

Experiential Learning and Artistic Identity in Indian Printmaking Education

Ms. Richa Maheshwari^{1*} & Dr. Ujjvala M. Tiwari²

¹Research Scholar, School of Fine Arts, IIS(deemed to be University), Jaipur.

²Associate Professor & Director, School of Fine Arts, IIS(deemed to be University), Jaipur.

*Corresponding Author: 12richa.maheshwari@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Indian traditional systems of education have consistently understood learning as a process that demands more than just imparting knowledge. The Guru–Shishya Parampara represents a tradition in which knowledge develops through a close relationship of transferring deep knowledge between the teacher and the learner, supported by observation, practice, discipline, guidance and continuous learning. Its purpose is not simply to replicate the teacher's knowledge or methods, but also to help learners recognise and develop their individual abilities. This can be understood through the example of the Pandavas, who were trained under the guidance of the one Guru- Dronacharya, yet developed various skills, strength and distinct qualities. As a result, a shared system of instruction and supervision did not produce people who were alike, but rather enabled each student to grow to the fullest extent possible. This paper examines the suitable and possible reapplication of these traditional educational values within the contemporary framework of the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020). The policy emphasises experiential learning, creativity, critical thinking, holistic development and the recognition of individual potential. Instead of proposing an attempt to revive the Gurukul system, the study considers whether principles such as mentorship, observation, learning by doing, experimentation and personalized instruction can retain their significance in the contemporary educational paradigm. These principles are primarily significant for the domain of Fine Arts education, particularly printmaking, where learning is strongly associated with experience. The students learn through observing process, comprehending technique, practice and experiments with the medium. Initially, they may imitate the techniques and processes of their mentors, but gradually through practice and experience, they start forming their subjects, language and personality in the art form. The artistic and pedagogical development journey of Zainul Abedin to Somnath Hore and Sanat Kar to V. Nagdas to Rakesh Bani and so forth, is the examples of this phenomenon. The paper contends that effective teaching and mentoring can impart knowledge, while at the same time, promote individuality, which makes the principles of Guru-Shishya Parampara relevant for contemporary Fine Arts education and the pedagogy proposed under NEP 2020.

Keywords: Guru–Shishya Parampara, Fine Arts Education, Printmaking, Mentorship, Experiential Learning, Artistic Identity.

Introduction

Education not only involves the acquisition of knowledge, it involves the development of knowledge, skills, experiences and individual capabilities. In the Indian culture, this wider perception of education has been exemplified by the Guru Shishya Parampara, in which the education took place

through the personal interaction between the guru and the shishya. Knowledge did not only involve listening to the instructions but observation, demonstration, practice, discipline, discussion and continuous interaction. The shishya learned from the guru, learned the techniques of practice and developed the capability of applying the knowledge independently. The importance of this tradition does not only lie in the transfer of knowledge but in the process through which knowledge transforms into experience and skills and finally individual capabilities.

The classical tale about the training of the Pandavas by Dronacharya serves to illustrate this point. Despite being educated together, the Pandavas showed different inclinations and skills. The significance of this tale for education lies in the way it demonstrates that despite receiving common education, students do not become equal. On the contrary, it shows how education can serve as a platform from where people learn and develop their own particular skills. Thus, the traditional tale provides an appropriate concept to consider contemporary trends in education, which is the shift from general academic knowledge to specialized skills and personal choice. It is important to stress that it does not mean that in the ancient education system there were concepts and terms which are used now in contemporary educational policy. It is rather the concept of the relationship between education, personal skills and ability and choice.

The above connection assumes more significance when considering Fine Arts education where the process of learning cannot be confined to theory alone. In any form of artistic education, the development of understanding and skill happens simultaneously with observation, experimentation and personal expression. For instance, in the case of printmaking, the learner will not only have to have theoretical knowledge about the medium, but also gain practical knowledge through the application of the medium with respect to the techniques used. This also includes personal choices made by the learner on matters of subject matter, composition, visual language and techniques used.

