

Photos: Sall Bera



From calendar to the art gallery



Clockwise from top: Prints on display at the exhibition; BK and Sarala Birla at the inauguration on March 11

Kathakali Jana

Lithographs and oleographs — impressive names for 'bazaar art' or 'calendar pictures' — have only recently gained the eminence of collectibles. The Birla Academy of Art and Culture is holding an exhibition of prints from the collection of ad filmmaker Sanjeet Chowdhury, curated by Tapati Guha Thakurta, which was inaugurated on March 11 by Sarala Birla, the chairperson of the academy.

The collection is only about six years old, but spans the 1870s to mid-20th century and has prints from Kolkata and other Indian presses. "I started collecting for the kick it afforded me and initially the choices were based on personal aesthetics. But a pattern fell into place later on," says Chowdhury.

The filmmaker's interest in popular prints is a radical deviation from his late father, actor Basanta Chowdhury's, more "serious" collection of coins, shawls and a host of other things.

"These prints have over

the last few years become fascinating objects of art scholarship. The exhibition focuses on the genre of 'framing pictures' or pictures circulated as separate prints as opposed to the paraphernalia of commercial products," said Guha Thakurta. The display takes one on a journey that the curator describes in her scholarly note as one from the "fine-boned naturalism of figures and landscapes to growing degrees of iconicity and mythic fantasy, from portraits of historical heroes, local saints and nationalist leaders to scenes of epic drama, from the frontally posed deities to amorous divine couples and seductive beauties".

In a few quick strokes, her introduction traces the history of prints from Kolkata and the lure and scopes of mythical realism, the prints from western India and the political life of these prints, the brand-name called Ravi Varma and its numerous progenies and, finally, the proliferating printing trade in the post-Ravi Varma era and Independence.

The exhibition displays,

chronologically and supported by learned research on methods of printing and its gradual sophistication, prints of Surendranath Banerjee and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee from Calcutta Art Studio dating back to 1880 and ends with those of Dr Rajendra Prasad and Dr S. Radhakrishnan close to our independence.

In between are a plethora of images: Objects of devotion and desire (how can popular art be free from the baser passions?) and miscellaneous other categories — Chhatrapati Shivaji from Bharat Printing Works, Pune, is an interesting inclusion — enrich the assortment. There are images of Radha, Krishna, Manasa, Durga, Shiva and several more from the Hindu pantheon, while significant episodes from the epics are also well-represented in the works of Ravi Varma and others. Also thrown in are images of voluptuous women allegorically named Jnanada Sundari or Pramada Sundari.

The exhibition is on till March 25 between 3 pm to 8 pm