



Confluence Of Expression: A Study Of Language And Literature Through Kalighat Chronicles

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ABSTRACT

Art, literature, music and other intellectual expressions of a particular society are together regarded as the culture of that society. Ideas, customs and social behavior of a particular people or society are also its 'culture'. Contrary to what we think, it is not easy to describe 'culture', nor is it easy to write the cultural history. Writing the history of Bengali culture is even more difficult because Bengali society is truly plural in its nature, made even more so by its political division. The two main religious communities that share this culture are often more aware of the differences between them than the similarities. Nonetheless, the people remain bound by history and a shared language and literature. In this background Kalighat Painting as a folk culture represent the interconnection of society and culture.

Kalighat painting, originating in the Kalighat area of Kolkata, India, during the 19th century, provides a unique insight into colonial India's social, cultural, and political aspects. This artistic form emerged as a response to the changing socio-economic dynamics under British colonial rule.

Literature and culture of that era often reflected and drew inspiration from Kalighat paintings, showcasing the daily life, customs, beliefs, and transformations occurring in society. Some literature of the time, especially Bengal Renaissance literature, incorporated themes, motifs, and narratives from Kalighat paintings to depict the societal changes, cultural amalgamation, and the impact of colonialism.

Writers like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore, among others, were influenced by the themes depicted in Kalighat paintings, using these narratives in their works to comment on societal issues, women's roles, religious practices, and the clash between tradition and modernity in colonial India.

These paintings and their cultural influence also found their way into the performing arts, influencing theater, dance, and other visual arts of the time, contributing to a vibrant cultural landscape that encapsulated the essence of colonial India's complexities and transformations.

Keywords: Kalighat Painting, Colonial India, Modernity, Transformation.

Introduction

The intersection of folk art with language and literature serves as a means of preserving and transmitting cultural heritage, capturing the essence of a society's identity, values, and history through storytelling, linguistic expressions, and artistic creations. Kalighat painting is a significant form of folk-art originating from the region around the Kali Temple (Kalighat) in Kolkata, India, during the 19th century. It emerged as a popular art form among the local artists who depicted a wide range of subjects, including religious, mythological, social, and everyday life themes. While there may not be an extensive collection solely dedicated to Kalighat painting, several scholarly articles and chapters in books that explore this art form within the broader context of Indian art history.¹

1. Kalighat Painting in the Existing Academic and Non Academic Scholarship

To begin with, paintings like literature or other historical sources are important repositories of a bygone era. 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 Paintings of Colonial Bengal through existing Language and Literature.

Cultural historian Sumanta Banerjee(1989), who stated that many of these painters had an idea of shading because they painted clay figurines of deities. Thus, the understanding of three-dimensional forms transferred from clay modeling to paper at Kalighat. That art and its varied forms it takes is not static and undergoes many changes can be gleaned from the works of Patua painters.¹ Perhaps, their choice of painting material also talks about a form of politics that they wanted to share with the wider public. Bordering on the vibrant or the 'un-aesthetic' these painters were attempting to shake the conscience of their audiences and were making a commentary on the important happenings of the day.

To emphasize the interactions between Kalighat paintings and anti-colonial struggle, Banerjee(1989), evokes the French West Indian political philosopher Frantz Fanon, who states that anti-imperial struggles revitalize the culture and traditions of indigenous classes in colonial settings—as native artists who once used to relate 'inter episodes' start bringing them alive with modifications to describe the new socio-cultural context, modernizing legends, naming heroes and their weapons. In the case of Patua Painters, too, it becomes slowly evident that in a way, these works of the Painters were speaking truth to power as well as at the same time evolving a visual form of anti colonialism which will be further explored. The constituent elements of Patuas, their ethos, their inclinations will be looked into by the researcher.