Printmaking is thus an important area for investigating the connection between experiential learning and the formation of artistic identity. Technical processes such as etching, woodcut, lithography among others can only be known through observation and experiment in addition to theoretical explanations. Students learn through observation, handling of material, practise of processes, experimentation and personal experience of mistakes among others. The teacher provides a theoretical and technical basis for the learner to develop his/her artistic identity. The printmaking studio is thus a place of observation, demonstration, practice, experimentation and individual guidance. Although students might learn from the start how a particular teacher approaches his work or the method he uses, with constant practice they start questioning, adapting, and reinterpreting their knowledge. What is important, therefore, is not the replication of the teacher's artistic language, but the formation of an independent one.

This process has a strong connection with the principles of Guru–Shishya pedagogy. The contemporary relevance of the Guru–Shishya relationship does not necessarily lie in recreating the historical Gurukul system as it existed in the past. Instead, its relevance can be found in the continuation of its pedagogical principles—particularly mentorship, observation, learning through practice, individual guidance, discipline, dialogue and experiential learning. These principles can coexist with the institutional structure of contemporary Fine Arts education and with the learner-centred approach.

The current paper examines this process through selected examples from modern and contemporary Indian printmaking, focusing on Zainul Abedin, Somnath Hore, Sanat Kar, V. Nagdas and Rakesh Bani. The artists are considered not as one uninterrupted literal Guru–Shishya lineage, but as an artistic and pedagogical continuum through which artistic knowledge, technical understanding and pedagogical values have been transmitted and transformed across generations. Abedin's influence on Somnath Hore provides an example of how social consciousness and artistic observation can become transformed into an individual visual language for the welfare and development of the society. The practices of Somnath Hore and Sanat Kar demonstrate the development of printmaking as both an artistic medium and a specialised field of education. Sanat Kar's encouragement of experimentation further illustrates the importance of allowing students to move beyond established methods.

The continuum can subsequently be considered through V. Nagdas and Rakesh Bani, where the transmission of technical and artistic knowledge becomes connected with institutional printmaking education. Nagdas's role as an artist and educator and his influence on Bani provide an opportunity to examine how mentorship operates within contemporary Fine Arts education and commercial field as well.

Bani's experience is particularly significant because, although he was strongly influenced by Nagdas's working discipline and artistic practice, he developed his own thought process, subject matter and compositional approach.

Thus, the primary theme of the current research is the interconnection of continuity and individuality. According to the researcher, experiential learning becomes an important solution: knowledge is initially observed and acquired, followed by practice, experiment and interpretation of that knowledge individually. It is at this stage when the teacher plays a role of a base for the development of individual skills of transforming this base into one's own artistic language. Hence, the research focuses on Guru-Shishya methodology not as a traditional approach but as principles that may be relevant to be considered again in the context of learner-centered, skill-based and adaptive educational approach.

Methodology

- The research adopts a qualitative and descriptive/analytical approach using both primary and secondary sources.
- Primary Sources:
 - Conducting interview with a printmaker Rakesh Bani about his educational background, mentorship by V. Nagdas and his working process.
 - Visiting an exhibition for a direct experience of the works of art.
- Secondary Sources:
 - Deriving data from the thesis, books and scholarly journals on Indian art education, Guru-Shishya methodology, printmaking and contemporary Indian art.

Objectives

- To research the function of the teacher in imparting basic artistic knowledge and skills in the Guru Shishya method.
- To analyze the growth of the artist's own personality through observation, practice, experiment and experience.
- To investigate the transformation of learned knowledge to the artist's own artistic expression instead of imitating someone else in the case of some Indian printmakers.

Guru-Shishya Pedagogy, Experiential Learning and Individualism

The importance of the Guru-Shishya model of teaching in present-day education may be examined in terms of the character of the relation between the teacher and the learner. Since this model implies a lot of guidance, observation, practice and interaction, the process of knowledge acquisition is gradual and occurs due to practical experience. The teacher is the one who guides and shows the discipline, and the learner understands it through observation and practice.

