around in tighter spirals.’ In 20 November 1960, he writes about a plan for touring Bengal on foot, to illustrate the history of Bengal in pictures:

I had begun work based on it from Dinesh Sen’s *History of Bengal*, that sound be something like 25 years ago – an infantile attempt. Now source materials are galore in Bengali – the prominent among which is Ashok Mitra’s *Census Report of Bengal*. But I do not at all wish to visualize an academic history-in-pictures. I will tour Bengal on foot as far as possible – for two years. The tour programme will be prepared from textual references in advance. Then I will bring back photographs of historic Bengal from my tour in cities-villages-open terrain – a glimpse of the past as seen through my contemporary vision – and then I will write and paint my book based on how my modern mind feels and responds. I have given this a thought – such a book is essential not only in Bengal – every region of India needs a history of new India from a new vision. And that is only possible from regional artists and writers. It isn't essential to make use of pictures as the saddle-horse of history. At least I don't intend to do that – pictures won't merely be a supplement to the text. Had my famine sketches not been supported by reportage, even then the pictures would have spoken for themselves. What is essential is that the life-rhythm of the pictures maintains a connection with the *flux of history*, and that is precisely why I must tour Bengal on foot.

Chittaprosad never left Bombay, until before his death when he had to be brought to Calcutta for failing health. His accumulated world of books, art, ongoing work – despite his active withdrawal – seem to carry a restless weight, one that he himself could not share. Writing to his mother, this becomes stark:

And this single room contains the accumulated wealth of the past twenty years, the yield of my toil, the wealth of my pain. So many books, so many paintings, puppets, gifts from abroad, expensive brush and paint. Further, utensils and clothes as well. And – at night there's the menace of the tree-rodents here, they had broken into my suitcase and nibbled to bits my expensive warm clothes and suit.

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66 Ibid., 39.
68 Letter to Mother, 10 March 1965, in Mallik, ed., *Yours Chitta*, 75.
His nostalgia for Cox’s Bazar remains; writing to his mother in December 1967:

Cox’s Bazar was true heaven – such splendid hills and forests – so many flowering plants – the huge areas full of the champa and the nagkesar. The countless varieties of divine orchids and ferns. And there’s no comparison between the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea. I have not seen shells and cowries here till date [. . .].

Home also provides to him a new domain for re/creating new story-worlds, where his own lineages in socialist art, his melancholic withdrawal away from postcolonial art worlds, as well as his socialist internationalism come together. Since the late 1950s, Chittaprosad rediscovered himself as a narrator and illustrator of folk tales, retold and illustrated by himself, and as a maker of puppet theatre.

Socialist story-worlds

Writing to Murari Gupta on 31 July 1957, Chittaprosad mentions his Czech friend Salaba gifting him money for a puppet project, 100 Rupees each month for a period of six months. Salaba also gifted him a puppet stage. Chittaprosad named his puppetry theatre group ‘Khelaghar’ – translatable as an ‘abode of play’. He mentions composing shorter theatrical pieces to be staged for puppet shows. ‘I have become addicted to puppets since then,’ he writes,

I have already composed two plays in the meanwhile number one – Shakuntala. Entirely rearranged, complete in three acts, a matter of about one-and-a-quarter hours. The last act is completely mine, a little bit of Kalidasa in the initial two. Number two, a fifteen-minute sarcastic drama.

Khelaghar became his obsession, threading into his daily life and his melancholic affiliations:

[. . .] the entire noon I spend with the hammer and the saw, build the limbs of the puppets and fume at not receiving your letter. In the evening I sit down with needle thread and scissors to prepare the puppets’ dresses and get furious over Tara [. . .].

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71 Ibid., 21.
Somnath Hore recalls that Chittaprosad nurtured these puppets like his own children, despite tremendous financial strain. He assembled his own crew for the puppetry project, and ruminated on the new possibilities of creating puppets in more vernacular idioms:

One of the members is an engineer. He is preparing the torso of the puppets, trunks with legs, in the factory following the Czech technique, I will supply the heads. I have already produced some five such whole figures. . . . Since I am still under the spell of foreign prototypes, the puppets continue to follow a naturalistic schema. But other fresh plans are filling my imagination; intend to ‘puppetise’ the folk wood and terracotta toys.

