

Water



Worshipper
Water-colour on paper, 1995
46 x 61 cms

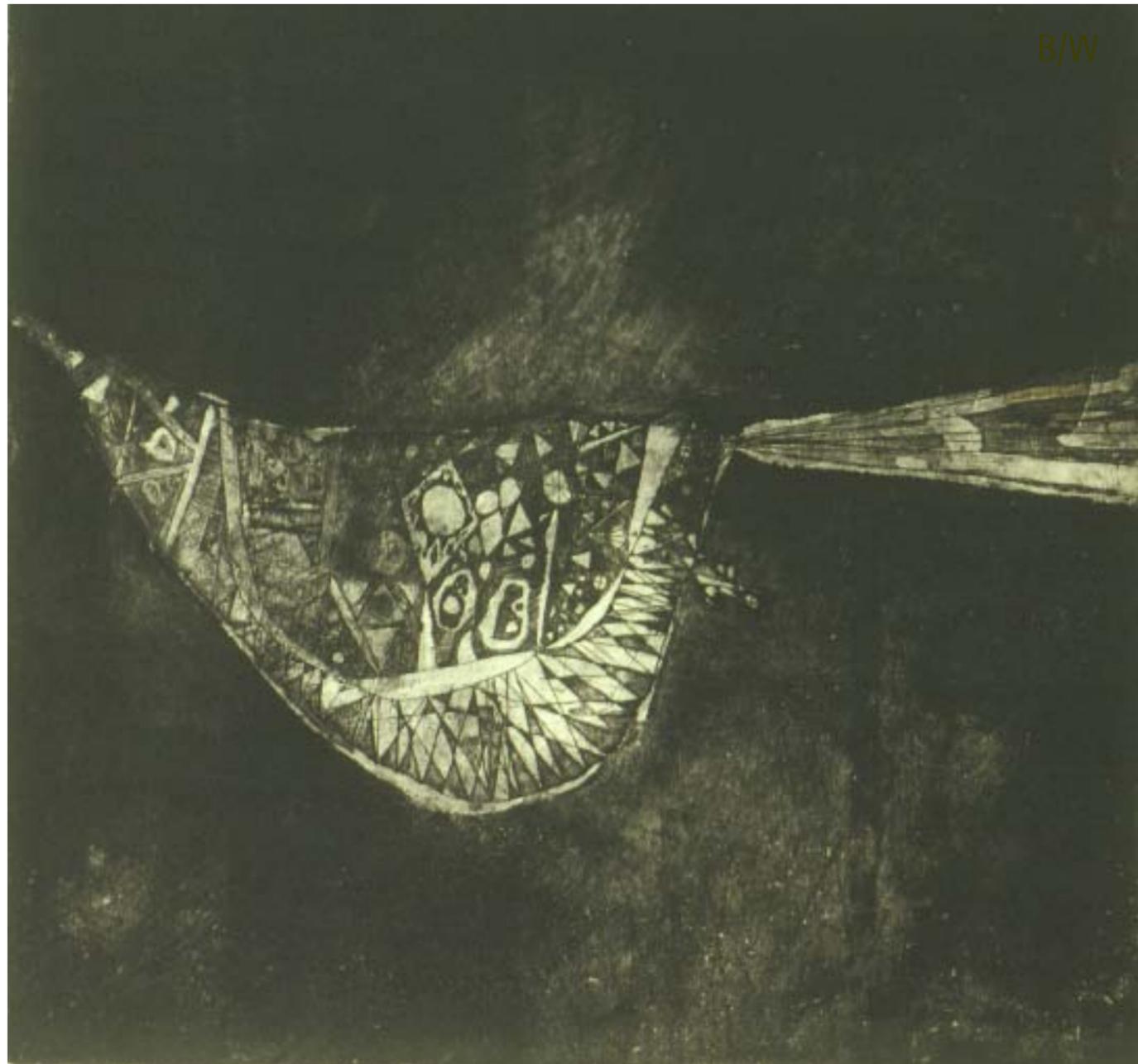
The Padma, Meghna and Dhaleswari are three magnificent rivers of Bangladesh. Bangladesh, the independent nation of today, was East Bengal then. The waters of those rivers were transparent, specially the rivers of East Bengal. One could clearly see the deep submarine vegetation and the movements of shoals of fish. A boy of about six or seven, seated in a river boat used to look fascinated at the flow of water beneath him and the many-splendoured reflections of light all around. On both sides of the river were wondrous and luxuriant green landscapes, the varied scenery of life, in quiet and soft chiaroscuro. All these together impressed him with the resplendent lucidity of nature. He never lost the memory of his travels on the rivers. Amongst the memories from which his artistic attitudes and visions germinated, the memory of his riverine experiences is one. The fact that the artist chose water-colour as his principal medium of expression was determined by the many-hued memories from those times.



