

The importance of diversity

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AFTER THE grand failure of the modernist programme of homogenization the whole world is slowly realizing the inevitability of the co-existence of multiple cultures. In the name of universality of human beings the industrialized West has been creating a uniform lifestyle for easy marketing of the products.

For a long time abstraction, rather than the cultural potential of signs and symbols, governed the sensibility. The print exhibition titled *Signs and Symbols*, curated by Julie Courtney, at the American Centre, on the other hand, reflects the ethnic diversity that characterizes the United States and 'the plurality of styles that abounds there in the 1980s and 90s'. This kind of forced change of focus in post-modern times reflects the imminent erosion of the unipolar world and the superiority complex of the whites.

Acknowledging the meanings of the signs and symbols means admitting the differences that exist. While a symbol deals with a conventional meaning a sign denotes something individualized and specific to a certain culture. The offset lithograph works of 26 artists who participated in Brandywine workshop in Philadelphia reflect a variety of perceptions.

Since the participants in the 'workshop were from a multiplicity of ethnic, racial, cultural and aesthetic backgrounds' the curator of the show should have provided a detailed note on the cultural background of the artists and the behaviour of the signs they have used.

As all signs depend upon specific cultural backgrounds for their existence a detached sign does not interact with the viewer. However, this kind of exposition of the signs and symbols used by a set of artists who live in a polity with clearly demarcated differences do clarify identities and cultural groupings of people.

In all communication systems the juxtaposition of signs and symbols changes the individual meaning of all those images and the person who tries to decode them can generate a new configuration in his or her mind. Betye Sarr's work titled *Mystic Sky with Self Portrait*, for example, shows many images such as sun, hand, crescent, lightning, dice, stars, planet etc

background. Some of these representational images are even changed by the artist. Placing all these images in a skyscape has also changed the dimension of communication.

It is a much distanced space: A conceptual one. There is even the portrait of the artist in a corner. While the image of a burning heart has got a conventionalized Christian significance, the other images juxtaposed to it distances the viewer from extending a traditional reading. On the other

tional aspects of images and signs.

POSTER IS PRIMARILY a propaganda material. It has to reach people, attract them and convey something directly creating an immediate impact. It is not an art form that expects meditation of the viewer and much analytical thinking. Its function is also to attract cash.

But poster, as a public art, has

1969 to 1992, exhibited at the Rabindra Bhavan galleries exemplify the typical German style of graphic art which developed from the times of Albrecht Durer and also the image language formulated by a number of post-W.W. II German artists.

Since a poster is not intended for a detailed viewing and it has to invite a passerby — graphic realism helps in generating an interest. Prechtl does this by meticulously detailing the figures and the stories he deals with. His use of historical styles, personalities and illustrative images narrate the story behind the poster. There is a condensing of situations in these images.

In the pictorially re-created situations of Prechtl, the critical realism works as a re-reading of the old texts. Further, the presence of historical and famous figures in these situations pin-point the theme for which the posters stand. A variety of early pictorial styles are also made use of by the artist to relate the experiences to history. Thus, as Susanne Neiman says, 'The hidden allusions and indications activate the powers of imagination, prompt thought and make those interested in his pictures into conspirators against stupidity and a lack of imagination'.

CITY, ACCORDING to the modern conventions, is a centre of trade. It is a place filled with various objects, images, sounds and pollution. Advertisements and vehicular traffic are most expressive signs of a city. Along with it a pop culture has been developed. Superficiality, in other words, living a life according to the fluctuations in the sense and ephemeral fashions, guides the city life. While engaged in this cultural network a self-conscious human being either has to respond to it critically or playfully.

Avantika Bawa, a young artist from Delhi takes the typical post-modern attitude of playfulness in her responses to the city realities. By making a parody of advertisements, MTV imagery and making use of the comic book picture-style in an expressionist language the artist gives a personal reading of realities.

Images of snails, octopus, dogs etc., in these works work symbolically. They suggest the political or cultural scenario

rather cynically. For instance, her four works under the title *Wishes and Vices* deal with our manner of conserving nature, the modern dish (antennae) disease which spread with the emergence of various TV companies, liquored prohibitions, etc.

Even though Avantika uses pop imagery she denies the super realism of Pop Art. A major set of her images refer to the city culture that changed after the liberalization of the economy. Now we feel the vitality of water through the bottles of mineral water and the thirst through the bottles of Coca-Cola and Pepsi. This is a wild world as we see in comic books.