From this point of view, the function of the teacher is not limited to the transmission of already existing knowledge only. In other words, the mentor plays a significant role in the shaping of the attitude towards the subject by the learner. Therefore, the process of education comprises continuity and change, when knowledge is taken from the previous generation and interpreted anew.

Such an approach is especially suitable for the development of an artist's identity. While learning some approaches or techniques or a certain attitude to work from the teacher, a learner later has the opportunity to rethink his influences because of the constant work with the medium. Gradually he begins to pick, change and merge his learning experiences and create his own path of art.

The method of teaching by Sanat Kar serves as a good example of the pedagogical principle. He motivated his students to work in different media and to think outside of the box about the traditional methods of printing and try the peculiarities of each printing technique. He wanted students to take something from the teacher and develop their own way of communication through art.

Thus, the efficiency of Guru-Shishya approach can be judged by the process of achieving the independence of a learner but not by the reproduction of the style of the teacher. The teacher gives the basis and the student changes it. Such concept can serve as the base for the analysis of the chosen printmakers in the following section.

Transmission and Transformation of Printmaking Knowledge: Zainul Abedin to Rakesh Bani

Artistic knowledge transmission from one generation to another can be studied with the help of the selected artists. The process of knowledge transmission includes the receipt of influence, its acceptance and transformation. As regards printmaking, this process is especially valuable for the reason that technical knowledge, artistic sense and methods of work are usually learned through direct interaction with teachers and in the studio atmosphere. Examples of Zainul Abedin, Somnath Hore, Sanat Kar, V. Nagdas and Rakesh Bani show the various aspects of the transmission process as well as the fact that influence does not always lead to imitation.

Zainul Abedin is an especially valuable starting point for the discussion because he was both artist and teacher. His works were characterized by the interest to social issues, human suffering and marginalized people. His Famine Sketches reflected the Bengal Famine of 1943-44 and created the visual language based on observations of human suffering. The artist's significance in this context consists not only in his works but also in the fact that his style had an impact on another generation.



Fig. 1: 'Untitled' Woodcut 1942 (Zainul Abedin)

Somnath Hore attended the College of Art and Craft in Kolkata and was inspired by Zainul Abedin who was both his mentor and guide. The link between the two can be interpreted in such a way that it is about the passing on of sensitivity in art rather than copying of visual form. Social pain became a key issue for Abedin which formed a good basis, while Hore worked out his own approach to the problem through printmaking. His subsequent interest in scars and wounds led him to symbolize human suffering. Therefore, the thing learned from the teacher was not just the theme but also the way of perceiving it.



Fig. 2: 'Untitled' Etching 1972 (Somnath Hore)

The transition from influence to transformation is more visible in the case of Somnath Hore, whose contribution goes beyond his personal art making practice and reaches to the development of printmaking and the education of printmaking. While influenced by Zainul Abedin, Hore translated his concern for social reality and human pain into his own artistic vocabulary, however, his importance within the context of the current paper is also due to his continued involvement with the printmaking as a practice and as an educational discipline. Hore's contribution to the establishment of printmaking department was instrumental in creating an environment where printmaking could be practiced and learned through technical experimentation and close contact between the teacher and the student. The material used in the current paper mentions Hore, together with Sanat Kar as a teacher of V. Nagdas, and their contribution to the establishment of the printmaking department.

The pedagogic import of Hore may also be appreciated by means of his quiet and constant engagement in the process of art making. Not limiting himself to the technique of printmaking alone, his dedication serves as an example of how important it is to have the right discipline, patience and dedication to the craft. In a Guru-Shishya mode of education, this kind of attitude is not imparted just through instruction but is also shown in the actions of the teacher which in turn sets a precedent for the student. The implication is more pronounced in relation to V. Nagdas and later Rakesh Bani in that dedication to consistent practice forms a part of the learning process.

