

Dairies of Kalighat: A Cut to the Mellow British Society

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Kalighat Paintings emerged as a product of the changing urban society of the nineteenth century Calcutta, with the growing importance of the kalighat temple as a pilgrimage centre in the then British capital, Calcutta. Basically this was the class of paintings and drawings on hand-made or more usually on machine-made paper produced by a group of artists called 'Patuas' that developed and flourished in response to the sudden prosperity brought to Calcutta by the East India Company trade in between as early as the 1830s until the 1930s at the market place around the famous Kali temple, at Kalighat, in Calcutta. These inexpensive pictures would have been purchased initially as mementos of a trip, and subsequently would have decorated a home or been consecrated to embody the depicted deity and worshiped at a home altar.



Fig. 1: Goddess Kali in Kalighat Temple

There are no historical data about the exact date of beginning of this style of paintings. Type of paper and colors used by the patuas and the date of purchase of these paintings by different European collectors these certain evidences point towards the first half of the 19th century was the starting point of kalighat Paintings. And also it can be accomplished that Kalighat paintings have been started sometime after the formation of present day Kalighat Temple and probably between first and second quarter of 19th century.

FROM PATACHITRA TO KALIGHAT PAINTING

Kalighat paintings were created by patuas who migrated from Bengal villages into Calcutta and set up their "shop-studios" around the Kalighat temple. Kalighat patuas saw opportunities in the urban developments in Calcutta. They modified the traditional scrolls which Artisans and craftsmen of rural Bengal especially from 24 Paraganas and Midnapore had painted long narrative stories on scrolls. These often stretched over 20 feet in length and were known as patachitra. Each section was known as a patan and the artists therefore became known as patuas. The visitors to Kalighat did not want to buy long scrolls. Therefore first change came into



Fig. 2 : Radha Krishna

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notice; they started painting single pictures involving just one or two images.

Secondly this new style evolved in response to the market which was potentially huge. Together with fixed buyers there were also seasonal visitors/special pilgrims who wanted those art pieces as souvenirs. So, the patuas decided to capture this market. The growing need to produce large numbers of paintings quickly and cheaply made possible the switch to paper rather than cloth as well as the switch from a scroll-narrative formula to a single page format. Price and portability were constraints. So the single frame of color drawings of religious icons, priced within an anna each, was the right solution.

METHODS USED IN KALIGHAT PAINTINGS

At the beginning, figures were outlined in pencil and then the base color was swiftly applied in broad wet strokes. To get the sculptural volume a darker hue was added before the base coat was dry, to avoid tide marks. There is no sense of using scientific perspective. Faces were mostly drawn in three-quarter profile. To differentiate figures and the eyes, noses, and fingers or to denote folds and partings in drapery they were used rapid, thin short strokes in black or in a dark color. They used thick black lines to outline the pad or the border of the cloth and too were shown as a black block. A flat middle tone was used as a color-wash for clothes to differentiate them from the body. With shaded contours and articulated gesture and



Fig. 3 : Saraswati

movement, the figures attained a plaque-like effect on a neutral unpainted ground. The style is epitomized by formal and linear economy, expressive gestures, and quality brushwork and unerring rhythmic strokes.



Fig. 4: Kartikeya

Kalighat

painters adopted the

new format of single panels involving just one or two simple images leaving the background plain and eliminating non-essential details focusing on the main figures. Other changes was that, the traditional patuas used to paint on cloth, on the other hand Kalighat Painter started their work on paper, and a preference for quick-drying watercolors in the place of gouache and

tempera. A number of colors like blue, indigo, red, green, yellow, carbon black etc. had been used in Kalighat paintings. Some of these colors were made of indigenous ingredients. Silvery and golden colors were used for ornamentation. Kalighat artists used colloidal tin extensively as a substitute of silver to embellish their paintings and to replicate the surface effects of jewels and Pearls. Along with the colors, gum of Belfruit or crushed tamarind seeds was used as binder. The format of Kalighat Painting was Chaukosh pat or the vertical square. The standard size was usually 17 by 11 inches (43 by 28 centimeters).

It was a group work. According to Mukul Dey “One artist would in the beginning, copy in pencil the outline from an original model sketch, and another would do the modeling, depicting the flesh and muscles in lighter and darker shades. Then a third member of the family would put in the proper colors in different parts of the body and the background, and last of all the outlines and finish would be done in lamp black. They would generally mix these colors with water and gum and mould them on a round stone with a granite Muller. Thus a living picture would be drawn in the most simple and apparently easy way as a sort of conjoint family work”. The brushes that had been used were made of simple Goat’s tail or squirrel’s hair.

