

# Color, Theme, Artist's Lifestyle and Aesthetical Aspects of Kalighat Paintings

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## Abstract

In this research paper, I have highlighted Kalighat Folk Paintings and the artists who are directly associated with this Painting. Kalighat paintings are a very popular form of folk painting. These Paintings are not only just works of art but also have strong connections with Indian Religion, Mythology, Social Aspect, Daily Life, and Nature. The main distinctive feature of the Kalighat Paintings is the motifs used in them. There are two types of kalighat painting, the Oriental and the Occidental, both of which were popular in the country. Besides motifs, Kalighat Paintings feature the use of basic natural colors. Kalighat paintings also saw diversification in the motifs or subjects for their paintings. I have included these paintings with their compositional elements. For this paper, I have chosen an artist family who has retained this work of art for generations. They have reinvented the meaning of Indian mythology by giving a new appearance.

**Keywords:** Kalighat Folk Paintings, Artists, Motifs, Mythology, Color, And Method.

## Introduction

India is well known for its culture and tradition. Every country has its own distinct culture, traditional identities, and are displayed through various forms of art prevalent there. Every region in India has its style and pattern of art, which is known as folk art. However, these art forms have been on the decline, some time back, but thanks to the rising interest of people again in local arts, they have been thriving. Here "Kalighat Painting" is one of the best-known folk art forms of India that is flourishing today with a well - established market for their artifacts.



**Fig 1: Kalighat Painting**

## Historical Background of Kalighat Paintings:

The name of the Kalighat painting derives from its place of origin Kalighat, in Kolkata – which was the capital of British India. This art form has its roots in the cultural upheavals of the nineteenth century colonial Bengal. During that time a large number of village people had migrated from rural Bengal and settled in at Kalighat where the Kalighat temple is located. Amongst them, many were potters and scroll painters. These were

the people whose painting style and themes later came to be known as Kalighat painting. They used watercolors and<sup>[9]</sup> painted on inexpensive mill papers.

The material evidence such as a type of paper and colors used in Kalighat painting points towards the origin of the type in the first half of the 19th century. The other means of knowing the origin is to follow the date on which different European collectors acquired these paintings and from which it can be concluded that Kalighat paintings were begun sometime after the erection of the present Kalighat Temple and probably between the first and second quarters of the 19th century.

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Kalighat Temple was also a popular destination for local people, pilgrims, and some international tourists. With the rise of the Kali goddess' popularity and fame, many of the artisans and craftsmen flocked to the Kalighat area to capitalize on the new market by selling visitors cheap religious souvenirs [2][3][4].

Soon after that, several skilled artists moved to Kolkata from rural Bengal, particularly from 24 Paraganas and Medinipur, and set up stalls outside the Temple. They had drawn long narrative stories in the villages, frequently extended to over 20 feet in length, on handmade paper scrolls, and were known as patachitra. Every portion was called a pat, and so the artists were called patuas. It is difficult to trace the exact date on which the activities of the patuas start at Kalighat, since there are no historical documents about the origin. To know the root of this genre one needs to rely on other facts. The patuas would travel from village to village, unroll a segment at the time of the scroll and sing the stories to their audiences. Nevertheless, the Kalighat visitors did not want to buy long scrolls that would take a lot of time to paint. Therefore, the patuas began to paint single pictures involving only one or two figures which could be painted quickly with simple forms leaving the background plain and eliminating non-essential details [3][7][8]. Such inexpensive pictures may have been bought initially as memories of a trip and would have eventually adorned or consecrated the home to represent the depicted deity and worshiped on a home altar [2].

#### **Area of Work**

These paintings were done on paper are mainly carried out in two places in India namely 24 Paraganas and Medinipur. The paintings over a while developed as a distinct school of 'Hindustani Painting'. From the depiction of Hindu gods, goddesses, and other mythological characters, the Kalighat paintings developed to reflect a variety of themes.



**Fig 2: With Artist's Family (Medinipur)**

For my field project, I went to Medinipur, West Bengal. Naya is a village, which is 131 km from Kolkatta. During the study, I met a few artists who started learning the art of kalighat painting at a very early age with their father or grandfather and they have a group whose name is ' Banglar Patachitra". One such artist is Mr. Laltu Chitrakar, working as a senior painter in this group.

#### **Aim of the Study**

The main purpose of this study is to bring out the different aspects of Kalighat Painting and the way artists live their lives.

