

## **B. Prabha: The Silent Strength of Indian Women in Art**

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### **Abstract**

*This research is based on the life and art of B. Prabha, one of India's most well-known modern artists. She was born in 1933 in Bela, Nagpur, and studied at the Nagpur School of Art and later at the Sir J. J. School of Art in Mumbai. Her early life in rural Maharashtra deeply influenced her artistic vision. She grew up observing the lives of poor working women, which became the main subject of her paintings throughout her career.*

*B. Prabha's art is recognized for its simplicity, grace, and emotional strength. She used soft tones and smooth brushwork to express feelings of silence, struggle, and dignity. Her figures, often tall and slender women, stand calm yet powerful. Through these forms, she portrayed the hardships faced by women in rural India, especially fisherwomen, farmers, and laborers.*

*Her paintings reflect social concerns such as poverty, gender inequality, and loneliness. Yet she always painted with empathy rather than sadness. The women in her works are not shown as victims but as symbols of patience and endurance. Prabha believed art should speak truthfully about the life of common people, and she stayed true to that belief.*

*In an art world led mostly by men, B. Prabha built her own space through dedication and sincerity. She received national and international recognition for her contribution to Indian modern art. Her calm colour palette and emotional depth set her apart from other artists of her time.*

*B. Prabha passed away in 2001, but her legacy continues to inspire new generations. Her art remains a voice for women, simplicity, and truth. Through her work, she turned everyday life into quiet poetry filled with human strength and beauty.*

**Keywords:** *B. Prabha, Indian modern art, women in art, rural life, female painter, oil painting, simplicity, emotion, social realism, dignity, working women, 20th-century Indian artist, empathy, visual storytelling.*

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## **Introduction**



Art has always been an important part of human life. It reflects our thoughts, emotions, and experiences. Through art, people can express ideas that words cannot fully capture. Paintings, music, and sculptures help us understand society, culture, and even ourselves. Art inspires, teaches, and creates a connection between people across time and place. It can show beauty, struggle, hope, and emotion all at once. In many ways, art is a mirror of life, helping people see both the world and themselves more clearly.

B. Prabha was one of India's most respected modern painters. She was born in 1933 in Bela, a small town in Nagpur, Maharashtra. From a young age, she was drawn to art and showed a deep interest in observing the world around her. Growing up in a rural environment, she closely saw the lives of women who worked tirelessly in fields, homes, and villages.

These early experiences shaped her vision as an artist. She wanted her work to capture the strength, dignity, and silent struggles of women in India.

Prabha studied at the Nagpur School of Art and later joined the Sir J. J. School of Art in Mumbai, one of the country's leading art institutions. During her studies, she learned both classical and modern painting techniques. She was inspired by Indian folk art, temple murals, and the works of other modern Indian artists, but she developed her own style. Her paintings became known for their simplicity, emotional depth, and grace. She often painted tall, slender women with calm expressions, using soft, muted colors to reflect mood and feeling.

Throughout her career, B. Prabha focused on portraying women not as objects of beauty but as real people with lives full of work, hope, and quiet strength. She showed their struggles, patience, and resilience without exaggeration or drama. At a time when the art world was largely dominated by men, she carved a unique space for herself. Her work received national and international recognition and continues to inspire artists today.

B. Prabha's paintings remain relevant because they speak of honesty, empathy, and the human experience. She turned everyday life into quiet poetry, giving voice to women who were often unseen. Through her art, she showed that beauty lies not only in form but in truth, emotion, and the courage of ordinary people.

B. Prabha was born in the village of Bela, near Nagpur in Maharashtra. She studied at the Nagpur School of Art, after which she pursued a Diploma in Painting

and Mural Painting from the Sir J.J. School of Art, Mumbai. A modern artist, B. Prabha experimented with different styles and mediums before resolving to oils as her preferred medium. She is known for her elegant formal style, which ranges from subjects such as landscapes to social issues of her time, like hunger and homelessness. She was an artist during a period in which women were highly oppressed in India, and her body of work is a reflection of and an ode to their plight. Using a single dominant colour, she is best known for graceful elongated figures of pensive rural women- a recurrent theme in her works. Inspired by Amrita Sher-Gil and her husband B. Vitthal, B. Prabha's signature style has evolved from modern abstract forms to a more decorative figuration. Although her works today might seem like a straightforward documentation of the figures of rural women, a few decades ago, they were odes to the spirit and the status of the Indian woman.