Writing to Murari Gupta in 1958, Chittaprosad mentions writing a play for puppet theatre about ‘a drongo bird’:

This will require nearly 17 puppets, ten are ready as on today. The painting of details in the faces is also finished – only the dress remains. All the characters have turned out to be very amusing, really, extremely amusing. And the puppets are of a completely new kind too, they would even stun the Czechs. And equally simple.

Khelaghar created a new story-world around him:

Increasingly, I am observing that a new kind of life is growing up for me centred around the puppet performance. New acquaintances, young boys are gathering around me. Even the ruling authority seems interested . . . . The meek, docile puppet is commanding me to toil enormously, day in and day out.

Yet he remains anxious about this becoming too public:

It is certainly exciting, nevertheless I do not wish to get too entangled and dissipated in an outside world. The joy in work can never be achieved unless I move away from the hustle and bustle of the world of exchange. Yet my own blood goads me on to work, and work invariably implies establishing a relationship with the market. This is an indescribable situation.

He talks about his fascination for Radost, a famous puppet group from Prague; Radost was also to view Khelaghar’s performance.

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75 Ibid., 24.
Yet Khelaghar too runs into crisis. The artist writes about the lack of ‘manpower’ and ‘effort’: ‘This is not a one-man’s job – one needs a team, both boys and girls.’77 As ‘fresh visitors keep passing by attracted by Khelaghar’, Chittaprosad writes of the difficulty with ‘necessary monetary support for the expenses.’78 In November 1958 he mentions shutting down Khelaghar.79 In 1959, he writes to Murari Gupta, “The truth is that without a real patron it is still impossible today to construct something really artistic with the support of these film-people. One cannot produce art with the support of speculators.”80

In the late 1960s, Chittaprosad can be seen illustrating children’s stories, many of which were published in periodicals in Eastern Europe, for instance in Czechoslovakia, the image reproduced here being published in the Czech journal Novy Orient in May 1957 (Figure 1.3). Last ten to fifteen years of his life he composed poems alongside children’s book illustrations, including writing scripts for puppet plays. As his own health deteriorated, he continued to work on children’s illustrated books on the epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata, with calligraphic writing on one page and illustrations on the other; but this work remained incomplete; Prabhash Sen recalls seeing some of these works.81 During these years Chittaprosad was also writing poems. Writing to his friend and fellow artist Sanjoy (he is referring to the noted commercial artist Sanjoy Sengupta here), he writes in 1966: ‘You had asked for new poems – that inspired me to pen these twenty poems in the past three days [. . .].’82 He invites his friends (refers to commercial artists Sanjoy Sengupta and Dilip Dasgupta here) to illustrate and publish the poems – similar to Sengupta’s publication of Chittaprosad’s comrade from the 1940s – the Marxist poet Sukanta Bhattacharya’s poem collection Ek je chhilo Raja. Sanjoy Sen Gupta was part of the Shilpayan Artists’ Society – one where one of the first retrospectives of Chittaprosad was organized after his death. By 1967, however, he is alienated from the group, as he writes in a letter to his sister, asking her to pick up the collection of his works from Sanjay Sen Gupta’s house.83 In these letters he is also writing about his illustrations for children’s Ramayana.

In a July 1968 letter to his sister he mentions Subrata Banerji’s piece on him in the Illustrated Weekly of India.84 His images were published in March and April