#### **Lifestyle of the Artist**

Born at Naya village under the Pingla block of Paschim Medinipur district of West Bengal, Laltu Chitrakar belongs to a family of Patuas. His grant parents started their journey in Medinipur. Laltu Chitrakar learned painting from his father during childhood. His life was full of hardship. But he has overcome it and started reviving his painting skills. Laltu's dedication and creations started getting recognition first at the district and then at the state level.

He has participated in many national and international festivals. Art collectors and appreciators visit his village regularly for buying the artifacts or learning the techniques and also for getting acquainted with the lifestyle of the Patuas. Most of the members of his family have been painted Khalighat paintings since their childhood.

#### **Methods of Kalighat Paintings**

The Kalighat painting process is organized as work. The most fascinating thing<sup>[4]</sup> about the Kalighat paintings is that they will include an entire family in making the work. Each family member had a specific role in the process of establishment. In the first scheme, one artist would copy the outline from an initial model drawing in pencil at the beginning, and second artist would model, portraying the flesh and muscles in lighter and darker shades [3]. Then a third member of the family will place various parts of the body and background in the correct colors [3]. Some members of the family are responsible for grinding the colors and creating the dyes. And last of all outlines and finishes in the lampblack would be done. In general, they would mix these colors with water and gum, and mold them with a granite muller on a round stone. Thus, the simplest and easiest way to draw a living the picture would be as a kind of conjoint family work. Brushes were made for the painting from the hair of simple goat tailor squirrel [3].



**Fig 3: Working Time (Medinipur)  
Colors used in Kalighat Paintings**

Kalighat paintings were created on papers using a variety of water-based, opaque colors. In such paintings, several colors such as blue, indigo, purple, green, yellow, carbon black, etc. were used. Many of those colors were created from natural ingredients. For example, yellow was made from the turmeric root, blue was made of Aparajita flower petals, and black was made from the common shoot by burning an oil lamp under a pot.

Tin was widely used by Kalighat artists to embellish their paintings and mimic the surface effects of jewels and pearls. Silver and golden lines are not found for ornamentation in other folk paintings, such as Kalighat. But it can be seen in Mughal painting and Rajput painting. The Bel fruit gum or crushed tamarind seeds were used as a binder along with the colors. Imported factory-made aquarelles were later available from Britain, and patuas took full advantage of those cheaper materials, avoiding the use of home-made paint [3][9].



**Fig 4: Natural Color**



**Fig 5: Artist Laltu Chitrakar (Medinipur)**

#### Diversity

The Kalighat Paintings' most distinguishing characteristics are the motifs used in them. Two styles of Kalighat painting exist, the oriental and the occidental. The paintings in the oriental Kalighat depict gods, goddesses, mythological figures, and scenes from Hindu religious texts. And the paintings from the occidental Kalighat depicts secular and civil themes.

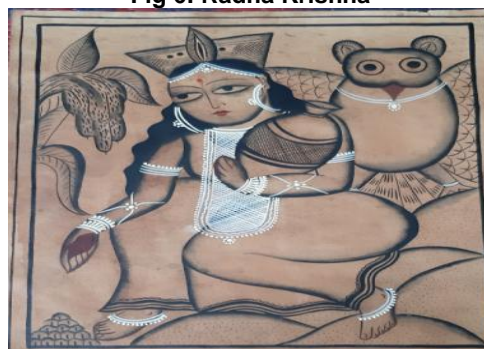
#### Religious and Mythological Themes

The Kalighat paintings developed from the depiction of Hindu gods & goddesses to reflect a variety of religious themes such as Ramayana and Mahabharata, the life of Krishna and the other

mythological characters. Among the deities, Kali was the favorite who was very fair and apart from that Shiva in the form of Panchanan or sitting with Parvati on Nandi or holding Sati, Lakshmi or in the form of Gajalakshmi or Chandi as Kamalekamini, Durga as Mahishasur Mardini, and other gods and goddesses such as Kartikeya, Ganesha, Saraswati, Jagadhatri, etc all were the popular themes of Kalighat paintings. Various Vishnu incarnations such as Parashurama, Balarama, Krishna, Rama, etc. and series of scenes from Krishna 's life such as milking a cow, killing Putana, dealing with Radha, Kaliya Daman, etc. were all depicted in Kalighat's repertory.