Among her various solo exhibitions, one of particular note is 'Shradhanjali' in Mumbai in 1993, which was dedicated to her late husband B. Vitthal. Prabha's work was also included in the group exhibition 'Contemporary Indian Painters' at Jehangir Art Gallery in Mumbai in 1996 and in the Bombay State Art Exhibition in 1958, where she was awarded the first prize.

After finishing her studies, Prabha struggled to find her place in the art world. The art scene in Mumbai was mostly male. Few women artists were recognized or supported. She faced both social and financial challenges. But her commitment never broke. She once said that she painted "the hard life of women who toil all day in fields and homes."

While Vitthal explored form and movement in sculpture, Prabha focused on painting human emotions. Their styles were different, but they supported and inspired each other. Their home in Mumbai became a meeting place for artists and students. B. Prabha's first solo exhibition was in 1956 in Mumbai. The show introduced her signature style—tall, graceful women with long necks and simple saris. The figures looked calm but carried a deep sadness. The public noticed her unique way of painting emotion without drama.

At her first exhibition, held when she was still a student at art school, 3 of Prabha's paintings were acquired by Homi J. Bhabha, eminent nuclear scientist and patron of the arts, for the iconic art collection of the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research. Prabha's signature formal style evolved after her marriage to B. Vitthal, when she moved from a modern abstraction to more decorative figuration. The artist couple held their first joint exhibition in 1956, the year they were married.

Prabha's graceful, elongated figures of rural women spotlighted their lives, labour, and the very real contemporary threat of drought, hunger and homelessness. It is significant to note that Prabha, a female artist practicing in an age where women were unapologetically oppressed, used her position and voice as an artist to comment

on the same. While her work today might seem like a simple documentation of the figures of rural women, a few decades ago the works were rebellious, and conscious remarks on spirit and the plight of these women. As she famously said, “It is my aim to paint the trauma and tragedy of women.

### **Themes in Her Art**

The central theme in Prabha’s art was the life of rural women. She once said, “I paint the lives of the women I see around me. They are poor but proud.” Her women were not just subjects; they were symbols of resilience and patience.

She painted fisherwomen, farmers, laborers, and housewives. Each figure carried a calm strength. Her paintings often showed them standing in groups or alone, looking straight at the viewer. Their faces were expressionless but full of feeling.

Her art reflected her concern for social issues. She saw the hardships of women in rural India—poverty, loss, and endless work. Yet she showed them with beauty and respect, not pity.

Another theme in her art was loneliness and silence. Many of her figures seem to be waiting, thinking, or dreaming. She used minimal background to focus on the figure. This gave her work a poetic stillness.

### **Artistic Style and Technique**

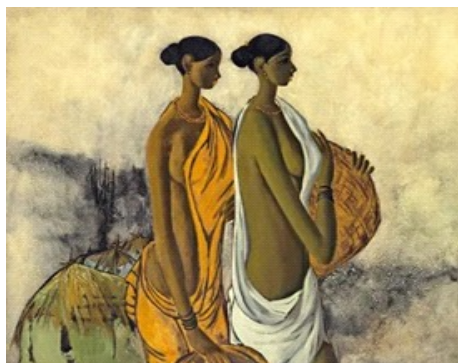
Prabha’s style is simple, graceful, and emotional. She used clean lines and smooth brushwork. Her figures are tall and elongated, giving them an almost spiritual presence.

Her use of color was restrained but thoughtful. She often painted in shades of blue and green to show calmness or sadness. Warm tones like orange and brown were used for warmth and life. She balanced light and shadow to create depth without clutter.

Unlike many modern painters of her time, Prabha did not experiment with abstract forms. She believed that simplicity could speak more deeply than complexity. Her goal was not to shock or impress but to move the viewer emotionally.



Untitled.by B. Prabha, 1979.



