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Art of Bengal: the communal art appreciation of world’s most fertile Delta
A journey for bewildered search of own identity

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Abstract
The softness of river line soil has softened our minds, which gave the opportunity for the ancient artists of this most fertile delta of the world, comprised of approximately 700 rivers, to draw coarse lines over muddy surface and to mold any shape by fingers, a hypothetical beginning of art in this land. After Pala consequence, synthesis of Islam and Hinduism in rural culture gave birth of Bengal’s own artistic language during medieval period, where art was something inherent, instinct and intuitive. Folk art was not; even still not iconoclastic but the study of nature is prior to there. Bengal art had been possible only for the thirst to acquire precise negotiation with the surrounding nature. This observation resulted in a metaphysical fancy and was relevant in all forms of art. It represents the emotion of our community, not of the individuals. Thus the artists are lost, in the womb of past but not their arts. Prominence of folk literature had shaped the art of Bengal. From Bengal renaissance to Modernism, it is obvious that all of the artists wanted to search a common answer of a very simple question- what is art of our own! The question echoed in the realm of folk arena, where they all bowed and sought help, got enriched but there were conjoint dissatisfaction too: success without any specific response. Art of Bengal is synonymous to the art of folklore. It was, it is and it will be.

Keywords: Bengal art, Folk art, Folk literature, Artistic Morphology, Aesthetics and Schooling of Visual Arts.

Preamble
In this study, visual materials of art are not discussed in detail for critical issues but the folklore essence and its morphology in every art form regardless of their category are going to be the focal concern of this discussion. Here, genealogy of Bengal art will roam through a macro level; from Pala art to Modernism and even crafts but the folklore spirit will earn the clues to rediscover our way to contemplate. If folk art is compared to the spontaneous drift, then the artists of each era are only the fetchers from the shore. Thus political issues might be contextual for the art of medieval, colonial periods and late 60’s and readers may get indication when needed but...
they are not elaborately pursued here. Let us consider that the human civilization began here from early dates back to 450 BC in Wari-Bateshwar, today's Narshingdi District. There should have a developed culture of art. (Hoque, 2013) But Mother Nature has its own commandments. Winning the artistic and archaeological levy, these rivers comprised the most fertile delta of the world. Thus the Ganges took the appellation of 'Kirtinasha' in Hindu scripts. In fact, the bloods of Bengal's own veins have washed her glorious attainments of past. Primitivism may give us a hypothetical answer with condolence: ‘Art criticism is either harmful or useless.’

The pronoun ‘I’ represent ‘us’: it is somewhat self-denial or self-praising and against all kind of ownership. When the first artist created the first bamboo bucket, for example; on behalf of all men was not an art? Their name has been lost in the womb of the past forever. For the conventional thinking of art, this was a cerebral question of the creation. Here the ‘selfness’ is important, not in a sense of ‘selfishness’. This cooperative tradition of folk art blended with the daily needs and thus was recognized as functional art. The empirical point is, folk culture is conceived as special kind of artifact (Bhaskar, 2006) which is still contextual.

In the 68000 villages of Bangladesh, housewives are busy with leisurely works like embroidery, decorative pillow covering, hand fans of palm leaves and many other artifacts. Cooking, sewing, floor paintings, costumes of the female represent the lion’s share of aesthetics in this regard. To exemplify, the flat landscape might have been responsible for simplified dress like Sari of woman, only a piece of cloth without any joint. In addition, oriental dresses of women have long parts from shoulders to hand with a lot of variations in colors, because here dress is also an art piece. Nobody told us to design our lifestyle in this way. It might be compared to the acquisition of linguistic skills of a child, who already knows how to communicate with its mother by precarious words but still wants to learn the language from her.

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1One who destroys the achievements
2Art is not an isolated phenomenon. It is part of a culture, linked up with the history of the culture and with the history of the people. It ranges from products of different races, mentalities, temperaments and historical events to influences of environment. Every society has developed a specific style by giving preference to certain objects and patterns or certain arrangements of lines and spaces.
Again, why we like fairy tales? These poor people suffered bitter experiences of reality knowing well that reality is not as pretty and stunning as these tales are. Bengal art is an artistic truth, not the realistic one. It generates a sense of pleasure, whether beauty is achieved or not. Our Journey of art appreciation starts from the fancy of literature, an aesthetics embedded in a motto that ‘not to understand the art’. If mystery becomes faded then everything is understood and nothing to console the human mind: ‘One has wasted; one will be wiser’!

