

Kalighat Paintings: A review

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“Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication”. Remembering the quote of Leonardo da Vinci when I visited the exhibition at Victoria Memorial Hall (VMH), Kolkata to see collection of “Kalighat Paintings” from Victoria & Albert (V & A) Museum, London and VMH in the year 2011 and wondered how some simple brush strokes of water colour have given birth to these master pieces, the elegant Bengali folk arts. I have visited several museums after that to get the inherent taste of this gracious art and found a great zeal to write a review with the knowledge that I have gathered these days.

Introduction

Kalighat Paintings refer to the class of paintings and drawings on hand-made or more usually on machine-made paper produced by a group of artists called ‘*Patuas*’ in the neighbourhood of the famous Kali temple at Kalighat in between 19th and earlier 20th Century.

A N Sarkar & C Mackay¹ remarked that “The Kalighat school of painting is perhaps the first school of painting in India that is truly modern as well as popular. With their bold simplifications, strong lines, vibrant colours and visual rhythm, these paintings have a surprising affinity to modern art”.

One of the earliest pieces of description on Kalighat paintings by Ajit Ghose² is also worth to be mentioned here. He said: “The drawing is made with one long bold sweep of the brush in which not the faintest suspicion of even a momentary indecision, not the slightest tremor, can be detected. Often the line takes in the whole figure in such a way that it defies you to say where the artist’s brush first touched the paper or where it finished its work...”

History of Kalighat Paintings: A glimpse

The exact date of beginning the activities of the *patuas* at Kalighat is difficult to trace^{3,4} as there are no historical documents about the origin. To know the origin of this genre, one has to rely upon certain evidences. The material evidences like type of paper and colours used by the *patuas* point towards the first half of the 19th century for the origin of the type. The other means to know the origin is to follow the date of acquisition of these paintings by different European collectors and from which it can be concluded that Kalighat paintings have been commenced sometime after the erection of present day Kalighat Temple and probably between first and second quarter of 19th century.

By the early 19th century the Kalighat Temple was a popular destination for local people, pilgrims and certain foreign visitors as well. With the rise of popularity and fame of the goddess Kali, many of the artisans and craftsmen flocked to Kalighat area to capitalise the new market by selling cheap religious souvenirs to the visitors. Soon after that a number of skilled *artists* moved to Kolkata from the rural Bengal especially from 24 Paraganas and Midnapore and set up stalls outside the Temple.^{4,5} In the villages they had painted long narrative stories on scrolls of handmade paper often stretched to over 20 feet in length and were known as *patachitra*. Each section was known as a *pat* and the artists therefore became known as *patuas*. The *patuas* would travel from village to village, unrolling the scroll a section at a time and singing the stories to their audiences. However, the visitors to Kalighat did not want to buy long scrolls which would take a lot of time to paint. The *patuas* therefore started painting single pictures involving just one or two figures that could be painted quickly with simple forms leaving the background plain and eliminating non-essential details.^{4,5}



Figure 1: Brahma

Jyotindra Jain, the famous art historian and museologist, however has different opinion regarding the artist behind Kalighat paintings. He highlighted that the traditional art practitioner of Bengal at that time like potters, carpenters and stoneworkers were also involved in making Kalighat paintings apart from *patuas*. He⁶ opined that “There appear to be certain inherent correspondences between Kalighat Paintings and the traditions of making and painting clay figures, or painting storytellers’ scrolls by the *patuas*, or between the *sutradhar* carpenters’ sketches and wood carvings.”

S Chakravarti⁷ has mentioned that “Kalighat paintings were in vogue not earlier than 1850”. However, the paintings have attained its pinnacle in between 1880 and 1890. Most of the Kalighat painting collections at museums in different parts of the world can be attributed during this period⁵. 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 take the field, some of them blatant imitations of Kalighat paintings.



Figure 2: Lady with a Peacock

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 pice 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 coloured 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.”⁸

W G Archer finally concluded that the final phase of Kalighat paintings ceased to exist after about 1930.⁵

Suhashini Sinha has chronologically categorised the Kalighat painting collections of V&A into three broad phases⁵ which can be expanded to the entire genre of Kalighat paintings.