Village Women by B. Prabha

Every painting by B. Prabha begins and ends with women. To her, they represented the heart of society. She saw their pain, silence, and strength as reflections of India's soul.

She painted women who carried water pots, worked in fields, or sat by the sea. Their faces were calm but their eyes spoke volumes. They seemed aware of their hard lives yet carried a quiet hope.

In her paintings, women are not background figures—they are the story itself. This focus was rare in Indian art at the time. Few artists showed working women with such empathy and beauty.

B. Prabha drew inspiration from her surroundings. Growing up in rural Maharashtra, she saw how women worked under the hot sun and still smiled through hardship. Their simple grace stayed in her memory.

She was also inspired by Indian folk art, classical sculptures, and temple murals. The fluid lines and serene expressions in her work echo the style of ancient Indian art.

Her husband, B. Vithal, was another major influence. They often discussed ideas about form and composition. While his sculptures explored motion and rhythm, her paintings found poetry in stillness.

Some of her most recognized paintings include *Fisherwomen*, *Three Women*, *The Bride*, *Village Women*, and *Women with Pots*. Each one reflects her love for quiet storytelling.

In *Fisherwomen*, the tall women stand by the sea, their faces calm but filled with thought. The background is soft, making the figures stand out like statues. *The Bride* shows a young woman dressed simply, not as a symbol of beauty but as someone beginning a new life filled with both hope and uncertainty.

Through these works, Prabha captured timeless human emotions work, waiting, love, and endurance.



Fisherwomen



Three women

By the 1970s, B. Prabha had become a respected name in Indian art. Her paintings were shown in major galleries and art festivals in India and abroad. She represented India in several international shows and brought attention to women artists.



Village Women



Women with Pot

Art critics admired her for staying true to her vision. While others experimented with abstraction and modernism, Prabha kept her focus on people and emotion. Her art was honest and consistent.

She was also one of the few women artists to gain wide recognition in post-independence India. At a time when the art world was dominated by men, her success inspired many young female painters to follow their own paths.

Behind her calm paintings was a life of struggle. She faced gender bias in the art world. Many galleries and buyers preferred male artists. She often had to fight to be taken seriously.

Money was also a challenge. In her early years, she sold paintings for very little. But she continued to paint because it gave her meaning. She believed that art should speak for people who have no voice.

She once said that every painting was “a story of a woman I knew.” That sense of personal truth gave her work deep emotion.

B. Prabha’s paintings remain relevant because the issues she painted—poverty, gender inequality, and the quiet strength of women—still exist. Her art reminds us that beauty can grow even in struggle.

In today’s fast world, her paintings slow us down. They invite reflection and empathy. They show that art does not have to be loud to be powerful.

Her commitment to painting real people makes her a true storyteller. She painted with honesty and compassion. Her art speaks of women not as victims but as survivors.

For B. Prabha, art was not about decoration. It was about emotion and truth. She once said, “I paint because I must express what I feel.” She believed that an

artist must stay close to life and people.

She kept her lifestyle simple. Her focus was always on her canvas. She believed that success or fame should never decide an artist's value. Only sincerity mattered.



Her words and works reflect a deep moral clarity. She did not paint to impress but to connect.

B. Prabha continued to paint through the 1980s and 1990s. Her later works became even more minimal. The colors grew softer, and the figures more solitary. She often painted women waiting by the sea—a symbol of patience and longing.

Even as modern art trends changed, she stayed loyal to her own language. She did not follow fashion or market demand. For her, art was not a product but a message.

Her husband, B. Vithal, passed away in 1992. His death affected her deeply. Yet she continued to paint quietly, working from her home in Mumbai.

She died in 2001, leaving behind a legacy of truth, empathy, and grace.

B. Prabha's art remains timeless. Her work is now part of major collections, including the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi and many private collections around the world.

She influenced a generation of artists, especially women, who saw her as proof that art could be both personal and political. She showed that beauty and struggle could exist in the same frame.

Today, art students study her work for its simplicity and strength. Her elongated figures have become iconic. More than their style, it is their soul that moves viewers.

