

Kalighat Painting and the Changing Notions of Nationalism: A Case Study of the Folk Painters of 19th Century Calcutta

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Abstract

This research paper will seek to understand the multiple experiences of the emerging ideas of India through the medium of subaltern paintings. It primarily seeks to focus on the Kalighat and Tribal Paintings of Colonial Bengal. The depiction of the 'Nation' and its very manifestations in painting is a prominent feature of Nationalist agenda during those days. However, as it turned out, there are many alternative ways of imagining a nation as can be discerned from the works of the painters from these 'marginalized' communities.

Secondly, as this research paper will show, expanding on the conceptual category of inner domain of Partha Chatterjee, it will argue that through the world of paintings and its multifaceted themes: it became a way by which these marginalized sections articulated their versions of 'Nationhood' or ridiculed those 'nationalist models' of middle class intelligentsia.

Nationalist discourse therefore suffered from the tension between the National interest on the one hand, and the desperateness of various community class caste interests on the other hand.

The paper would be working with both the primary and secondary sources. By linking the idea of visual representation via the medium of paintings to the broader idea of nation making, it would argue that nation making project would always remain a contested idea. Paintings being one such medium where competing ideologies of their 'imagined nationhood' were full manifest, both in its rigour and vibrancy.

Keywords: Kalighat Paintings, Tribal Paintings, Inner Domain, Public Sphere, National.

1. Introduction

To begin with, how does one contextualize or rather delineate the contours of a distinctive art form within the framework structured around a certain form of modernity unleashed on city of Calcutta by the imperialists? A form of 'art', as some commentators have observed which took little amount of time for its trajectories to shift from rural places (at first) to the 'market' area adjoining the Kalighat temple to its cheap imitations in the various commercial spaces and finally landing up in the galleries situated in the European West. Queries revolving around economics of Kalighat paintings, their buyers, their cultural-politics would form an important aspect of this paper. The answers to these questions are not that easy and straightforward. This paper would make an attempt to understand the varied contextual fields around which the art of Patuas developed flourished and evolved in the span of nineteenth century colonial Bengal. The paper would thus look into the various socio-political, economic and cultural aspects of a time in ferment.

The nineteenth century histories of colonial Calcutta have attracted attention from scholars of various ideological hues and dispensations. Placing this art form of Kalighat painters in the historical context of the ever evolving city of Calcutta has to be taken into account for a proper appraisal of the dynamics that this art form came to engender. This colonial city as some academics of repute has opined that the nineteenth century Calcutta was in a state of constant flux and ferment. Many factors were responsible for these churning at socio-political, economic and cultural levels. The growing forces of nascent nationalism, the half hearted materialist manifestations of colonial modernity, the actions/inactions of the colonial state and ultimately the counter-responses to such momentous changes by the common people, all went into the making the city of Calcutta a veritable space of contest and negotiations.

Historically speaking, nineteenth century Bengal as Anuja Mukherjee notes witnessed a particular moment where cultures of various kinds precisely popular and elite collided and confronted with each other to create new forms and types. The art of Patuas and their political commentary should be understood in such contexts. However, scholars are unanimous when it comes to the 'popular' nature of Kalighat paintings. The painting as the name suggests derived its name from the market areas of Kalighat where it was sold and popularized as a form of merchandise to the general public. On a different plane, one is compelled to query the very definition of 'art' when it comes to those of Kalighat paintings in particular. How does one define art?. Isn't it its singularity or non-imitability that is the essence of a distinctive art form particularly as seen in the case of paintings of famous artists? However, it does seem that Kalighat paintings traversed a trajectory of its own before being relegated to the glass chambers of hallowed galleries and museums around the world. The Kalighat paintings as the name suggests got its fame and prominence around a place known as Kalighat : a hustling bustling place in the colonial metropolitan of Calcutta. A prominent temple dedicated to the goddess Kali being one of the important sites of religious pilgrimage in the colonial landscape of Calcutta. It must also be observed that it is precisely such a space which was to experience various forms of contestations and limited reforms as in the case of women's reform and other empowerment initiatives.

2. Socio-Historical Perspective of Kalighat Painters

Calcutta as a burgeoning market place or as a seat of power of the colonial masters provided the perfect space within which the commercial needs of many kinds of people could be fulfilled and realized. Indeed a place of potential for marginalized sections of the society particularly people who were overburdened with the tax machinery of the imperial masters in the rural hinterlands and economies. So can it opined that all those people who were in their earlier avatar of being agriculturalists professionally migrated to making local artifacts in rural fairs which subsequently in their later avatars became an 'art' form of repute? Does imaginative works like painting have to be authored in singularly to be counted in the pantheons of modern 'art' form? Every linear understanding of 'art' in its elite essence gets subverted if one contextualizes the cultural artifacts prepared by the Kalighat painters in the colonial landscape of Calcutta in the 19th century.