Anthropologist Igor Kopytoff (1986) terms the process of transition as 'singularisation' in the cultural biography of objects. The elevation in status of Kalighat paintings was not accidental. It coincided with the extinction of the tradition in the 1930s when cheap lithographs overtook hand-painted production. Removed from the general markets, they became rare and, thus, prized possessions.²

Rituparna Basu and Rituparna Basu(2009-2010) 'The Folk Arts of Bengal and Evolving Perspectives of Nationalism, 1920S-40s': A Study of the Writings of Gurusaday Dutt.: The paper sheds light on the 'folk art' which contributes the intimation not only to a regional identity but also to a set of national values, that could harmonize the discording professes of citizenship, ethnicity and history, as well as incorporates the widest universal values of humanism.³

Nandalal Bose. (2010). 'Masculine Regeneration and the Attenuated Body' in Niharika Dinkar(ed.) Oxford Art Journal, Vol. 33, No. 2 (2010), Oxford University Press. His works are known for introducing the sense of Indian element by simultaneously discarding certain westernized aesthetics and like Abanindranath Tagore and Asit Kumar marked the beginning of the new cultural scene of Bengal in the 20th century.

Faye Hirsch.(2016). 'A Rare Kali Woodcut from the Era of the BattalaPrinters'in Art in Print Vol. 6, No. 3 (September – October 2016): This work looks into the many works on Kali or its various manifestations in the cultural scene of colonial Calcutta. It also highlights the infamous press act of 1910 which sought to regulate the visual medium for its anticolonial dispensations.

Ghosh, Pika. (2003). Unrolling a Narrative Scroll: Artistic Practice and Identity in Late-Nineteenth Century Bengal, Association for Asian Studies, The Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 62, No. 3: Ghosh has talked about how the art of Kalighat painters transformed from being urban political commentaries to scholarly commentaries on Hindu political life.

Dey, Mukul.(2020). 'Drawings and Paintings of Kalighat.' With the emergence of the twentieth century, Kalighat paintings as a form of Indian Art began losing its charm as cheaper imitations in the form of oleographs were made accessible from Bombay and Germany. These were the paintings which were made with the help of machines. These were varnished and colored lithograph copies of the primeval works.⁴

S Sinha and C. Panda(ed.) Kalighat Paintings, V&A Publishing in association with Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd., Ahmedabad, 2011: has focused on the different manner in which the Kalighat painters could incorporate secular themes as well as at the same time reflect on the various European influence in the cultural fabric of colonial Calcutta.

Ghose, Ajit. (1926) 'Old Bengal Paintings.' Rupam. Here in the authors talks about the colonial imprint in the many imaginings of Kali and in the various works of Kalighat painters.

Status of recent research at the international level

Ghosh, Pika. (2000), 'Kalighat Paintings from Nineteenth Century Calcutta in Maxwell Sommerville's Ethnological East Indian Collection.' Expedition 42, no. 3: 11–21. Ghosh has tried to contextualize the artists and their art in certain political social framings of colonial Calcutta. Ghosh has observed on how its becomes pertinent to strike a balance between economic viability of the work as well as sticking to the ingenuity of their core art forms.

GuhaThakurata, Tapati. (2011). The City in the Archive, Calcutta's Visual Histories, Seagull Arts :This book envisages the cultural fabrications of the modern city and implements the changing forms of middle-class affability.^{3 5}

Mitter, Partha. (2007). *The Triumph of Modernism, India's artists and the avant-garde 1922–1947.* Reaktion Books London. Mitter looks into the relationship between western modernism and evolving forms of modern art in colonial India. He has focused on the feminine aspect of the Indian art, the disappearance of oriental art and the various interesting ways in which this art form evolved.

Bhattacharya, Arunima. 'The Popular and the Nation: The Kalighat Patas.' *The Criterion: An International Journal in English* 4, no. 2 (April 2013): This journal is enthralled on how the Kalighat painters of mid and late nineteenth century, used their seditious glee in reshaping themselves to a dynamic metropolitan city.

Das, Aurogeeta. (2010). *Metropolitan and Traditional: An Exploration of the Semantics in Contemporary Indian Arts Discourse, Etnofoor, Vol. 22,* ⁶

W.G. Archer in his famous book, *Bazaar Paintings of Calcutta: The Style of Kalighat (1953)*, H.M.S.O., for the Victoria & Albert Museum has highlighted the manner in which western ideas and influences impinged on the work of Kalighat painters.

Apart from this national and international work there is also the availability of some of the ***Nonfiction work which incorporates KALIGHAT PAINTING.***

"A Fine Balance" by Rohinton Mistry: This novel set in India during the 1970s mentions Kalighat paintings. The author describes a character purchasing Kalighat paintings as a reflection of their interest in Indian art and culture.