MANIPULATION OF RELIGIOUS AND MYTHOLOGICAL THEME The main focus was given on Hindu deities, episodes from Ramayana and Mahabharata. Although Kali (Fig. 1) was the favorite which was quite reasonable and apart from that Shiva in the form of Panchanan or sitting along with Parvati on Nandi or carrying Sati, Lakshmi herself or in the



Fig. 5: Taziya(model of the tomb of Hasan and Husain at Kerbala)

form of Gajalakshmi or Chandi as Kamalekamini, Durga as Mahishasurmardini, and other gods and goddesses like Kartikeya, Ganesha, Saraswati, Jagadhatri etc all were the popular themes of Kalighat paintings. Also different incarnations of Vishnu and series of scenes from life of Krishna like milking a cow,



Fig. 6: Babu with a concubine

killing Putana, affair with Radha, KaliyaDamanetc are the basic themes of painting. From the beginning, the *patuas* despised the British because of British attempts to reform Indian artistic tastes. By the year 1850, Indian rulers had developed Victorian tastes. In doing so, they withdrew their support of the *patuas* and other folk cultures, rejected their traditional culture

and religion, and began to prefer and collect European paintings. To give an appropriate punch to the social taboo the *patuas* made the icons dressed in a European such as we see in one of the paintings, *Kartikeya*, where *Kartikeya* is in form of a man, similar to a dandy, or a *babu*, who favors contemporary British style as evidenced by his “Prince Albert” haircut and European buckled shoes (Fig.4). The close observation on newly setup urban life style reflects through the ornamentation of images in their works. Goddesses wear Victorian crowns, play violins in its place of *veenas* (Fig.3) and adopt the elegant poses of English noblewomen. These deities are often framed against the heavy curtains of the English playhouses of the city (Fig. 2). Along with it should be also noticed the presence of strong images from Islam and Christianity in the *Kalighat* repertoire. The painters sought to capture all segments of the truly cosmopolitan market available to them. One famous representation in *Kalighat* Paintings was “*DuldulHorse*” on which *Husain*, the younger grandson of Prophet Muhammad, was killed in the battle of *Karbala*, and another theme related to prophets and angels and *taziyas*(Fig.5). There were many such instances which pertained to Islamic mythology.

DIPICTION OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY THROUGH PAINTING

Kalighat artists did not confine themselves only in religious themes. Rejection from British or “*Bhadralok*” society, folk culture disapproved of many reformations which Eurocentric values called for – such as permitting the remarriage of widows and female education – as these reforms threatened their traditional society. Westernization meant modernization, and modernization threatened the *Kalighat* *patua*’s traditional way of life. From these burning sentiments the subjects that arose were -Husbands beating or killing unfaithful wives, pampered wives riding on the shoulders of henpecked husbands, *baboos* embracing concubines(Fig.6), good-for-nothing-dandies, cats bearing Hindu holy marks on the forehead as allusion to debauchery, Wealthy *zeminders*, spending their money on wine and women, foppish *babus* spending their day and night at nasty places, were popular themes.

These would not escape the searching eyes of these artists and they would draw the caricatures in such a way as would repel ordinary people from such activities” .So in one type of secular painting they derided *Babu culture*, which *patuas* well visualized ironically through their series of *Kalighat* paintings were equally objects of fun and sources of income. The ‘*babus*’ were illustrated as high class rich gentlemen who were typically identified with nicely oiled hair, pleat of his *dhoti* in one hand and either chewing the *betel* or smoking a *hukkahn* the other hand, flirting with courtesan. They also showed European innovations (*babus* wearing European clothes, smoking pipes, reading at desks, etc.).



Fig. 7 : Nabin kills Elokeshi

Fig. 8 :Mahant offering Child Birth
Medicine to Elokeshi

Fig. 9 : Rani Lakshmbai

Another popular theme was related to the Tarakeswar affair, an affair between Elokeshi, the young attractive wife of Nabinchandra Banerji and the mahant, a chief priest of the Shiva temple at Tarakeswar. The meeting of Elokeshi and the mahant at Trakeswar Shiva temple; Elokeshi offering betel and hookah to the mahant; mahant offering her childbirth medicine; Elokeshi embracing Nabin and asking his forgiveness; Murder of Elokeshi by Nabin with fish –knife (bonti), courtroom trial of Nabin and the mahant and Nabin was sentenced to life imprisonment and the Mahant was fined and imprisoned for 3 years(Figs. 8,7).

Other popular themes were Shyamakanta Banerjee became famous for wrestling with tigers while performing in circuses; an allegory of fighting the British, the Rani of Jhansi riding on horseback, heroic characters like Tipu Sultan and Rani Lakshmbai(Fig.9). These subjects were also reproduced many times in Kalighat paintings.

KALIGHAT PAINTING – AN INDIGENOUS STYLE OF ART

Eurocentric views strongly favored western art over traditional Indian art. Both the British and the elite Indians held these views. This perception, which diminished traditional Indian art and values, coincided with the emergence of the new Kalighat painting style. After that there were lots of debate roll around the british influence on kalighat painting. They said that kalighat adopted several western modernist techniques and treatments in terms of its background, volume and medium.