1. Phase I: Dated between 1800 and 1850, which attributes the origins of the genre, and the formation of essential Kalighat Characteristics
2. Phase II: Dated between 1850 and 1890, this set depicts many variations between style, composition and colour and has attained its peak in its class
3. Phase III: Dates from 1900 to 1930, which shows the end of the tradition with the infiltration of cheap lithographs.

Collections of Kalighat Paintings in Museums

Victoria & Albert Museum, London holds single largest collection of Kalighat paintings in the world. The collection, which numbers about 645 watercolour drawings and paintings, also includes line drawings and hand coloured

lithographs. The Bodleian Library in Oxford holds 110 Kalighat paintings. The India Office Library collection, now part of the British Library, contains 17 paintings. The National Museum of Wales in Cardiff has 25 Kalighat *pats* while the Naprstek Museum of Prague holds a collection of 26 works. The Pushkin Museum of Graphic Arts, Moscow also has collection of 62 *pats*.⁵ The University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia holds 57 Kalighat paintings⁹. There are other museums in different parts of the world which also hold some of the Kalighat Paintings in their collection.

In Bengal, Victoria Memorial Hall has a collection of 24 Kalighat paintings⁵, the Indian Museum has in its collection 40 paintings and four drawings of Kalighat style⁴ while the Gurusaday Museum holds more than 70 drawings and paintings.⁷ Apart from that, the Birla Academy of Art and Culture, the Ashutosh Museum, and the Kala Bhavan at Santiniketan also hold important collections of Kalighat Paintings.

Methods used in Kalighat Paintings

According to Mukul Dey⁸ the method of drawing, was very simple and a family affair. He described “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 colours 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 colours 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”. Even the brushes that had been used were made of simple Goat’s tail or squirrel’s hair.

Colours used in Kalighat Paintings

Kalighat paintings were produced with variety of water based, opaque colours on papers. Several colours like blue, indigo, red, green, yellow, carbon black etc. had been used in Kalighat paintings.^{4,5} Some of these colours were made of indigenous ingredients. For example yellow was produced from the turmeric root, blue was made from petals of *Aparajita* flower, and black was produced from common shoot by burning an oil lamp under a pot. Silvery and golden colours were also used for ornamentation. Kalighat artists used colloidal tin¹ extensively as a substitute of silver to embellish their paintings and to replicate the surface effects of jewels and pearls. Along with the colours, gum of *Bel* fruit or crushed tamarind seeds⁵ was used as binder. Later on, imported factory-made water colours were available from Britain and *patuas* took full advantage of these cheaper materials, avoiding use of home-made colours.

Theme of Kalighat Paintings

The themes in Kalighat paintings had wide variety. From the pantheon of Hindu Gods and Goddess to the religious and contemporary social events –nothing left behind as the theme of Kalighat paintings.

Kalighat Paintings: Religious and Mythological themes

Kalighat paintings were mainly sold as items of religious souvenir taken by the visitors to the Kali temple. It was thus obvious that the prime focus were given on religious and mythological characters. From the depiction of Hindu gods & goddesses, episodes from *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, scenes from the life of Krishna to the other mythological characters, the Kalighat paintings developed to reflect a variety of religious themes. Amongst the deities, Kali was the favourite 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 form of Gajalakshmi or Chandi as Kamalekamini, Durga as Mahishasur mardini, and other gods and goddesses like Kartikeya, Ganesha, Saraswati, Jagadhatri etc all were the popular themes of Kalighat paintings. Different incarnations of Vishnu like Parashurama, Balarama, Krishna, Rama etc. and series of scenes from life of Krishna like milking a cow, killing Putana, affair with Radha, *Kaliya daman* etc. all were represented in Kalighat repertoire.



Figure 3: Radha Krishna

In the village, unrolling the sequential frames of pictures of two great epics while chanting the story was all the part of the traditional performances of *patuas* in Bengal and Kalighat paintings were no exception to portray the episodes of two great epics. The Kalighat *patuas* painted stories from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* in a quite fashionable way. The interesting thing in Kalighat painting was the presence of Islamic icons. A N Sarkar and C Mackay¹ described that “It is

important to note the presence of strong images from Islam and Christianity in the Kalighat repertoire. The painters sought to capture all slices of the truly cosmopolitan market available to them”. One famous representation in Kalighat Paintings was “*Duldul Horse*” on which *Husain*, the younger grandson of Prophet *Muhammad*, was killed in the battle of Karbala. There were many such instances which pertained to Islamic mythology.

