

Monoprinting Workshops in Tihar

Conducted in early 1990's

Way back sometime in early 1990s I attended a talk by Kiran Bedi organized by the Delhi Commonwealth Women's Association, one of Delhi's reputed charity organizations. She had recently been appointed Inspector General at Tihar, the first woman officer to head India's largest prison. She was to talk about her plans for prison reforms which she had initiated since her recent appointment. Prison reforms had always been a low priority and this was a pathbreaking initiative.

There was passion and sincerity in her words and a sense of immediacy in her voice, as she articulated her plans. One of her closing sentences was inviting people to join her in her crusade of prison reforms. She was very keen that the community get involved. At the end of her talk I spoke to her to say that I was interested to take art to the prison as a way to bring some relief into the lives of the prisoners. She invited me to meet her in her office the next week without asking for details about my work or plans, what I was doing. It seemed like she was in a hurry to commence work without losing time.

I called her office soon after, and was given an appointment immediately to meet her the following week. Meeting was brief and decision was instant. After hearing me out she simply said, "please come, start from next week" and suggested we work in the women's ward. No formal proposals or letters were asked for. Just a caveat that the materials to be brought could not be sharp or inflammable. The medium of monoprinting* suited the jail norms ideally-no sharp tools, no glass, no inflammable fluids or other such material which could prove hazardous in the prison environs.

Bulbul Sharma, printmaker readily agreed to join me to conduct these workshops. So the following week we headed to Tihar, with our basic art paraphernalia.

The first visit, the experience was overwhelming. The thought of entering a prison was formidable. As the heavy iron door rammed shut behind us, I was overcome with claustrophobia and an urge to flee as fast as I could. For the first time I understood the meaning of freedom.

Past the high intimidating walls of Tihar jail we were escorted by two women police officers into ward no. 1 where the women's cells were located. Ahead of us there were vast open grounds of well-tended grass and all around were the different wards. We were led to the women's ward. We waited anxiously as the formidable iron door was opened cautiously, by a policewoman clad in khaki salwar kameez. She took her time to inspect us with piercing hawk-like eyes and then let us in without a word.

Once inside the women's ward, the image I captured at a fleeting glance was of wide open spaces with sporadic grassy patches, a swing, a cemented platform like a stage under the shade of a tree, the cells, a creche and the inmates scurrying to and fro, excitedly

Much to our surprise the women barely took notice of us. I had expected to be surrounded by curious women reaching out to us clamouring for some contact with the world outside. But there was none.

News had reached them of their Inspector General, Kiran Bedi, being awarded the Magsaysay Award. The mood was festive. The women were in celebration mode, preparing to felicitate her. The mike was being tested, the dholki (drums) was being tuned, the stage-like platform was being swept for the women to sing and dance, the children* were being chided to wear clean clothes. Such was the atmosphere inside this ward. As a result the first monoprinting** workshop was a bit of a washout. We succeeded in drawing halfhearted attention of about 6 to 8 women who reluctantly drew themselves away from the festivity.

However, subsequent workshops were a complete surprise. After initial hesitation and a few monoprints behind them the women gradually became comfortable with the medium. Their imaginations took flight.

The tools were basic: rollers, paint brushes, paint, their fingers, leaves and grass strewn on the ground to create stencils, stuffed cloth balls to press down on the sheets to take the impression. Roller was the only mechanical tool. There was not even a press to apply the pressure to take the impression which was substituted with cloth balls.

There were women from different backgrounds and income groups - semiliterate while some totally illiterate as well as English-speaking collegiates. Most had never held a pencil in their hands. They were now handling rollers,

plexiglass sheets, paints, brushes and quick to grasp the monoprinting technique. From each workshop emerged some remarkable monoprints. The women too were amazed as they looked at their handiwork with admiration. They were becoming both discerning and critical. They were overjoyed with some prints while others they rejected with a steely finality. No amount of encouragement could convince them that what they condemned as a disaster was a good work.

As their confidence grew they began to enjoy pressing the paper on the plexiglass plates to take out their print. They discovered excitedly what would happen if they applied more pressure or less; how each subsequent print of the same plate would give varying results. Some women were quick to work while others were slow and contemplative working alone receding into a corner.

They experimented playfully like children, discovering with great delight their own 'techniques'. What emerged were some exciting and unexpected results with vibrant abstract forms, portraits, landscapes depicting with childlike innocence, a house, trees and flowers in happy, bright colors. They enjoyed finding leaves and grass strewn on the ground, using them as stencils when the stencil technique was introduced to them. They were elated to discover how to work over a monoprint doodling with pencils and pastels or draw on the reverse of the paper pressed down on the plexiglass plate coated with paint.

What characterizes these monoprints is spontaneity which only the ease and comfort of the medium allows. Thus monoprinting proved to be an effective medium well suited to the confines of the prison environment as no prerequisite skill or experience was required.