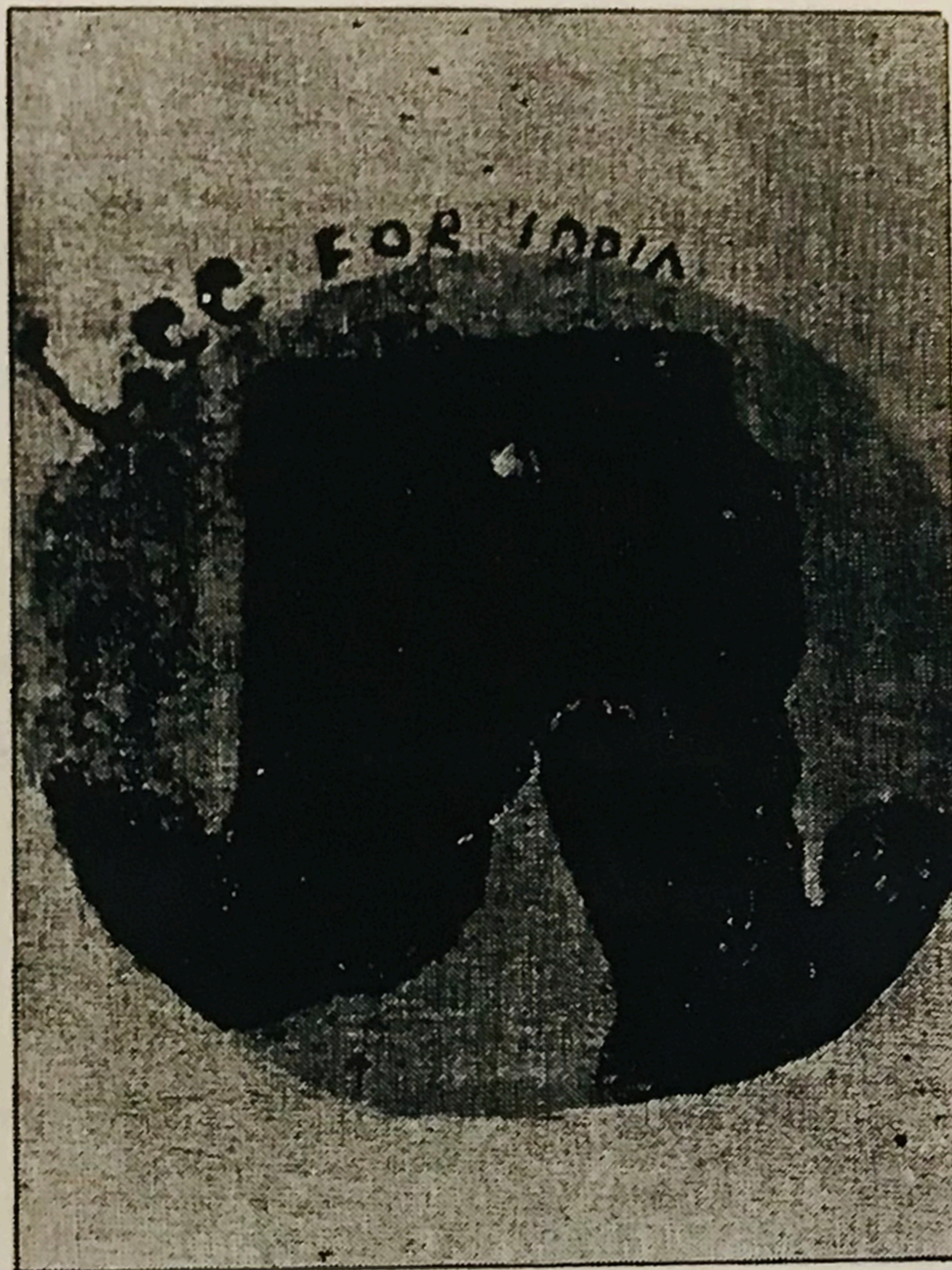
There is no difference between the frame and the pictorial surface in the paintings of this artist. That means there is no exterior or interior nor there is any centre or periphery. What

present in Madhya Pradesh give impetus to many artists to pursue the possibilities of this age-old medium. The exhibition of ceramics from Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal, at the Vadehra gallery displays some of the modern methods and trends in ceramics.

Prakash Patidar, a young artist, takes up the amoebic figures of Manjit Bawa for his sculptures but rather than giving a three-dimensional angle to the painter's image he could exploit the malleability of clay to achieve certain sculptural effects.

Smrati Dixit, another artist, uses the modern kettle image in her configurations but that single image is allusive of temples and rituals. She also hides the ethnicity of the work for a suggestiveness.

While Devilal Patidar's draw-



'Lee for India', woodcut by Avantika Bawa

hand, those symbols which suggest fire, heat and light enlighten the pictorial space for they convey brilliance, might and strength.

Some other works also display the eagerness and passion for a renaissance. Though a myth, the use of Phoenix image in a restless picture surface of James Wells communicates the untamed human energy. Mei Ling Hon's *Cross Cultural Pictogram*, Patricia Smith's *Portrait of a Model Child* and Lee Limon's *L.A. Greenhouse Premiere* are some of the works that deal directly with the transforma-

much possibility for it can cultivate new visual taste among public. Many of our poster artists rely upon the format that already exists and which satisfies the curiosity of the people. Only those who would think of changing the whole life situation will think of changing human sensibility.

For Michael Mathias Prechtl, a post-World War II German artist, this change in human sensibility was the main objective. This is the reason why his art refers to actual situations and people, besides the art styles that determined the course of German society.

His posters, done for theatre and other cultural events from



'Mystic Sky With Self Portrait', a lithograph by Betye Saar

we see is a variety of images in different colours and forms freely floating. The artist has used a straightforward compositional means and her colours are impulsive.

AS THE MOST primitive medium of art, clay imbibes the whole history of human race. Its malleability, the earthly quality and easy availability have given a universality to the medium. In India, recently Bhopal has emerged as the principal centre of ceramics.

Perhaps, the strong down-to-earth cultures that still use clay in all spheres of life

ings and ceramic works titled *Watches* express human emotions. Shakti Rane's mural works deal with nature and surface textures. Dipalee Banerjee's pottery however is unimpressive. She is for the subtle changes of the forms that are commonly used.

G. Reghu, another participant in this show, exhibits his 'sculptures of space'. He narrates some human situations related to village experiences. Interestingly, Shampa Shah goes for an abstract realm in her works titled *Mirrors*. Ceramics, in India, with all these experimental uses is slowly emerging as a major medium of sculpture.