Her art also serves as a record of social history. Through her brush, she preserved the image of Indian rural life in a period of rapid change. Her women stand as witnesses to a time when the country was moving toward modernity but millions still lived in poverty.

B. Prabha expressed her creative philosophy by stating, “My intention is not to project realism but to record my impression of the given moment”. This quote reflects her focus on capturing personal perception rather than depicting an objective reality.

She was an Indian artist known for her oil on canvas works that often depicted rural women. “It is my aim to paint the trauma and tragedy of women,” she once stated, reflecting her commitment to capturing the lives of her subjects. Born in 1933 in Bela, Maharashtra, India, she lived and worked in Bombay, India until her death in 2001. Her education included studies at the Nagpur School of Art, Nagpur, and the Sir J. J. School of Art, Bombay. She was influenced by Amrita Sher-Gil, and her work earned her the First Prize at the Bombay State Art Exhibition in 1958 and All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society (AIFACS) Awards. Her works are exhibited in the National Gallery of Modern Art, the TIFR Art Collection, and the Air India Art Collection.

B. Prabha’s artwork is defined by simplicity, elegance, and emotional depth, featuring elongated figures, minimalist lines, and muted colors that evoke grace and introspection. Her work centers on rural Indian women, portraying their struggles, resilience, and dignity with empathy and compassion. Beyond this, Prabha explored themes of nature, spirituality, and Indian culture, blending folklore and mythology with contemporary concerns to craft unique, meaningful narratives.

B. Prabha received several prestigious awards, including the Maharashtra State Art Award and the Lalit Kala Akademi Award. Her work was showcased in national and international exhibitions, earning widespread recognition. She mentored young artists through art camps and workshops, and her works are featured in esteemed collections like the National Gallery of Modern Art and Lalit Kala Akademi.

In her later years, B. Prabha remained active in the art community, painting and exhibiting despite health challenges. She passed away on July 25, 2001, leaving behind a legacy of emotionally resonant and socially relevant art. Celebrated for her artistic excellence, Prabha’s work continues to inspire and remains a vital part of India’s cultural heritage.

### **Collections & Commissions**

#### **Air India art collection**



Air India bought its first set of six paintings for Rs 87.50 in 1956 from B Prabha, then still a young art graduate. Prabha walked into Air India’s art department and asked if the company would buy some of her paintings of Indian women. The officials agreed and a new art collection was born. The “Maharajah Collection” as it came to called, expanded to

4000 works over the next six decades and more, becoming one of India's most important art collections.

The collection, which started with Prabha, aimed to put a little bit of India, both past and modern present, into the booking offices and spaces of the airline worldwide. Air India also commissioned her a wall mural for the waiting room of their Bangkok booking office.

### **Indian Embassy Tokyo**

B. Prabha was also commissioned a mural by the Indian Embassy in Tokyo.

### **Tata Institute of Fundamental Research**

In 1962-63, B. Prabha was part of a small group of acclaimed young artists invited to participate in a competition process to create the single most significant work commissioned by the TIFR - an over 13 foot mural to be executed in the building's central foyer. Whilst the commission was eventually awarded to the artist M.F. Husain, B. Prabha's proposed painting (Black Moon, 1963) in maquette form, continues to be on display nearby.

### **Citi India Corporate Collection**

At least four of Prabha's works are also part of the Citi India Corporate Collection.

### **Exhibitions**

Over the years Prabha held more than 50 exhibitions in India and abroad. She held two solo shows at Delhi's Kumar Gallery in 1959 and 1961. Her solo exhibition 'Shradhanjali' in Mumbai in 1993 was dedicated to her late husband B. Vithal. Prabha's work was also part of the group exhibition 'Contemporary Indian Painters' at Jehangir Art Gallery in Mumbai in 1996. She was also a part of the Bombay State Art Exhibition in 1958 where she was awarded the first prize.

Posthumously, Prabha's work has been included in exhibitions such as 'Winter Moderns' at Aicon Gallery, New York, and 'Pot Pourri' at Gallery Beyond, Mumbai, both in 2008.