Kalighat Paintings: A portrayal of Society

Mukul Dey mentioned that “The folk art of Kalighat did not keep itself divorced from life. Events of burning interest, social oddities and idiosyncrasies, follies and foibles of people, and hypocrisies and meanness-these never escaped the Kalighat



Figure 4: Mahant offering Child Birth Medicine to Elokeshi



Figure 5: Nabin Kills Elokeshi

painters”.⁸ In another article³ Mukul Dey also cited number of examples and attributed that patuas were keen observer of life. “.. wealthy zeminders spending their money on wine and women, foppish babus spending their day and night at nasty places..... 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”.

The rise of 'Babu culture' in late eighteenth century was well envisaged sarcastically by the *patuas* in series of Kalighat paintings where, 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 *hukkah* in the other hand, flirting with courtesan.

In 1873, the Tarakeswar murder case^{5,10} was a public scandal in Calcutta based on an affair between Elokeshi, the young attractive wife of Nabinchandra Banerji and the mahant or chief priest of the Shiva temple at Tarakeswar. Upon discovering the affair, Nabinchandra Banerji cut Elokeshi's throat with a fish knife (*bonti*). In the trial, Nabin was sentenced to life imprisonment and the Mahant was fined and imprisoned for 3 years.

Various scenes related to the Tarakeswar affair were portrayed in Kalighat repertoire: 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 the rigorous imprisonment of mahant.¹⁰

During 1890s, Shyamakanta Banerjee became famous¹ for wrestling with tigers while performing in circuses. This subject was also reproduced many times in Kalighat paintings.

Kalighat Paintings: presence of fish, birds and animals

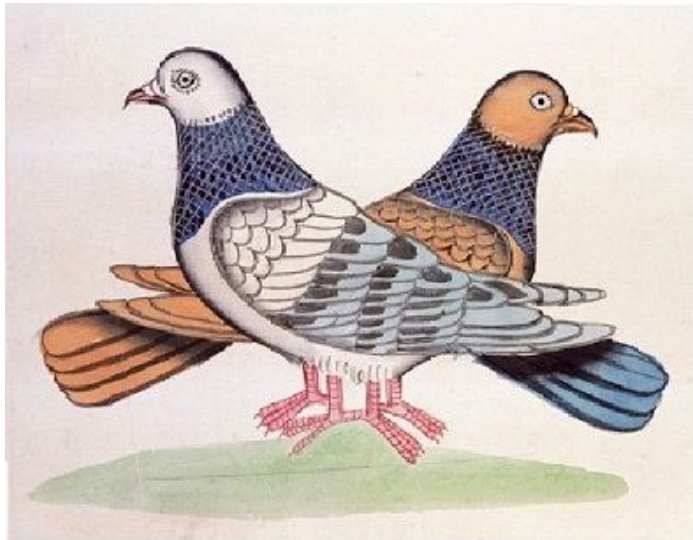


Figure 6: A pair of pigeons

The Kalighat *patuas* showed an interest in portraying domestic pets which might be an influence of Mughal as well as contemporary British artists.⁵ Several scenes of animals like cat etc., birds, prawns/lobstars, fishes like *Rui*, *Shol* etc. were the popular themes in Kalighat paintings.

Conclusion

Today the practice of Kalighat paintings still 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. This is surely a matter of great appreciation and a consortium is needed whose un-tired effort will revive the glorious past of Bengal.

Acknowledgement: All the images used here are from Wikipedia and Wikimedia websites.

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Partha Sanyal is a Textile Engineer. Besides his profession, he is having interest to explore traditional arts and heritages of Bengal. His interest on Kalighat paintings developed while visiting Victoria Memorial Hall (VMH), Kolkata to see collection of "Kalighat Paintings" from Victoria & Albert (V & A) Museum, London. His other interest is to do research on Terracotta architecture of Bengal. Email: partha.iitd@gmail.com