**What Uniqueness Belongs to Bengal Art?**

Art can be only realized by the fluidity of time. For example, Tepa Putol 3 found in Indus valley is surprisingly still practiced all over the subcontinent with the same skills, thus the same configuration achieved. The Plasticity of river soil was the opportunity for artists. This is true for every civilization developed on the banks of rivers. Rivers were worshipped as form of mother here; it relates the mother iconology of totems.

The pictorial inscriptions on palm leaves and the terracotta plaques 4 from the Pala period are the unique and identical features in Bengal art. During the Pala dynasty 5, art reached its culmination in the realm of oriental art. Without Pala iconography (750–1174 CE) and practice of terracotta, the origin of art in this land cannot be understood. It encircles some criteria like traditional and decorative motifs, Ariel perspective to depict total atmosphere and overall scenario. At authentic Mahayanist 6 Buddhist text of palm leave miniatures, there is no thematic connection between the texts and their paintings. (Saraswati, 1978) A hypothesis estimates that Bengal folk art is a synthesis of the terracotta practice over

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3 Clay dolls, made with a simple technique: by pressing the mud ball with fingers to form any figure.

4 Pictorial narration of epics and social life of general people were presented one after another with paneling of blocks and installment in the façades of temples and monasteries.

5 Nearly 400 years of the dynasty (850-1250) that witnessed the birth of a new civilization in north Bengal. It was the most prosperous reign that Bengal ever experienced.

6 Where Tantric-Buddhist Gods and Goddesses are also found profusely
temple facades and Orissa’s Pata painting which seems again a rectified form of Ajanta art. (Mitra, 1956)

While India practiced Hinduism in sculpture\textsuperscript{7}, Bengal was confined to the Buddhist practice, (Boardman, 1993) which is known as Pala schooling of art\textsuperscript{8}. (Harle, 1994) Bronze sculptures began to be assimilated in the 7th century AD primarily from the Chittagong region. (Ron, 1999) Bengal sculpture then went under a deep sleep for next 800 years until the Mughals permitted to build one of the unique temples of this world, the Kantaji temple where magnificent terracotta plaques depicted secular presentation along with the lifestyle of common peoples, for the first time in our history. The temple bears some political epochs like the Mughal conquest of Bengal, march-past of Akbar’s soldiers under Manshing’s\textsuperscript{9} leadership. It seems architecture was a canvas for sculptors.

On the other hand, study of icon (except religious purpose) in folk art was either absent or minimal. This art helps us to understand the unchanged rural life-style of thousands of years. The features include: decent

\textsuperscript{7}The northern India practiced Bhaisnavism, eastern India practiced Shakhya cult and the whole south India practiced Shaiva cult in sculpture. Notable among these is Bishnu statue at Khajorahho, Shiva and Parvati statue in Durga temple and Nataraj icon in Chola temples.

\textsuperscript{8}Along the Silk Road three schools of Buddhist Mahayani sect evolved- Gandhara style with Hellenistic influence, Mathura school with traditional sculpting skills in Uttar Pradesh and Amravati school in the Deccan. According to Tibetan historian Taranath, Bengal art reached its peak during the reigns of two early Pala kings Dharmapala (c 781-821 AD) and Devapala (c 821-861 AD), when two artists of Varendra, Dhimana and his son Vitapala, attained mastery in image making in stone and metal as well as in painting. But in style, the son differed from the father. While Dhimana pursued the “eastern style” of Mathura, Vitapala sculpted in a style termed as Magadha (today’s South Bihar means “the middle-country”). This influential technique was practiced recurrently and the fame reached to Java and Sumatra, Bali, Vietnam, (at Anchopat sculptures) China (Tibetan art) and even in Japan with some architectonic appeal.

\textsuperscript{9}Man Singh was a Rajput King of Jaipur and a trusted general of the Mughal emperor Akbar, who included him among the Navaratnas, (the 9 gems of the royal court).
segmentation in designs, repetition of forms, dazzling colors but light by their appearance.

Besides, forms of folk art tend to repeat the common motifs: the water lily, the sun, the tree-of-life, flowery creepers, fish, elephant, horse, peacock, waves, temple, mosque etc. are commonly seen in paintings, embroidery, weaving, carving and engraving. Many of these motifs have symbolical meanings too. For example, fish epitomizes fertility, bunch of paddy for prosperity, lily for limpidness, etc. - all are the symbolization of riddles. (Wakil, 2001)

Again, an inconspicuous exception can also be found in a limited canvas, pottery painting; used instead of icons in religious sacraments among the Hindus- popularly known as Lakshmi Sora\textsuperscript{10}. Why these are designed in holding mode? For our fondling to prayer as a devotee, for the soul-intimate relation with our artistic creations with religious rituals, this sort of art had been possible to evolve. In fact, Kalighat's artisans inherited the tradition of Sora painting. 'Syntheses' of beliefs by the endogamous castes\textsuperscript{11}like Patuas of West Bengal has identified the works. (Giusti, 2014) As Bengal art is not aloof from oriental art, it has shown fondness for static contrast and used it frequently. Why do the sculptors of goddess Durga\textsuperscript{12} paint the eyes at last? The eye is the most contrasting part of the human figure whether the iris could be black, brown, blue or green in the white background. In fact, Artists, painters, poets of all ages were fond of eyes not only for its color but also for its sharp shape.