### **Awards and honours**

Awarded the First Prize at the Bombay State Art Exhibition in 1958

Received All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society (AIFACS) Awards, New Delhi

B. Prabha, an Indian modern and contemporary painter born in 1933, had a significant presence in the art world through exhibitions and publications, though she was not involved in traditional media or publications as a journalist. Her work has been featured in numerous key galleries and museums, including DAG in New Delhi, which has showcased her art in major exhibitions such as "Manifestations VIII: 20th Century Indian Art" (2012), "India Modern: Narratives from 20th Century

Indian Art” (2015), “Navrasa: The Nine Emotions of Art” (2020), and “Ways of Seeing: Women Artists | Women as Muse” (2021). Her paintings, primarily oil on canvas, are celebrated for their portrayals of rural women and the working poor, reflecting her deep empathy and artistic vision.

In her long career, she stayed away from the changing trends in art. While many artists moved toward abstract or experimental styles, Prabha remained focused on realism and emotion. She believed art should come from the heart and connect to human experience. This belief gave her work purity and depth. Even today, her paintings feel fresh and alive because they speak directly to human feelings.

Through her work, B. Prabha proved that real art does not fade with time. It continues to speak, to move, and to remind us that beauty lies in the quiet strength of ordinary life.

B. Prabha’s work has been the subject of articles in prominent art publications such as Daily Art Magazine, ArtDependence Magazine, and ArtDaily. The most recent article on her was published in March 2025 by Daily Art Magazine, titled “12 Indian Female Artists Portraying Other Women”. Her art has also been discussed in archival media, including features in *The Independent* (1989), *The Afternoon Despatch & Courier* (1997), and *the Free Press Journal* (1985). Her paintings have been offered at auction multiple times, with realized prices ranging from \$357 to \$175,093, and her record auction price of \$175,093 was achieved for her work “Untitled” at Asta Guru Auction House in 2024. Her work is held in notable collections, including the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi. She passed away in 2001. B. Prabha’s work has been the subject of articles in prominent art publications such as Daily Art Magazine, ArtDependence Magazine, and ArtDaily. The most recent article on her was published in March 2025 by Daily Art Magazine, titled “12 Indian Female Artists Portraying Other Women”. Her art has also been discussed in archival media, including features in *The Independent* (1989), *The Afternoon Despatch & Courier* (1997), and *the Free Press Journal* (1985). Her paintings have been offered at auction multiple times, with realized prices ranging from \$357 to \$175,093, and her record auction price of \$175,093 was achieved for her work “Untitled” at Asta Guru Auction House in 2024. Her work is held in notable collections, including the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi. She passed away in 2001.

B. Prabha passed away in 2001, but her spirit continues through her art. Her paintings remind us that art has the power to show truth with grace. She transformed the everyday lives of women into lasting symbols of strength and resilience. In doing so, she gave Indian art a new identity—one built on empathy, simplicity, and human connection.

B. Prabha stands among the most respected modern Indian painters. Her art combines simplicity with deep emotion. She gave voice and dignity to the working women of India. Through her calm, graceful figures, she told stories of labor, loneliness, and quiet hope.

Her legacy is not just in museums but in the hearts of people who see beauty in honesty. She showed that art can be powerful without being loud, emotional without being sentimental.

Even years after her death, her paintings continue to speak. They remind us of the strength of women, the value of hard work, and the quiet beauty of ordinary life.

B. Prabha's world was one of color, silence, and truth. Her brush turned everyday life into poetry. Her art remains a gentle but lasting voice for dignity, empathy, and grace.

Her paintings show that art can be both beautiful and meaningful. She used her art to speak for people who were often unseen—the working women of rural India. These women became the central figures in her paintings. They appear tall, graceful, and calm, often standing or sitting with quiet dignity. Their faces are expressionless, but their eyes seem to carry the weight of life. Through soft colors and simple lines, Prabha captured emotions of hope, loss, and endurance.

One of the strongest parts of her legacy is her ability to blend social awareness with artistic beauty. She painted poverty and hardship without making them look tragic. Instead, she revealed the strength hidden within ordinary life. Her art reminds us that there is dignity in labor and courage in silence. She used her creativity not for decoration but for truth. That honesty makes her work timeless.

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