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79 Ibid., 29.
80 Letter to Murari Gupta, 30 May, 1959, in Mallik, ed., Yours Chitta, 41.
84 Letter to Sister, 1 July 1968, in Mallik, ed., Yours Chitta, 139.
editions of Illustrated Weekly of India. Banerji’s brief article on Chittaprosad strikes a sharp balance between Chittaprosad’s own radical lineages and his conscious absorption in (and translation into) folk idioms and puppetry – a point completely missed by Mulk Raj Anand, the Marxist writer and key figure in Nehruvian national-modern culture, who while introducing Chittaprosad in the mid-1950s to an American audience had described him rather tepidly, as a carrier of ‘folk traditions’ in the line of a ‘village artisan’,85 Chittaprosad himself mentions in his letters time and again, the ill-treatment he received from Anand, including never being paid for his works that Anand had published.86 The artist’s absorption in fairy tales, as noted in Banerji’s piece – one of the rare writings


on Chittaprosad – was an ‘escape’. *The Kingdom of Rosogolla and Other Tales* – Chittaprosad’s illustrated children’s book – was ‘hardly representative’ of the artist’s talents and lineages, wrote Banerji; he was, he noted, the artist of famine, earthy people rooted in the soil, ‘the artist of the struggle’. The ‘sensitive soul’ of this artist ‘reacted violently’, he wrote, to the reality of post-independence India, one that was a far cry from his own dreams; his retirement from active political life brought him to his art as a ‘refuge’. His withdrawal, Banerji writes, makes it appear ‘as if he had ceased to exist’, and ‘he is appreciated more abroad than at home’. The artist, Banerji writes, carried ‘a deep sadness in his eyes’, with a ‘raging passion’ – a ‘lonely man’, and yet ‘full of love’. Banerji concluded with a fragment of a poem the artist had sent him:

> In loneliness, there is no happiness  
> Brother.  
> No happiness in a crowd.  
> The happiness in friendship brother,  
> Even in a temple is not to be found.87

Staying along the grain of Banerji’s own encounters with and readings of the artist, one could still ask: Is the child’s world of story-telling an escape? The question of childhood in itself is an important cornerstone – not only in Chittaprosad’s postcolonial career but also for the wider story-worlds of transnational socialism. Childhood appeared as a critical point of deflection in Chittaprosad’s 1950s’ child labour linocuts, one that refracted a Nehruvian narrative of a young nation of promise. In the late 1950s, childhood enters a domain of narration, animation and a reinvented popular itself, as Chittaprosad dedicated himself to puppetry. This was a striking moment in his career, one that was otherwise deep in withdrawal. Khelaghar also exposes him to a new world of public-ness, one that is rooted in making art, yet removed from the art circuits:

> Till date, my fate relating to my pictures has exclusively been mine alone. I mean to say that a couple of individuals, or probably ten at the most, have made me their own from near or far, but it’s never the crowd; I have been able to continue in my own world of peace. Puppets are a world apart, gathering a crowd around them is their profession. Having started it, I am surely not going to give up, but it is equally certain that I am not going to allow myself to be traded away. A limit must be maintained, and that is the concern that keeps me engaged presently.88

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In his illustrations for children’s books, his projects on illustrating *Ramayana* or fairy tales, the artist can be seen to enter into his own uniquely personal vocabulary of the social, one that is rooted in translating art into story-telling, imagination into pedagogy. This is its own kind of abstraction – in this case, from his own lineages in socialist expressionist art that visualized hunger, struggle and displacement. It echoes, in a very different way, his friend and former comrade Somnath Hore’s 1970s’ abstract white-on-white prints called the *Wounds* series, where Hore himself withdrew from realistic or expressionist portrayals of hunger and politics by creating textured pulp prints with deep gashes and burns signifying corporeal/material rupture. Chittaprosad’s (further) withdrawal into fairy tales – while echoing a wider socialist culture of children’s book illustrations – can also be read as a peculiar trajectory for former CPI artist-cadres like him whose postcolonial careers were marked by disjunctures from the party, and constant negotiations around how to carry on the radical socialist impulses within the wider postcolonial condition.

The *Ramayana* pictures, Chittaprosad notes in his (only) interview, given to the Czech film-maker Pavel Hobl for his documentary *Konfesse* (Confessions), was his last venture: “The events of old myths fascinate me today. This is my last job. Transcript of the ancient Indian epic *Ramayana*.“99 *Konfesse* was made in 1972, which reveals the rich world of story-telling and illustration Chittaprosad had created around him. As ‘confessions’, the artist’s words in the short fifteen-minute documentary, also brought together an almost pivotal moment combining testimony and testimonial.