Each workshop lasted about two and a half hours. Excitement, camaraderie and laughter infused the air. As the women opened up, one confessed to squeals of laughter from the group, how she bought paints keeping a secret from her parents as they wanted her to focus on studies and not indulge in frivolous pastimes like painting. Another said she had dabbled in fabric painting. Monoprinting was new to all.

Each workshop gave them a respite from the hostility that they experienced inside claustrophobic cells and dormitories, ready to tear each other's hair over trivial issues like a misplaced comb or over milk. Milk was sanctioned for women with children under the age of 5, those above 60 and some were allowed under medical advice. The sanctioned quantity was 250 grams of milk daily. Some women would sell the milk. This transaction led to fierce fights for reasons such as not being paid on time or being given less quantity. Adding to the daily brawls was the uncertainty of serving an indefinite term without trial.

We maintained utmost caution not to bring up any questions about their crimes so they do not revisit their past. These workshops were meant to give them a respite. Their creativity was being unlocked and they were revelling in the release instilling them with a sense of selfworth and perhaps hope.

These monoprints were shown at an exhibition invited by the India International Center in September 1995. I had no idea how people would respond. This was a first time such an exhibition was taking place. Although the works were for sale, I was not expecting to sell any. Neither had I made any commitment to the women that they would be put up for sale. To everyone's great surprise, they sold very well. One visitor, wife of an industrialist bought several monoprints to give away as gifts. I sent them checks around Diwali***. I was told that they were very surprised to receive their checks from sales of their "paintings". It was unthinkable for them. Their checks were deposited in their bank accounts which were opened while they were serving term in prison.

It was here that a friend and fellow gallerist Kazuko Longmuir having a gallery in Tokyo, Gallery Honjo and who was living in Delhi at the time, suggested that this exhibition travel to Tokyo. Thanks to her initiative this exhibition was invited by Gallery Tom in Tokyo. It was on view for eight weeks where it was received with great enthusiasm by the Japanese people. A gallerist from Korea happened to see the exhibition in Tokyo and wanted to take it to her country but due to certain logistics, details of which I cannot recall, it did not materialize. Such was the interest in these works.

Monoprinting workshops at Tihar were made possible by the encouragement of Dr. Kiran Bedi during her tenure as IG Prisons. For this I thank her most sincerely.

Her words from her book "Its Always Possible" summarize best her underlying philosophy of her prison reforms at Tihar. "I was personally convinced that retribution may assuage the hurt feelings of a victim, but it does not necessarily check the offender from getting at the next victim. In reconstructive justice we were to help move the offender from 'breaking' to 'mending'. It was a process of self amendment of his own thoughts, feelings, actions and reactions."

This experience touched an emotional chord for me reminding me of my maternal grandfather Amolak Ram Kapur. He was a lawyer of the Lahore High Court and took up cases of freedom fighters including the well known martyr, Bhagat Singh. He would make frequent visits to the prison to counsel them, discuss their cases and lend moral support. I am told by my mother that the environment for her father was fraught with tension due to undue delays in hearings by biased British judges who on many occasions even refused to hear the cases.

This practice of delays in trial, I learned from my visits to Tihar was prevalent at the time as well, contributing to the anxiety of these women inmates due to the trauma of imprisonment, separated from their families, their lives wasting in confinement.

A warm thank you to Bulbul Sharma for initiating the women gently and patiently to overcome their inhibitions and immerse themselves in monoprinting.

My sincere thanks to Teteii Tochwang, Chief, Programs Division of the India International Center for her constant support and for hosting this exhibition on the IIC portal. I have fond memories of dear Premola who showed great interest in this concept of art by prison inmates and the exhibition was invited to be held at the charming and intimate gallery which is now the library at the IIC, inaugurated by Dr. Kiran Bedi.

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Footnotes

* Children upto the age of five are permitted to stay with their mothers in jail as per the prison rules.

**Monoprinting is a simple technique in which the image created with paint is not done directly on paper. It is made on a plate which could be of plexiglass, glass or metal. Once the image is ready the paper is placed on the plate. Pressure is applied on the paper so the image gets transferred on to it. As the name suggests, Mono means one in Latin - monoprint is single and unique image. It cannot be repeated.

*** Festival of lights celebrated all over India. People celebrate by lighting earthen lamps inside and outside their houses symbolizing the triumph of light over darkness.

Seventy percent from the sale of these monoprints will go to India Vision Foundation.

Each monoprint is priced at Rs. 3500/ plus 12% gst. (USD 54, inclusive of taxes). Courier charges apply

India Vision Foundation was established in 1994 when Dr. Kiran Bedi was conferred with the Ramon Magsaysay Award for forging 'positive relationships' between people and the police through creative leadership as Inspector General of Tihar , Asia's largest prison. It was with the award money that she started this foundation, which seeks to carry forward its service in all those areas which were the basis of the award.