Classical canon prescribes that the eyes of a perfect woman emulate fish\textsuperscript{13}. In addition, Bengal art is a ‘sense depended art’ or, ‘Art of consumption’ from an alternative point of view. Traditional desserts (Pitha) of Bangladesh are best example where the ingredient, rice is not only to satisfy their appetite, they also want to consume in a more artistic way when

\textsuperscript{10}The earthen plate’s back side is colored to depict the image of goddess of wealth, Lakshmi. The ritual is maintained especially in Dhaka and Faridpur region during the worship of goddess.

\textsuperscript{11}As they follow both Hindu and Muslim customs.

\textsuperscript{12}The most celebrated worship festival of Bengali Hindus dedicated after this goddess of protection; occurs in the autumn (September-October).

\textsuperscript{13}Meenakshi- eye (ankshi) like the shape of fish (meen)
they like to celebrate any festival, even decorating their fenestrations and floors by rice powder. Your food is your art; this is something unique—there is nothing intimate which is comparable to this relation. Again, the embellished blanket of colorful embroideries which gives warmth at night even they don’t see its artistry in the darkness; still gets concern for the compassions with our life. To know the practice of aesthetics in Bangla, the festivals of agricultural society need to be known first, like Nobanno. This belongs to the most primitive stage of human civilization while the matrimonial society invented religious rituals related to cultivation. It is more likely to a painting; a seedling rose from the virgin soil: symbolism of creation.

Bengal: Where Literature Shaped Art

How Folk Literature had shaped our art? Proverb (Probad), folk sayings, adages (bachan, probachan) and riddles/ rhymes (shlok) are the unique components of our rich oral values. Riddles were once a great source of entertainment in village chitchat, would create confusion and fun, teaser of brain, throw challenge to the audience by questions, teach morality or pass down knowledge. (Khan, 2012) Here a protagonist often can save his or her life or win a big prize by answering riddles. (Wakil, 2001) The use of orthography and comparison to different animals, plants, human parts and other objects was common in Bengali riddles—‘A sort of verbal puzzle.’ (Chaudhuri, 2009) Riddles were as documentation of these wits and thus cognitive folk art of pictorial illustrations was dreamt up.

Now, Folk literature reveals why oriental art always tries to balance the cold and warm colors. Better imagination comes through the better observation. An inscription of folk sayings:

“ওপােরেত মেঘ ঢাকা ধূসর আকাশ
এপােরেত নাগা মিরচ লাল টুকটুক কের।”

It means, “There is a grey sky over casted by clouds on one side of the river. On this side, the red chili is dark in its very color.” If we consider this subaltern literature as a picture, we find a background in grey (sky) and an object in dark red (chili): a balanced combination of colors.

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14 Means ‘new food’, it is the festival of harvest in agro-based village society during the month of Puash in Bengali calendar (December-January).
15 One of the oldest branches of folk-literature and available almost in all the regions of country and very common in many Bengali epic poems and fairy tales of middle-ages. Based on the dialect of the region, riddles have different names like Chhilka, Thollok, Dhok, Dostan, Dithan, Shilok so on.
16 Literature created by persons without access to hegemonic structure of culture; the marginal people’s literature which is depended only in verbal inheritance.
What have the ancient poets in Bengal thought about the colors of our world? The Underground is black (darkness), life over the earth is green, heaven is white (peace) orsky blue (warm) but hell is red (fire). The pictorial quality of any literary work was better enhanced by the modern Bengali poets (18th century). They first created the environment and guided the reader to go through. Tagore and Jibananda Dash are the best examples. Tagore was more subjective and he emphasized on the capability of black as a hue, which can be used both in cold and warm moods although his poetry was worshiper of light. But Dash inscribed mostly from our landscape and preferred grey in many regards. For instance, a modern song of Hemanta Mukherjee is chosen: it depicts the divisions of various colors also:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{নীল} (\text{hue}) \quad \text{নীল} (\text{chrome}) \\
&\text{সবুেজর} (\text{value}) \quad \text{ছাঁয়া} (\text{chrome})
\end{align*}
\]

It means, “Blue and blues (hue), might be stroked by green (chrome)
That I don’t understand,
The light-dark (value) various amounts of blue (value),
An eye-catching (dark) gull, amidst this scenario as likea careless laughter (whitish).