**Confessions: Testimony and testimonial**

*Konfesse* begins with a scattered set of catalogues that show Chittaprosad’s transnational footprints and book illustrations: we see reproductions from the Czech periodical *Novy Orient* and its English edition *New Orient*; in Danish from the ‘Dansk Unicef Komite’ (Danish UNICEF Committee); Den Ny verden (The New World: For International Illumination of Nordic Peasant Culture); ‘Chittaprosad, Born uden aeven’; Chitta’s own illustrated story-book *Kingdom of Rosogolla*; the Czech magazine Indické Bajky a Pohadky; also paper cuttings from Danish periodical ‘Fredens Årstid’.

99 Transcript of *Konfesse*. I am thankful to the art historian Simone Wille for providing me with the transcript.
The film begins with the camera zooming into a Bengal rural landscape and terracotta temples; village fairs; rural homes with decorated walls, thresholds; it cuts into, seamlessly, the artist’s own room in Bombay – a sign are the masks (from his puppets) hanging on the walls, in what seems to be afternoon light; the artist’s own story moves alongside montages of the famine, displacement and decimation of population. We hear the artist’s own voice in Bengali, very briefly, as we see him sprawled on the floor, showing his drawings to Hobl (possibly); before the Czech voiceover overtakes it very soon: ‘I felt the eagerness to put art and art education to the use of mankind and society first and most clearly during the war.’ The music moves from classical notes to folk rhythms, to songs of the Indian People’s Theatre Association – the left’s front organization in the 1940s, of which Chittaprosad was a visualizer, making in fact the IPTA icon of a drummer beaconing the people to action. At moments it seems that the artist himself is singing (which is likely given he composed songs and designed attire for IPTA performances), as the documentary weaves from decimated landscapes, to displaced populations and, suddenly, a battleground. The shift seems seamless when we are alerted to the scenes actually shifting to the Liberation War and genocide in East Pakistan at its hour of becoming Bangladesh in 1971. The artist is showing Hobl drawings tied to the Liberation War in Bangladesh; while these could have been drafts for the Liberation War painting that he poses with (Figure 1.4), many of these drawings have not been shown anywhere else. They show the artist’s experimentation with a figuration of evil – anthropomorphic images of battleships, humanoids, army generals as grimacing animals – striking additions to a genre of works that artists in India were doing in response to the Liberation War in Bangladesh, yet ones that remained invisible, and in fact lost today.

The use of the term ‘confession’ itself is interesting – it echoes the idea of testimonial and testimony; the artist’s own recollection appearing not only as a mode of staging his own lineage of political art but also connecting a narrative of (postcolonial) Bengal from both sides of the border. Speaking to Hobl, Chittaprosad’s confessions reveal the inner lives of communist art in twentieth-century India, one where deeply individual and subjective interfaces with political art become tangible:

The more I wanted to stay away from political life in my life and pursue only art, the more my country’s life returned me again and again into the arms of politics. It is so. After all, the artist is a human being, nothing more and nothing less, which has been tied to the fate of his homeland since his birth. Whether

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the artist is aware of it or not, whether he likes it or not, he becomes part of the future of his fellow citizens. (music, shooting, war, singing)91

‘And so, in the face of death,’ he continues, ‘I always realize again what is art and its value. The more ‘the essence of humanity is threatened,’ the more an artist’s message ‘must be stronger’: ‘Perhaps it seems trivial to those who have survived.’ The black-and-white ‘essence’ of graphic art, to him, creates the unique possibility of ‘quick and cheap reproduction,’ and is ‘the most effective means of communication for both learned and unspoken’. His confessions echo both the received histories of the left he was part of and the wider worlds of radical popular art he felt the nation failed to produce:

Every artist must sooner or later consciously or unconsciously express his moral and political standpoint. Through my work, I am committed to the tradition of moralists and political fighters. To save people is to save the art itself. Artist’s activity is an active denial of death.92

In a way Chittaprosad’s letters are his confessions. They often veer closely towards his own incapacity, as much as he rejects the structures of the art market and official