Theorizing their actions and inactions in the backdrop of the evolving contexts of the Patua painters and their lived realities are an important aspect of this research work. Literatures of various kind too have been employed to understand the many sided aspects of Patuas and their vocation. Both vernacular as well as English source materials dealing with various aspects of the similarly placed art form would be used for understanding the nitty gritty of the research topic undertaken.

Paintings in general and the works of Patuas in particular are a commentary on the evolving and multisited socio-political and economic histories of colonial Calcutta.

The art of Patuas was an indigenous response to the new cultural context unleashed by colonial modernity in Bengal.

Patuas and their political paintings suggest the many ways in which the 'margins' speak truth to power.

Patuas and their migration histories are replete with sociological observations on the evolution of colonial urban spaces of Calcutta and its periphery.

When pitted against the growing consciousness about Nation and its derivative Nationalism, the critique of the migrant and economically under privileged class of the Patuas raised very relevant questions about negotiating India's colonial history when conceiving of her as an independent nation.

The participation of female painters broadened the template as well as richness of the art of Patuas as a whole.

It must be noted here that there are socio-economic and cultural transitions at multiple levels. The transition from singing local folk songs, to paintings on varied themes contemporary to the social milieu of the times, and its migration from the local fairs of the rural areas to the cityscape of Kalighat is a testimony to the upwardly mobile ambitions of the Patua painters or artists. The paintings in general and those of the Kalighat artists in particular are pertinent commentaries on the socio-political and cultural milieus of the times, is well known and an accepted fact. If one looks at the varied trajectories that have been undertaken by the Kalighat painters from rural to the

urban market spaces of Calcutta, one becomes very much aware of a new form of political vocabulary that was being created in the subaltern spaces of the Calcutta's streets.

So how does one seek to understand the background of the Kalighat painters in the context of colonial modernity unleashed by the Britishers? It must be observed that it was not the rural artists/painters who came to the colonial landscape to make a living. It should also be seen as a political act taken by certain sections of the rural folk to reclaim the lost economic space which after being colonized was taken away by the imperial masters. A lot many other things could be read into these acts of Kalighat painters who migrated from rural spaces to the urban polity of Calcutta to undertake a certain form of politics at the cultural level.

It may be stressed that quite a wide array of enquiry-oriented literature has been produced on Kalighat Patuapara, but none of it is focused on the socio-economic evaluation of the patuas. These pata painters of Kalighat are exceptionally talented communities so that their artistry deserves to be especially valued. Without an all-round socio-economic evaluation, the workmanship of an artisan community cannot be preserved.

The Style of Kalighat, the general consensus of scholarly literature suggests that Kalighat painting reflects a western influence on the patua artists(W. G. Archer, 1953). In line with the work of Tapati Guha-Thakurta and B.N. Mukherjee, however, I want to argue that there is not enough evidence to support the claim that this style was shaped by contact with western painting; instead I will argue that it was essentially indigenous in style, medium, and subject matter.

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The beginning of Kalighat patachitra as a practiced style of art was around 1830, when the pat artists who resided in the outskirts and nearby villages of Calcutta, migrated to Calcutta (Rituparna Basu and Rituparva Basu, 2009-2010). I specifically want to identify the genesis of this style of art with the physical movement of the artists to Kalighat due to a sharp shift in style. This move was economically influenced by the formation of a market area around the Kalighat temple or something else should be explored.

3. Major Themes

The Kalighat paintings can be good repositories of the time gone by. Sumanta Banerjee has rightly opined that there were many cultural influences that were at play in the nineteenth century colonial Calcutta whose imprint could be seen in the works of the Kalighat paintings. As Anuja Mukherjee observes the regular metaphors of Babus, Bibis, along with Gods, Goddesses and beasts were regular themes in the armory of Kalighat painters. On a careful note, one is compelled to wonder what persuaded the Kalighat painters to move away from painting the images of Kali the Goddess whose depiction was anything but subtle. To quote Mukherjee "it was unreal and beastlike" to being political commentators of the times lampooning the prevalent culture of blind imitation of the West among the middle classes in Calcutta. As has been mentioned above, although from the perspective of women's reform in the 19th century, emphasis was more on 'domesticating' the woman in the name of reforms or rather to use the local terminology of 'bhadra-mahila', the Kalighat paintings on the other hand were more in the nature of a rebel statement, where far from the domesticity and elegance required of woman Paintings like literature or other historical sources are important repositories of a bygone era. Replete with imageries of the past, the Patuas and their paintings provide us an important intellectual entry point to understand the times in which they were made particularly those of colonial Bengal in the nineteenth century. Although, this art at present has been relegated to the whims and fancies of mass consumption practices of the market economy as is evident in the cheap artifacts (bearing its name) proliferating the streets of Calcutta and other mundane places. Interestingly,

its historical significance or its cultural utility to the times till present date continues to attract serious scholarship from historians and other social science.