**Fig 6: Radha Krishna**



**Fig 7: Goddess Lakshmi**



**Fig 8: Durga & Mahishasura**

Unrolling the sequential frames of pictures of two great epics in the village while chanting the story was all the part of the traditional patua performances in Bengal and Kalighat paintings were no exception to portray the episodes of two great epics. The Kalighat patuas depicted Ramayana and Mahabharata stories in such a stylish way. The fascinating thing about

painting in Kalighat has been the inclusion of Islamic symbols. A N Sarkar and C Mackay described that "It is important to note the presence in the Kalighat repertoire of strong images from Islam and Christianity. The painters tried to capture all the slices of the cosmopolitan market at their disposal. One famous depiction in Kalighat Paintings was "Duldul Horse," on which Husain, Prophet Muhammad 's younger grandson, was killed in Karbala 's battle. There have been many such incidents relating to Islamic mythology [3][6][9].

#### **Capturing the Daily Life**

Ordinary objects can be found for everyday use and no matter how bright or inexpensive they may be, they will not bring any special significance to it. However, these sketches from the Kalighat patuas would have a peculiar appeal, and if they were hung up among ten other pictures anywhere, they would outshine the others not only for their distinct depiction but also for their marvelous color effects and contours. Since pilgrims know no caste or wealth difference, these pictures would naturally be taken, liked, and hung by people of all classes and communities from the big Rajas and zemindars down to the most ordinary villagers or even small children. Such pictures would decorate the thakurghars or family chapels of rich and middle-class men, brighten up – some of them – the drawing rooms of people of all kinds; add a touch of color and joy to the modest hut of the field tiller, and the village grocer or "panwalla" around the corner of a city street will find no better or cheaper decoration than these pictures [1].

It can be found from a study of the drawings that these patuas were skilled in handling the brush and color and were keen observers of life, with a grim sense of humor. For instance, wealthy zeminders spend their money on wine and women, foppish babus spending their day and night in nasty places, a Mohunt suffering imprisonment for abducting children, or a priest or Vaishnav "Guru" (who is invariably depicted as well-nourished and well-groomed, pot-bellied and top-knotted – the true picture of a pious rouge) living with unchaste women – we would not avoid these artists' probing eyes and draw caricatures in such a way that ordinary people would be repelled by these practices. We also get good examples of famous sayings and proverbs [1].

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Kalighat painting is its strong social themes and consciousness. Kalighat painting was the first of its kind on the Indian subcontinent to express subaltern sentiment and directly address customers. The emergence of 'Babu culture' in the late eighteenth century was well foreseen by the patuas in series of Kalighat paintings where the 'babus' were depicted as high-class wealthy gentlemen usually described with beautifully oiled hair, a plate of his dhoti in one hand, and either chewing the betel or smoking a hookah, on the other hand, flirting with a courtesan.

In 1873, the Tarakeswar murder case was a public scandal in Calcutta, based on an affair between Elokeshi, the attractive young wife of Nabinchandra Banerji, and the Shiva temple mahant

or chief priest at Tarakeswar. Upon discovery of the affair, Nabinchandra Banerji cut Elokeshi 's throat with a fish knife (bothi). In the trial, Nabin was sentenced to life imprisonment and the Mahant was fined and imprisoned for 3 years [3][5].

In Kalighat's repertoire, various scenes related to the Tarakeswar affair were presented: the meeting of Elokeshi and the mahant at Trakeswar Shiva temple; mahant offering her childbirth medicine; Elokeshi embracing Nabin and asking his forgiveness; Murder of Elokeshi by Nabin with fish –knife (bothi), Elokeshi offering betel and hookah to the mahant; courtroom trial of Nabin and the mahant and the rigorous imprisonment of mahant.

There are different views on Kalighat painting regarding the character and influence. While some believe that they have been greatly influenced by the West, others argue that the Kalighat style is entirely responsible for local technique and social settings. It is now recognized, however, that Kalighat painting is a legacy that unfolds our past ... a past that might have been lost and forgotten, had it not been for Kalighat 's paintings. It is interesting to note that this folk painting was ignored for decades by scholars and critics alike. In India, the ancient texts of Sanskrit acted primarily as the yardstick for assessing the quality of art forms. Far more important than pictorial expressions were considered the written word. Since they lacked the authority of the sacred text, the Kalighat Paintings' rural and folk visual forms were considered to be inferior expressions, unworthy of any attention.



**Fig 9: Babu Culture**



**Fig 10: Nabin Kills Elokeshi**



**Fig 11: A Woman with a Broom  
Using of Different Creatures**

The Kalighat patuas displayed an interest in depicting domestic pets that could be inspired by both Mughal and contemporary British artists [10folk]. The common themes in Kalighat paintings were many scenes of animals such as cats etc., birds, prawns/lobsters, fish such as Rui, Shol, etc.