Fisherman
Drawing, 1999
56 x 76 cms

The famous artist of today, Shyamal Dutta Ray, is that boy. He was born at Ranchi in Bihar, in the year 1934, on the 25th of Baishakh (a day he shares with Rabindranath Tagore). His father Birendra Kumar Dutta Ray used to live there since he was on government service there, but his ancestral home was in a little-known village, Gopal Ashram, in the district of Mymensingh, East Bengal. His younger maternal uncle used to live at Munshiganj in Dacca district. One had to go through Calcutta on the way to Munshiganj or Mymensingh from Ranchi. Some of the distance was covered by the railway—the rest was a two-day journey by boat crossing the Padma, Meghna and Dhaleswari.

Of course, that was not the first or only occasion when he developed an affinity for rivers and water. He had seen rivers at Ranchi too. A sort of friendship with rivers had developed when he was very young. He missed the Subarnarekha when he left Ranchi. But he had found something quite different in his years at East Bengal, a different mellowness. These rivers brought to him an abiding impression of pulsating life.



Flight
Etching, 1975
51 x 52 cms

Apart from a sense of beauty, water also gave him a new kind of life. He had suffered from a difficult kidney disease, nephritis, in his early years at Ranchi, which had given rise to loneliness as his world was confined to his home.

He was forbidden to go out, and could not go to school, so he created his own world. A world of imagination emerged from his sad reveries. He became his own playmate. Various trees and plants in the garden of his home

became his friends. An open space lay in front of the family house with paddy fields beyond. Beyond them was the abandoned estate of the Englishman known as Charlie Saheb. Once in a while, health permitting, he would go running across the paddy field to Charlie's dilapidated palace. There, while playing, he imagined himself a king with a broken chair for a throne and a crown of foil on the head. We see the boy-king or commander-in-chief with sword in hand as the leitmotif of his paintings even in his mature years. Apart from such games, pictures of various kind frequently became his companions as well. Sadness turned him into an introvert and that opened the windows of his imagination. This was occasionally expressed in the paintings he had done as a young boy. There was no tradition of painting in his family. The loneliness of his childhood developed an awareness in him, which awakened his artistic sensibilities.



Overthrown
Water-colour on paper, 1981
49 x 62 cms

Until about the age of five or six he sensed that there was no future open to him. He was hardly ever certain that the sun would rise the next day. When formal medical treatment did not bring about any improvement to speak of, the doctors advised a change of environment. A journey by boat was expected to be beneficial. This was the reason behind the decision to travel to East Bengal. It was decided that they would stay for sometime at their home in Mymensingh. That was the first time he had come to Calcutta on their way to Mymensingh. He was probably six years old then. They stayed at a hotel near Sealdah. He used to watch the streets of Calcutta from the hotel windows and saw the city's trams for the first time then. On that trip his acquaintance with Calcutta was negligible. This same city of Calcutta, over the next two years, became the setting of his life, the essence of his creative world.

From Calcutta he travelled eastwards with his parents partly by train, partly by steamer and boat. It was a two-day journey to Munshiganj. Spending a few days there, they travelled to their home in Mymensingh again by boat. On that trip, he stayed there only for a few months but, the memory of those days spent in verdant and rain-washed surroundings left an indelible impression on his life. After some time he was to return to these same surroundings for a longer stay. This stay restored his health to a great extent. He felt that the rivers of Bengal and their waters had given him a new lease of life.

The family returned to Ranchi but in a short while his father was transferred to Calcutta and they had to leave Ranchi for good. At first, they



The Chair
Acrylic on canvas, 1988
90 x 90 cms



Bazaar
Water-colour on paper, 1951
51 x 51 cms