"The Glass Palace" by Amitav Ghosh: In this historical novel spanning Burma, India, and Malaya, there are references to Kalighat paintings, offering insights into the cultural and artistic milieu of the period.

"Kalighat Paintings: A Catalogue and Introduction" by P. Banerjee and D. Gupta: While this is more of a reference book, it offers detailed insights into Kalighat paintings and their significance. It's a scholarly work that delves into the art form's history and provides a comprehensive overview.

"Indian Paintings: The Story of Kalighat Paintings" by W.G. Archer: This book explores the history and context of Kalighat paintings, discussing their themes, styles, and cultural significance. It's a valuable resource for understanding these artworks.⁷

These works either directly mention Kalighat paintings or provide substantial information about their history, cultural context, and significance within the literary and artistic landscape of India.

2. Art, Language and Literature: An amalgamation of Cross-Cultural Representation

Folk art intertwines with language and literature to express cultural narratives, traditions, and societal values in various ways:

1. **Oral Traditions:** Folk art often finds expression in oral traditions like folk tales, legends, songs, and poetry. These stories and songs convey societal values, beliefs, and historical events, passed down through generations.
2. **Proverbs and Sayings:** Folk art manifests in the form of proverbs, idioms, and sayings, encapsulating the wisdom, customs, and moral codes of a community.
3. **Regional Dialects and Vernacular:** Language reflects cultural nuances and diversity. Folk art is often deeply embedded within regional dialects, vernaculars, and colloquialisms, showcasing unique expressions, humor, and traditions.
4. **Literature and Folklore:** Folk art influences literature by inspiring writers to incorporate folk tales, myths, and legends into their works. Authors often draw from folk traditions to create characters, settings, and themes that resonate with cultural roots.
5. **Poetry and Songs:** Folk art's emotional depth and societal commentary are conveyed through poetry and songs, reflecting the joys, sorrows, struggles, and celebrations of a community.

These texts delve into the history, themes, techniques, and socio-cultural significance of Kalighat painting, shedding light on its evolution and influence within the broader landscape of Indian art.

How Kalighat painting exemplifies folk art

Kalighat painting serves as a significant example of how folk art captures the essence of society, blending religious, cultural, and everyday elements into visually compelling narratives that resonate with the masses.

- **Themes Reflecting Society:** Kalighat paintings often depicted scenes from Hindu mythology, religious deities, and stories from epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata. They also portrayed everyday life, social satire, and contemporary events, making them relatable to the common people.
- **Use of Bold Colors and Brushwork:** These paintings were characterized by vibrant colors, bold strokes, and simple yet expressive compositions. Artists used natural dyes and watercolors to create eye-catching imagery.
- **Accessibility and Appeal to the Masses:** Kalighat paintings were affordable and accessible to the general public, attracting a wide audience due to their affordability and relatable themes.
- **Narrative Style:** The paintings often had a narrative quality, telling stories or conveying moral lessons through visual representations, appealing to both the literate and illiterate sections of society.
- **Evolution and Adaptation:** Over time, the themes and styles of Kalighat paintings evolved, incorporating new subjects and adapting to changing societal norms and tastes.

3. KALIGHAT PATACHITRA: A LIVING EXAMPLE OF TRADITION AND MODERNITY

Kalighat Patachitra emerged as a unique style of painting in the 19th century Kolkata. Kalighat painting evolved as a unique genre of Indian painting in 19th-century Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) in West Bengal. From the depiction of gods and other mythological characters, these paintings developed over time to reflect a variety of themes. Kalighat 'patuas' (painters) produced these cheaply made works of art to make a living by selling to a mass market.

By the 1690s, when Hooghly River became part of the city of Kolkata, it was already known as the sacred realm of Kali or Kalikshetra. The moorings (ghat in Bengali) on the bank of the Hooghly River were known to pilgrims as Kalighat, and there was perhaps an early version of a temple at the spot in the 17th and 18th centuries. By the early 19th century, the temple was a popular destination for local people, pilgrims and interested European visitors. The paintings attracted the interest of many foreign travellers who visited the city in the 19th century. As examples of 'oriental' or 'exotic' souvenirs.