The Basic Morphology and Characteristics of Bengal Art:

What is color? Color is our experience and memory is the source of colors. Bengal art is truly fond of various green colors as we are acquainted with the greenery of our landscape. Another factor, most important perhaps, that has influenced the art and culture of this land is vibrancy of color: vibrant colors of the six seasons are present.

Over again, chrome change in colors is absent or less practiced in folk art but value change in colors create tonal variations of one particular color and are always hailed to obtain any theme. Warm colors (orange, red, yellow) are applied to demonstrate the visual perspective. Cold colors (sky blue, pink, green) are supportive and preferred as background. However, isn’t Pahela Boishakh stunningly
colorful? Probably, it itself is to reflect the warmth of colors in each of participant’s minds. Even religion has decided the colors of distinction for the 4 major castes\(^7\) of the Hindus. For lines, we know horizontal lines are calm or moving while vertical lines are bold and stand still.

Circular and any other serpentine lines are soft, amiable, adaptive and also the basic comprising elements of folk art.

Again, artistic soul and intelligence create any composition first. Likewise a child draws its father’s face more likely to a square while mother’s face is always circular. If intelligence is accompanied with only experience, it is named as crafts, not art. It is not only contextual for the humankind but also for other creatures, especially birds (e.g. Babui). They show inherent eligibility of craftsmanship. Nature is the best teacher for crafting and craft is intimate to our folk art. In same way, Brahmaputra River and Haors\(^8\) of Kishogonj district not only influenced the folk tradition of whole Bengal, but also the artistic thought of Shilpacharia Zainul Abedinas he once told ‘River is my master.’ (Khaled, 2000) Likewise, Utopian S. M. Sultan wanted to captivate a well cherished desire of his whole life, Adam Surat,\(^9\) the masculinity trapped in farmer figures. (Islam, 2014) Similarly, Potua Qamrul Hasan found animals like fox, owl etc. to depict the evil spirit of society.

Besides, lines of our painting come from the story behind an art. Story based paintings don’t have perspective and becomes an illustration and loses balance and harmony to depict more stories. For information, Egyptian art posed important figures in large scale regardless of perspective and depicting any story shows very eastern tendency of art. (Mukherjee, 1964) But these ‘story tellers’ can still be considered as paintings and the most practiced trend in oriental art. Perspective is not mandatory for our art at all! Truth to be

\(^7\) Priests wear white or bright yellow (purity), warriors and rulers wear red (success) traders wear yellow (neutral) and the low castes wear black (inferior). Lord Krishna’s complexion was amended as ‘bluish black’ to avoid the inferiority of lower castes. Another name of Krishna is ‘Pitamber’ to legitimize the Aryan aristocracy.

\(^8\) Derived from Bengali word Saor, which means sea. The North East Region of Bangladesh, marshy basin of distinctive characteristics becomes vast land of crops in winter and of diverse topographical and ecological features in 7 districts in between Sylhet-Dhaka region.

\(^9\) Inner Strength and beauty of a male figure
told, the practical experience in any foggy environment is something where the sense of perspective gets lost. Our weakness is our strength. It was later felt by the West during Modernism. From Pala art to Patachitra, this story telling was always contextual. (Bhattacharya, 1994) The story telling was not neglected in any form of folk art, consciously or whimsically. In folk music, there is always an introduction at first, and then theme is revealed and after that, the introduction is intentionally aback at the end of every stage to reveal the prior mode, mostly in a periodic cascade. A single piece of folk craft, segments of Nakshi Kantha can also be explained according to storytelling. It is an example how music and sewing can get blended.

Again, from the view of anthropomorphic notions, vocal procedure of singing Bengali folk music and its high and coarse melody is comparative to folk artisan’s brush strokes or rough patches.

Mostly featuring mythic-religious characters, there is nothing called pre-modernity; evangelical practices during 19th century brought pre modern universe into modernity which is a scholarly narrative of ‘Embourgeoisement’. (Jain, 2007) Even the first century of British reigns, when blind imitation of west created ‘confusion of fusion’ during the era of Company painting, could not able to derail us. Rather, Mughal miniatures had an important contribution and got

20Painting over the surface of any earthen pots. The Shading and spherical forms of Patachitra seem to have emanated from the sculptural aesthetics of Ajanta, the Kerala VittiChitra, crafts of Omritoshor (Punjab) and Jaipur (Rajasthan).