Usually painted on cloth, traditional pats were either square shaped or in scroll form and were used as visual aids in performance (Banerjee). Kalighat pats, on the other hand, were made of paper and were sold as souvenirs to pilgrims and other travelers near the Kali temple. Both Kalighat pats and traditional pats used water-based pigments as paint (Mukherjee). While Kalighat Patuas made a living by selling their paintings, traditional Patuas did not sell their pats; they earned a living by receiving gifts at the end of their performance and were usually paid in rice or would sometimes be served a meal, given old clothes, or receive a small amount of money (Hauser). Kalighat Patuas art is the art of the streets, the visual expression of outcaste Calcutta, an art rich and faithful to the cultural values it promotes. Kalighat art promotes cultural values that uphold Hindu tradition, and condemn religious hypocrisy. During the nineteenth century, Kalighat artist's clientele consisted primarily of lower class citizens, mostly pilgrims traveling to the nearby Kali temple, and they were quite successful at producing and selling large volumes of original paintings. They were able to maintain a steady income year-round, enabling them to stay in Calcutta (Hauser). Calcutta at that time was rapidly expanding due to commerce generated by the British and other European settlers who lived in the southern part of the city. The Patuas set up stalls outside the Kali temple (established in 1798), on the ghat of the Buriganga (a canal diverging from the Ganges river) in south Calcutta, from where since the 1830s to the 1930s, they sold pilgrimage and tourist souvenirs, which, because of the location, came to be known as Kalighat paintings.

4. Nationalist Perspectives

It is against this general backdrop of Westernization of the perception of the "artist" that the effort to create a new, distinctly Indian art emerged. In July 1896, the English art historian and teacher Ernest Benfield Havell became the Superintendent of the Government School of Art in Calcutta, after holding the same position at the Madras School of Art for about a decade. A European himself, Havell was a firm believer that the practice of art education in India unquestionably had to be based on the Indian arts tradition². In a statement expressing his grievances with the arts education system in Calcutta before his arrival, Havell complains: "The study of design, the foundation of all art, was entirely ignored and throughout, the general drawing and painting classes, the worst traditions of the English provincial art school forty years ago, were followed...Oriental art was more or less ignored, thereby taking the Indian art students in a wrong direction." Havell's efforts at reorganizing the educational policy at the Government School of Art were driven by the desire to change the school "from a Fine Arts Academy into a school of design and applied arts, with a special focus on the Indian traditions of decorative arts." Throughout the 1890s, Havell spilled all his energy into his role as an education reformer, creating a crafts program at the School that taught "decorative design" classes such as stenciling, fresco painting, lacquer-work on wood, and the preparation for stained-glass windows. His efforts at "Indianising" the School's curriculum at this stage in his career, however, was focused solely on revitalizing the "decorative" art portions; he left the "fine" art areas almost totally untouched, therefore creating an implied dichotomy that assigned the "fine arts" as a purely European area of study, and the "decorative arts" its Indian counterpart and only area of concern for reforms³. Towards the late 1890s, Havell's focus began to shift from education reform to the engagement of a new emerging Indian fine arts scene, and his role within that scene was not only as an educator, but now as an ideologue as well.

His effort at revamping the collection at the Government Art Gallery adjacent to the Government School of Art, specifically with examples of Mughal miniature painting and samples of the Ajanta murals as well as reproductions of Byzantine and early pre-Renaissance Italian art was the initial precursor to this shift. Havell's acknowledgment of an Indian "fine arts" tradition⁴, and his presentation of it in tandem with pre-Renaissance European art, may signal a dissolving of his conceived dichotomy between the purely "fine" and purely "decorative" arts, which itself allowed him later to promote, in a highly paternalistic manner, the new paintings of the artist Abanindranath Tagore as distinctly original and Indian. Havell even went so far to say, as Tapati Guha-Thakurta reveals, that Abanindranath's evolution as an 'Indian' artist was owed 'entirely to the new collections of the Art Gallery,' despite the fact that Abanindranath had independently experimented with his own Indian-style paintings since 1895. Introducing Abanindranath Tagore In the volume titled *Art & Nationalism in Colonial*

India, 1850-1922, ParthaMitter identifies two clear periods of art production in colonial Bengal. First, he says, came the Westernising period, which I touched upon at the beginning of this paper. He places this period within the time frame of 1850-1900, and defines it by the introduction and absorption of Renaissance naturalism in India. Then, between the years 1900-1922, he explains, came the “counterpoint,” during which a cultural nationalism emerged within the bhadralok and Orientalist groups in Bengal⁵.