In this manner, the impact of Hore is felt on two levels – both related to each other. First, as an artist he expanded the possibilities of printmaking through his unique visual language; second, as an instructor and art practitioner he helped create the atmosphere in which the knowledge of printmaking can be passed onto the next generation.

In that context, the connection between Zainul Abedin, Somnath Hore, and their successors assumes special importance. The legacy of Abedin brought in an attitude towards observation of social realities which Hore not only mastered but developed while developing his skills in printmaking and printmaking education. Somnath Hore's own artistic personality came into being in this process of both receiving and transforming what he inherited from previous generations. Knowledge acquired by his pupils served as a base for their personal development in their turn.

Together with Somnath Hore, Sanat Kar added yet another aspect to printmaking pedagogy, namely experimenting. Sanat Kar encouraged students not only to study under the guidance of their teachers but also to try various techniques, to ask questions about traditional approaches to printmaking and the peculiarities of each type of printing.

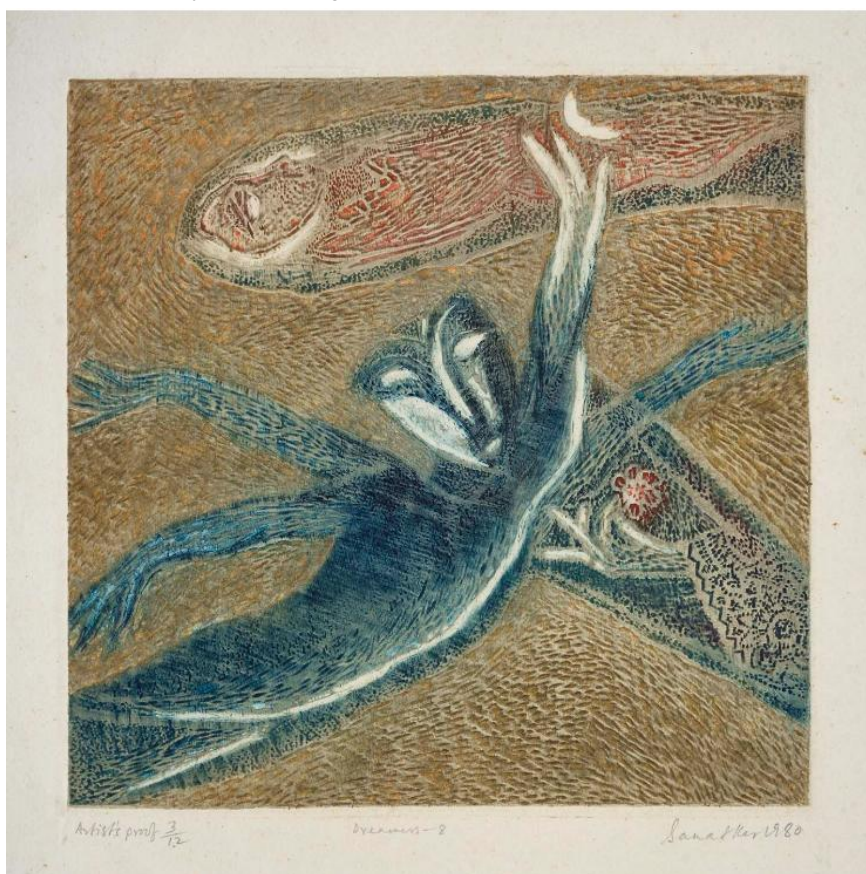


Fig. 3: 'Dreamers-8' Wood intaglio 1980(Sanat Kar)

V. Nagdas represents an important continuation of this process. He is the student of Somnath Hore and Sanat Kar and as a practicing educator and printmaker associated with Indira Kala Sangeet Vishwavidyalaya, Khairagarh. His artistic practice includes figurative imagery, narrative and observational approaches and engagement with social reality. Through etching, he presents social situations from his own perspective, with a concern for peace also visible in his work. At the institutional level, he contributed to the establishment and development of printmaking education at Khairagarh and influenced subsequent students, including Rakesh Bani. Nagdas's position is significant because the knowledge he received from an earlier generation became both an artistic practice and an educational responsibility. The teacher therefore becomes a link through which technical and artistic knowledge moves towards another generation. At the same time, Nagdas's own work shows that inherited knowledge was interpreted through his personal engagement with social situations and figurative narrative.