21First century of the British Raj in India, (1757 to 1857). As British East India Company was the legislation body of this rule, historians named everything in this period belonging it, for example: company law.

22Mughals continued their ethnic legacy as Mid Asians in art along with Persian influence. For the first time in human history, an industry of miniature art was flourished in Mughal capital, Delhi. Dating from 13th century these miniatures are actually portrait art with wide range of subjects in natural setting, depicted in a single plate or piece of cloth and focused on the luxurious life of aristocrats, hunting activity, landscapes and portraits with calligraphic borders and erected in a container called "Rehal" and never hanged on the walls. At a same time, they emphasized on anatomy; not accurately like Europeans. The artists did not implement designs; rather they imposed three dimensional effects in two dimensional figures. It features mental perspective, main subject highlighted by color and size as individuality was important; and also illustrative in mode. In Bengal, the triumph of Mughal practice went until the reign of last independent ruler, Shiraj-Ud-Dullah. He patronized the calligraphic art (inspired by Tughra trend of Cairo) and indigenous pata-painting both in Dhaka and Murshidabad.
fusion with Pata-arts especially in Kalighat temple’s yard as Delhi’s richest glory of traditional craft was declining for the lack of patronization. (Bose, 1956) The debauched youth, prostitution, luxury of the Babu Society and overall social discrimination was inscribed in symbolic folkloric manners in this art form. Kalighat was not only a thought for the chosen objects of folk art but also was the prime signifier of the Bengal’s civilization and antiquity. Such working of institutions have been tied to the pervasive authority that indicates how history of art defines the fact and fiction of our nation (Guha-Thakurta, 2004). After Bongo-Bhongo, Neo-Bengal School (1871-1951) brought a burning question: what kind of art should Bengal practice? (Glassie, 1997) Pan-Asian model of art, ‘Asia is one’ (Kakuzō, 1903) was well adopted by Abanindranath Tagore, who established a distinct trend of our art after 1000 years of Pala contribution.

The best example is ‘Bharat Mata’ (Mother India); many art critics believe now that the painting is a synthesis of neo-mythology with a rediscovery of classical pictorial treatment like Ajanta, Elora, Khajuraho and Mughal miniatures. RamkinkarBaiz, the first modern sculptor of Bengal, always sculpted with a base, to commemorate the folk clay dolls in his practices at Santiniketon. (Asok, 1956) Again, during the 60s, constructivism according to the social realism brought the political message: ‘Freedom of Bangladesh’. (e.g. Oporajeo Bangla) Folk art shaped the eccentric modernism by sculptor Novera’s exceptional works. The rests are the posterity of our glorious history.

Overall Speculation

Classification of Bengal art may not be considered as an intellectualist art; rather its attributes are emotional and decorative. Bengal art is the follower of Romantic sagacity, here colors get priority. Emphasis on human mind compelled to depict collective feelings and appreciations of folk subjects. Art is not additional to our lifestyle and is much traditional than innovative. This is somewhat referred to in-depth speculation above the

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23Thick on edges but coarse and brusque in the middle of lines that act like a unit to comprise the whole painting: known as Kalighat treatment in painting. Curving figures, earthy satirical style; technique of modulation and amazing sense of observation, simplification and proportion defers Kalighat art from conventional art.

24The youth were educated in European manners and became rich in short time.

25The Partition of Bengal on 16th of October, 1905 by Lord Curzon which lasted until 1911.

26Intellectual thought of Japanese art reformer and scholar, Okakura Kakuzō. In 1903, Okakura sent two Japanese artists to India, Yokoyama Taikan and Hishida Shunso, from whom Abanindranath learnt the techniques of Japanese ‘brush-n-ink’ works and watercolor wash. In the same year, in his book on Asian artistic and cultural history, he proclaimed the spiritual unity which distinguishes orient from the West, is diverting Asian’s artistic thought. The book is famous for its opening paragraph—"Asia is one. The Himalayas divide, only to accentuate, two mighty civilizations, the Chinese with its communism of Confucius, and the Indian with its individualism of the Vedas. But not even the snowy barriers can interrupt for one moment that broad expanse of love for the Ultimate and Universal…… to search out the means, not the end, of life."
known realm, what the Bengal artists acquired on their journey of inherited fantasy. The skill was always constant and resilient, but not the individualities. Considering limitations and obscurities, this study may serve well as an exposition and restrains itself to reach any conclusion which is somewhat a dubious proposition.

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