He explains this nationalist sensibility as being tied in with the swadeshi movement that surfaced in response to the 1905 partition of Bengal, and emphasizes that this nationalism was not confined to the form in painting alone, but implied an entirely new weltanschauung, or world view, for the participants. Although as an artist, Abanindranath explored the indigenous traditions of miniature painting, ornamental design, and calligraphy before 1905 and the surge of political nationalism in the region, it is within this swadeshi context and environment that Abanindranath is often introduced and discussed.

As TapatiGuha-Thakurta writes in one article on the artist, “His name became synonymous with the age of nationalism in modern Indian art, and the rise and spread of the movement that took on the denomination of the Bengal School...Frozen in time in his fixed slot, Abanindranath could then be dropped from that later history with no qualms.” While Abanindranath did emerge as a publically recognized artist during this historical period of swadeshi upsurge and nationalist polemics, it would be unfair to analyze his work as dependent on this environment. As R. Siva Kumar points out in one article, “the artist is well capable of making an original and independent response to his times.” Later in the same essay, Siva Kumar agrees that Abanindranath’s introduction as an artist happened at “the juncture at which the first wave of Westernisation was breaking and a new wave of cultural nationalism was beginning to take shape,” adding that “Like most modern artists looking for alternatives he turned from his immediate past to more distant antecedents and towards fringe-practices. Thus his moment of personal difficulties coalesced with the moment of nationalist cultural assertion.” Siva Kumar’s crucial assessment here of Abanindranath’s own personal development as an artist as something that merely “coalesced” with the advent of cultural nationalism is extremely important for a true understanding of the situation: Abanindranath’s art should be understood not as a “mere confirmation or exemplification” of the ideological discourse in the air at the time, but instead as an individual expression of creativity that happened to be contemporaneous with that discourse. As Siva Kumar reaffirms later in his essay, “Abanindranath’s involvement in the nationalist movement and his artistic career were two intertwined but distinct strands.” It is important to keep this distinction in mind when treating the relationship between Abanindranath, Havell, and the other cultural commentators to be dealt with in this essay, so as not to let the personality of Abanindranath become obscured by the anti-colonial polemics that weighed heavy in the air of his environment. Abanindranath’s Relationship With Nationalism It was through the advent of popular journalism that Abanindranath’s art was first popularized on a large scale in India during the first decade of the 20th century. It was mainly through RamanandaChatterjee’s publications *Prabasi* and *The Modern Review*, appearing in Bengali and English, respectively, that the paintings of Abanindranath were able to stand next to a nationalist dialogue expounded by three principle Orientalists: E. B. Havell, AnandaCoomaraswamy, and Sister Nivedita. *Prabasi* was RamanandaChatterjee’s first publication of the kind, but he decided in 1907 to produce *The Modern Review* as its English counterpart because, as ParthaMitter explains, Chatterjee was “convinced that the foreign rulers must be made aware of the emergent nationalism.” Clearly, *The Modern Review* was a cultural magazine with a mission, and it is within this forum that the Orientalists were able to brand Abanindranath’s art as nationalist⁶. Just as E. B. Havell demonstrated in his efforts at education reform, AnandaCoomaraswamy and Sister Nivedita were both deeply committed, as R. Siva Kumar explains, to reviving the Indian art traditions which they believed were being smothered under the weight of Westernisation under Colonial rule. In a different work, Siva Kumar explains that these kind of politically-charged assertions were padded by a deep background of Orientalist research in Indian art traditions that inevitably led to the binary categorization between “Western” and “Eastern” art. While the creation of this dichotomous conflict was largely of the Orientalists’ making, Abanindranath “went through the motions of subscribing to the program” in his own right, and was by no means a silent artist without personal agency⁷. Although he made the conscious effort to forge his own “Indian-style” painting before he had even met Havell, as will be discussed later in my treatment of his paintings, Abanindranath still allowed himself to be co-opted by the spirit of the cultural nationalist movement that was immortalized in *The Modern Review*. While the “nationalist” sentiments of his

paintings were drawn almost completely by the rhetoric surrounding the art in *The Modern Review*, Abanindranath's friendship with Havell led him to make his own swadeshi assertions. For example, when Havell put all of the Western-style paintings in the Government Gallery up for auction in March of 1905, Abanindranath followed suit by selling his own collection of naturalist oil paintings to a flea-market vendor, including his own.

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