**Fig 12: Cat with a Prawn in Its Mouth**



**Fig 13: Snake with Fish, Birds & Prawn Fish  
Aesthetical Aspect of the Paintings**

There was a wide range of themes in Kalighat Paintings. From the Hindu Gods and Goddess pantheon to religious and contemporary social events – nothing is left behind as Kalighat paintings style. Kalighat patas was the unique invention of Bengal patuas, the basic character of these paintings is bright colors, simplicity, and rhythmic lines. Within the composition kalighat drawing, this highly prominent bold black contour produces a contrasting feeling over the flat color. Kalighat painting's key features are bold contour and shaded patterns, calligraphic patterns, flat color

treatment, simplistic forms with curving curves, and wide unmixed color areas.

The painting is usually done on paper. Cut to the same size (7inches x 11inches) to build the picture's volume they used shading in a western way. The features of secular as well as religious [9] figures are not nearly in profile, it can be seen frontally and full of three-quarters view. Earlier origins could be traced back to Ajanta, an illuminated manuscript of the Pala period, in the style of Mughal Rajput. While Kalighat's patachitra is a development of painter's or chitrakar's patua classes of Calcutta the largest number came from Medinipur.

Artists in Kalighat depicted figures in a very natural way. Throughout all forms of Indian folk art, the faces of the human being are usually portrayed throughout the profile. The features of the Kalighat painting's human form are not nearly in shadow, it can be seen frontally and full of three-quarters vision [9].

Line not only creates the object's shape but can also give the overall image of anything. Folk painting in India gives this sort of feeling through their vibrant line drawings. Often brushstrokes give the line's energetic feel as well as the skill of the artists. Repetition of the same line confers a harmonious unity of elements. This style is made appealing by the bright lines and mature brush techniques, minute finish, deft precision, a rhythmic arrangement of the extremities [9].

#### **Global Influence on Kalighat Paintings**

These patuas' foreign imitators had driven the trade out of their soil. Taking advantage of the success of those images, the sneaky German merchants sent thousands of lithographed copies printed on glazed papers with bright garish colors and filled the whole country with these cheap Kalighat imitations. After these German presses, a Western India litho press then took the field and did the same thing as a "Swadeshi" concern and hastened the demise of this wonderful indigenous art school in Bengal. The cheap price, the glazed paper, and some kind of imitation of Kalighat pictures took the crowd away from those original artists who made them; they were not dissuaded by the smelly characters of these gaudy paints [1].

Nowadays Kalighat Paintings are on show all over the globe, from Britain to Philadelphia to Prague. It is one of the well-recognized forms of modern Indian art seen globally. Besides being an art form it is also used in the creation of fashionable ethnic Indian garments as a modern motif. Indian designers were influenced by this art form to create some of the most unique motifs ever to be seen on a sarees. Nevertheless, this has played a great role in expanding the reach of its reception and taking it to younger people whose interest lies more specifically than in mainstream art forms.

#### **Improvisation**

Things have changed dramatically over the last decade. However, Mr. Laltu Chitrakar had confidence in his skills and worked hard to reach out to his work to the outer world. Traveling all over India has also helped him broaden his vision as he learned painting on new mediums which improved the

repertoire of his art. The changing times have also been deafly captured by Laltu in the paintings. But nowadays Laltu Chitrakar and his family also painted 'Patachitra' for their survival. They also used these paintings' motif in a crockery item, T-shirt, dupatta. Improvising from traditional stories, today, he depicts incidents like the tsunami and terrorist attacks on 9/11 in his art. Social themes like AIDs, child marriage, and child trafficking, etc. have also found a place in his creations.



**Fig 14: Modified Kalighat Painting-1**



**Fig 15: Modified Kalighat Painting-2**

#### **Methods Adopted for Marketing The Product**

The Internet has made marketing very easy these days that they need not go anywhere to market their products. Uploading the pictures of the product and all the details related to it is the best way to market their product in domestic as well as international market. They even do not meet the buyer; they get online orders and prepare the product according to the buyer's requirement, make the transaction, and deliver the product. Few other methods include exhibiting the products in different galleries and exhibitions.

A study of the work of famous Bengal artists like Jamini Roy reveals the Kalighat Painting style's enormous inspiration for their work.

#### **Conclusion**

Only in the twentieth century did Kalighat painting begin to get its deserved attention and appreciation. Seeing traditional Indian art the violent

western culture faced an immediate threat. Therefore the preservation of Indian traditional art became a primary concern. Local traditions suddenly assumed supreme importance and the need to protect, document, and revive rural art was acute. This resulted in Kalighat Paintings entering the limelight in large part. It has since been recognized as a brilliantly inventive esthetic movement and has received major international attention.

#### **Acknowledgement**

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