But if we see there are lots of examples in Indian past traditions where artists used plain, unprimed background in their works, such as seventeenth century's Bhagavata manuscript, eighteenth centuries Ramacharitamanasamanuscript and many other scroll paintings. This kind of similar background can also be seen in some Rajput miniature

paintings. Like *KakubhaRagini* (c.1680) one of the example of Rajput miniature painting. It is also important to note that not all Kalighat paintings have blank backgrounds, as in *Woman Playing Music*, yet the backdrop remains simple blocked-in areas of color. There are many instances where Indian artists used solid color backgrounds without details, as in *Bhairava Enthroned* (c.1680). *Bhairava Enthroned* consists of a single deity image as the focal point with the background as one flat area of color, and this shares many similarities with a Kalighat pat, including the watercolor medium.

The paints used by Kalighat patuas were not the same as those used by the British, or by Indians painting for the British. Kalighat artists never purchased European readymade watercolor cakes, and even prided themselves on making their own homemade goat-hair brushes. The colors of Kalighat paintings are recognized for their vibrancy, and they never appear as transparent as what you would find in a British natural history painting, a European engraving, or a Company painting. That is, the palette and pigment of Kalighat painting has more in common with earlier traditions of Indian painting.

First mentioned by Sumanta Banerjee in 'Parlour and the Streets', scholars have linked Kalighat shading style from their practice of painting *kumors*, small clay figures of deities. Kalighat patuas fashioned clay figures, so they already had an understanding of three dimensional forms, and this practice was transferred onto paper at Kalighat. While fashioning clay figures might have played a role in the Kalighat artists' use of shading, it seems that their true style of shading more closely resembles shading seen in traditional scrolls, Rajput paintings, or manuscript paintings. In *KakubhaRagini*, c. 1690, you see the same shading techniques as seen in Kalighat pats; the artist conveys three dimensional figures against a flat backdrop, with no clear light source and flattened pictorial space, very similar to the Kalighat painting 'Sarasvati'. The continuity of anonymous themes that traced their origin to classical temple architecture. The musician couple seated on chairs was descended from the Gandharva musicians who played in paradise on innumerable temple friezes. The beautiful women, adjusting the rose in her hair, the luxurious women in silks, petting peacocks, smacked of *nayikas* or heroines of an urban culture that went back to 4th –century Gupta classicism.

Kalighat patuas' paintings should be celebrated as authentically Indian works that represent a specific reaction to colonial rule from an indigenous view. These artists thrived in a colonial urban setting all the while maintaining traditional imagery and culture, operating under aesthetics inherited from their forbears and modified by themselves.

DECAYED

However, the paintings have achieved its peak in between 1880 and 1890. Most of the Kalighat painting collections at museums in different parts of the World can be attributed



Fig . 10 : (left) Typical Kalighat painting ; (right) Jamini Roy art

during this period. The glamour of Kalighat Paintings decayed gradually after that, as the market was flooded with cheap printed reproductions of the themes of Kalighat paintings.

Mukul Dey lamented that “Cheap oleographs of all sorts from Germany and from Bombay now takes the field, some of them blatant imitations of Kalighat paintings. These cheap copies have practically killed hand-painted art production as a business and with it the artistic instincts and creative faculty of the painters of Kalighat. Not being able to cope with the competition of machine-made productions cheaper than hand-drawn and hand painted pictures selling at two or four piece each, their children have now taken to other professions. When German traders found that these pictures had a very great sale throughout the country—for they were sold in thousands all over India—they imitated them and sent back glazed and colored lithographed copies which flooded the country and drowned the original hand-painted pictures. The old art has gone forever; the pictures are now finding their homes in museums and in the collections of a few art lovers.”

Conclusion

Till now the practice of Kalighat paintings continues in the villages of Bengal where the rich traditions are proudly being carried out by the *patuas* which are being handed down through the generations. It was only in the twentieth century that this art started getting the attention and appreciation that it deserves. This is surely a matter of great appreciation and association is needed whose un-tired effort will revive the glorious past of Bengal. The charm and vitality of Kalighat painting had an influence on a number of modern Indian painters, as can be seen in the work of late [Jamini Roy](#) even to this day (Fig.10).

In recent times, one artist belonging to a family of *patuas*, Bhaskar Chitrakar of Kalighat, is reviving this style. Inspired by his grandfather, he has decided to create paintings in the same tradition. The artist is very young but the style is old. This talented young artist

comes from a family of artists and artisans, and is one of the last surviving Kalighat painters actually residing near the Kali Temple.

Thus the birth story of a popular art movement produced under paramount importance and an acute need for protecting, documenting and reviving rural art led to Kalighat art practice, a new and unique Indian art form with indigenous roots.

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