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91 Chittaprosad in conversation with Pavel Hobl, used in Konfesse. I am grateful to Simone Wille for providing me with the transcribed English script of Konfesse.
92 Chittaprosad in conversation with Pavel Hobl.
Forms of the Left in Postcolonial South Asia

patronage. ‘The urban formula for a successful exhibition is entirely different,’ he writes in 1958, pondering over having his own exhibition, ‘one needs a friend like Salaba in this case, or a Harold. But let’s quit that thought. [. . .]’ Writing on W. G. Archer’s book *India and Modern Art*, he writes in one of his letters:

> While I was reading the book, I had this feeling that, unknowingly, I traversed through all the phases from Aban-thakur to Sher-Gil in my personal pictorial endeavours along the rise-and-fall of the core perspectives pertaining to the practice. I am telling you, in truth. However, such direct and clear-cut intellectual formulations have never been possible from me, and will not be possible either, that I know. One cannot view oneself without a mirror. Art critics are mirrors to the artists. Accordingly, I felt I saw my work and its entire background – distinct in certain places, not so distinct in others.

Ultimately, Chittaprosad’s letters carry the confessions of an artist unsure of his own legacy, as much as he is unsure of his own sustenance:

> My greatest worry today is my future [. . .] And my life-sacrificed heap of paintings and books – how and to whom will I entrust them, brother Murari? The stinging words due to loan, the prospect that I may be on the streets for the final few days, are trivial, most trivial, I am ready for it today. But will I have to hand over this small world created by me to the gutters, those worse than asses and pigs – those are my disturbing sleepless thoughts, brother Murari.

Gouri Bhattacharya writes that in a legal quagmire, all of the artist’s belongings were languishing in lock-up, and by the time she got access after the case was closed, only 50 per cent of his things survived decay; only some artworks and a few thousand books remained; among these was his crushed leather bag – one that he carried with him in all his tours of rural India since 1939: ‘with this bag hung over his shoulders and with a mere bottle of water, Dada (elder brother) would roam the nooks and corners, rural expanses of India. The bag contained his drawing tools, sketchbooks, notebook and packets of cigarettes.’

**Afterword: Memory/montage/manoeuvres**

As Chittaprosad’s archive went on display at the 2011 DAG retrospective, and appear time and again across transnational exhibitions, its salvage, like I noted

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at the start, echoes beyond the art world or narrative of Indian/global modern art. In capturing at the same time, the artist’s own absence, this belated archive, as I have argued, carries melancholia that is both historical and individual. It bristles with the more granular histories of (postcolonial) freedom, where narratives of national identity are undercut by those of displacement and hunger, and legacies of the left’s activist movement too are not monolithic inheritances. Yet in appearing, even if belatedly and as fragments (that were also re-distributed across a private auction market) – Chittaprosad’s re/discovery
at a national and now transnational scale has carried distinct resources for the very popular movements that the artist himself would have been enthused by. In contemporary times, the artist’s melancholic archive – and the visuals from these works made in withdrawal – are becoming resource for montage and manoeuvres of contemporary emancipatory political cultures, and as such, are activating a potentiality that continues to make present, the politics of absence and peripherality.

Chittaprosad’s images appear as flashes today (Figure 1.5) – in protest marches, university graffities, people’s film festivals – also across mugs, bags, posters sold at sites where there are conscious citations of radical people’s histories, for instance here at the Kolkata People’s Film Festival (bottom panel). His works join – as montage – fragments from revolutionary poetry or combined with iconic political art (like with the Guernica as from walls of Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi) or with works of his fellow artists from the 1940s (with Zainul Abedin or Ramkinkar Baij) at the reception of the Kolkata People’s Film Festival in 2020) – upholding critical constellation of past histories and struggles as they resonate in our times. These are conscious manoeuvres – from students, activists and grassroots organizers – to generate through citational montages – new memory practices around people’s art and its twentieth-century lineages in India – even if such memories have remained marginal in art/historiographies in the country. This popularization via citation, one could argue, is perhaps also the closest afterword that the artist himself would have desired for his practice and the lineages he carried, or craved.