Fig. 4: 'Living within' Etching 2018 (V. Nagdas)

The relationship between V. Nagdas and Rakesh Bani provides the clearest example in the present study of learning through mentorship and the subsequent development of individuality. Bani acquired the dedication to the medium from his mentor and held onto the passion for figurative representation; however, Bani pursued a different idea. His pieces relate more closely with his own conscious and subconscious ideas; he independently makes decisions regarding composition and theme. Not only did he take inspiration from his mentor's art but also from the working style of Nagdas, dedicating himself to the medium. It can be said that Bani's learning process occurred not only as a result of training in techniques but also as a result of observing how the teacher practices and dedicates himself to the medium. It suggests that while the teacher's influence can be seen in the medium, discipline or form, the ideas of the student are individualistic.



Fig. 5: 'Untitled' (Abyss) Etching (Rakesh Bani)

In addition, the study points to the fact that knowledge in the field of art is not limited to any particular teacher. As per Rakesh Bani's experience, although initially he was guided by V. Nagdas, he learned further based on his interactions with other Indian and Western artists, participation in international print making exhibitions, and print making as a practice. While his technique underwent changes because of his experiences, his conceptual framework kept evolving independently. Contemporary learning, therefore, can be seen in terms of an expanding network rather than a limited teacher-student relationship.

In a similar way, it refers to Bani as the next generation of printmaker and teacher who has been practicing print making pedagogy.

On combining all the cases, one finds that there is an underlying trend that emerges from each example. In other words, Hore changes Abedin's social observation; Kar offers a platform to explore; the technical and pedagogical expertise of Nagdas comes into play in the context of formal printmaking education; and Bani receives his mentor's guidance along with developing his own style and ideas. Thus, this process is neither a complete departure from the past nor a mere continuation of it.

The transfer of knowledge about printmaking, hence, can be seen as a multiple process in which the student learns not only the medium, the discipline, the technical aspects, and the artistic sensitivity from the previous generation, but decides himself/herself about what to do with these. This is where the notion of artistic identity becomes relevant. The guidance of the teacher is a starting point, whereas individual experience, choice, and experimentation lead the artist.

In this way, the chosen continuum of art shows how the pedagogical principle mentioned in the previous part of the paper finds its practical meaning – the role of a teacher is not to replicate themselves through their pupils, but to provide a possibility for learners to become independent practitioners. Thus, the continuity of printmaking is not achieved due to the similarity of every subsequent generation's artwork, but by the transfer of knowledge and formation of its new expression.

Conclusion

The research proves that the Guru–Shishya approach is still topical within contemporary Fine Arts education through mentoring, observing, practicing, and experiencing. Its value is in forming a learning process where the teacher provides the learner with a proper basis, and further interaction with the medium makes him or her gain experience.

In the first place, the teacher acquaints the learner with basic aspects of artistic practice such as technical skills, composition, line, form, medium and technique. Learner learns these things through observation and practice. Nevertheless, the knowledge that has been received from the teacher will not be necessarily used in the same way. Learner will use this information in the personal way. Each element of artistic practice will be used and combined in accordance with personal ideas, experience and concerns of artist. Therefore, the same foundation of art will have its own unique results. In other words, the process of learning is continuity through change. The learner receives the knowledge and learns it through practice and experimentation. On the one hand, the teacher sets the foundation and gives the direction to student. On the other hand, the learner gets the independence through practice and experience.

In conclusion, the continuity of any artistic tradition does not lie in the creation of identical artists. The continuity of artistic tradition depends on the ability of each generation to accept, re-interpret and renew knowledge of previous generations. It is this principle that makes Guru-Shishya pedagogy relevant today.

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