These paintings recorded the fast changes that were occurring in the lifestyles, values and technology. The paintings were developed by traditional scroll painters called *patuas*. They brought a change in their visual language as there was a rising demand among the urban buyers for Western style images. So, the linear narratives of their paintings changed to single images with one or two figures. It became a hybrid form where traditional techniques and iconography were deployed alongside Western techniques and mediums like watercolours and Western academic shading.ⁱⁱ



Figure 1 (Captured during my Field work, Pingla, Paschim Mednipur)

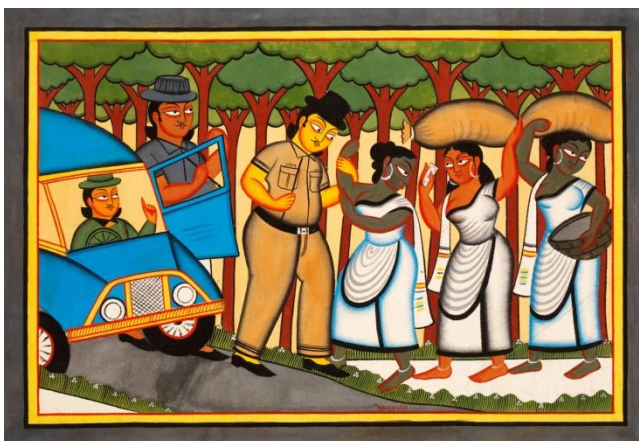


Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4
(CONTEMPORARY KALIGHAT PATACHITRA ,Indian Museum, Kolkata))

Conclusion

Kalighat painting and literature have exhibited a symbiotic relationship, mutually influencing and enhancing each other through the ages. Kalighat paintings, originating from the 19th century Bengali cultural milieu, drew inspiration from prevalent societal themes, narratives, and characters found in literature.⁸ These vibrant artworks, primarily depicting daily life, social issues, mythology, and religious motifs, often mirrored the stories, characters, and cultural nuances present in Bengali literature of that time.

Conversely, literature, especially works by renowned authors like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore, frequently referenced and drew inspiration from the visual imagery and societal reflections found in Kalighat paintings.⁹ The vibrant, expressive narratives in these paintings resonated with the themes explored in literature, enriching the depth and visual interpretation of the written word.

This interchange between Kalighat painting and literature fostered a cross-pollination of ideas, themes, and aesthetics, contributing to the richness and diversity of Bengali artistic and cultural expressions.¹⁰ Their parallel evolution and interdependence have left an indelible mark on Bengal's artistic landscape, showcasing how visual art and written word can harmoniously coalesce to reflect the societal ethos and cultural fabric of a region across time.

Foot Notes

ⁱSome literature sources that discuss Kalighat painting are *Kalighat Paintings: A Catalogue* by Nirmala Sharma, *Kalighat Paintings* by Goswami Mitali, *Kalighat Paintings: A Legacy of Bengal* by B.N. Goswami and Eberhard Fischer & *Indian Popular Painting in the India Office Library* by Mildred Archer and Toby Falk 1. Different Nationalisms Bengal, 1905–1947 Semanti Ghosh pp 99. Discusses the idea of a regional nation within a federal India.

2. Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908*, (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1973),

3. Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992),

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6. Siva Kumar, R. "Abanindranath: From Cultural Nationalism to Modernism." Nandan, 1996, 49.

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9. B N Mukherjee, "Kalighat Patas", Indian Museum, Kolkata 2011

10. S Sinha and C Panda (ed.) "Kalighat Paintings", V&A Publishing in association with Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd., Ahmedabad 2011

ⁱⁱDuring my search to gather knowledge about the folk art and my trip to Pingla Village in West Bengal, I set out to capture the essence of Patachitra through my camera lens. The vibrant array of traditions unfolded

before me, and I found myself immersed in the warmth of the locals and the vivid colours that adorned the surroundings. As I wandered through the narrow lanes, I was spellbound by the skilled artists, their brushes bringing to life mythological stories and religious themes on intricately crafted cloth scrolls. The impressive hues and meticulous attention to detail were simply awe-inspiring, and I felt a deep connection to the rich cultural heritage of the village. Equipped with my camera, I seized the opportunity to capture these moments in time, creating everlasting memories of a cultural journey that seamlessly blended tradition and creativity. Interacting with the villagers, I delved deeper into the profound cultural significance behind each piece, making my experience in Pingla Village a personal and rewarding exploration of art, tradition, and community.

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