



## KALIGHAT PAINTINGS

Hello! Everyone and welcome to today's episode. Today you will study about the Kalighat paintings of Calcutta during colonial period in India. Here we will focus on the painting techniques, style and the themes that were taken up by the Kalighat artists. The subject has been researched by Ms. Sonam Chaprana who is active as a painter and printmaker.

### INTRODUCTION

Kalighat style of paintings originated in Calcutta during early nineteenth century. With growing popularity of Kali temple in Calcutta which has deep significance among the Hindus in India, a new style of paintings originated during the colonial period. The Kalighat paintings style refers to class of drawings and paintings which were done by people known as 'Patuas' on machine made papers. The Kalighat paintings which were done by these Patuas are known as 'Kalighat pat'.

The patachitras were scroll paintings which were used for storytelling by the patuas. Usually patachitras were painted on cloth, traditional these were either square shaped or in scroll form and were used as visual aids in performances by the patuas. In the villages they had painted long narrative stories on scrolls of handmade paper or cloth often stretched to over 20 feet in length. Each section was known as a pat and the artists therefore termed as patuas. The patuas used to sing songs and shows the scrolls which were painted according to the stories which they were telling to the people. These paintings also included Scripts as part of the painting. This practice was common among the rural areas as the patuas



used to travel village to village along with the scroll paintings. This community of patuas has traditional artists who have inherited this art from their families as well as potters, carpenters and stone breakers were also among them.

Traditionally the potters used to make clay dolls of deities which were more popular among the people. These clay dolls which were crafted by the artists have many similarities to the paintings which were done in Kalighat style. These clay dolls were easily available to the pilgrims who visited the temple and wanted to take back home something as religious souvenir. As these clay dolls were more fragile in nature, the patuas started painting the deities on 2D paper to satisfy the demands of the religious souvenir. These hand painted clay dolls which were made by the patuas were small in size. The colours used for these clay dolls were also vibrant. Goddess kali was depicted in large number in the forms of clay dolls.

These patuas were lower class people who had migrated from rural Bengal and settled down near Kali temple. The Kalighat patuas turned to practice the paintings on paper rather following the traditional cloth as the medium of pats. As traditionally these paintings were done on scrolls and were large in size which took lots of time to prepare them. Later on the patuas switched to single paper painting so as to make the process easy and less time consuming. Bold, rhythmic lines, empty backgrounds and vibrant colours were main characteristics of these paintings which had a great impact on the pilgrims who visited the Temple of Goddess Kali. As these paintings flourished in the nearby markets of the temple these paintings are also referred as "Bazaar Paintings of Bengal". During early 20<sup>th</sup> century these paintings were taken by cheap



machine made lithograph prints which flooded the markets and were more preferred by the buyers.

## **Features of Kalighat painting**

- Bold and strong rhythmic lines.
- There are two categories of Kalighat paintings: line drawing and coloured paintings.
- Use of natural colours and natural binders for colour pigments used for paintings.
- Vibrant and rich colours were used in Kalighat paintings.
- Background was often kept empty by artists/patuas. Yellow or green were used for painting the background.
- Colour shading was done in the figures or the drawings against a flat background which resulted in roundness effect in the subject of the paintings.
- Paintings were done on various themes like religious themes, social-political themes as well as birds and beasts were also documented by the patuas.
- Males referred as 'Babus', Naiyaks and females were referred as 'Bibi', 'Heroines' and 'Naiyika'.
- They used silver colour in paintings. The dresses were drawn and painted with dotted patterns as well as dashes at the edges of the sari border.
- Decorative patterns and motives used in the paintings were still rural.
- No use of perspective can be seen in the Kalighat paintings.



## TECHNIQUES AND SYTLE OF KALIGHAT PAINTINGS

These paintings were done on machine made papers which were available during the colonial rule in India. Calcutta was the capital of British India and was more centre of development during the colonial period. The Patuas used bold simplification, strong lines, vibrant colours and visual rhythm to depict their subject and to make it more attractive to their buyers in the market. The paintings were usually 17 by 11 inches (43 by 28 centimetres) were done on blank sheets with no background and one or two figures in the painting. These paintings were cheap and easily available. As to meet the growing demand of the paintings were done by a group of people where the males use to draw the subject with bold outline where as three to four women use to fill in the colours within the outlines of the drawing. After the drawing done on paper each woman was assigned with a specific colour which resulted in 200-300 painting could be produced in one hour. The colours used were natural pigments like lamp black and different colours obtained from flowers, vegetables and soil etc. These paintings were produced with different variety of water based opaque colours like indigo, red, and blue, yellow, green and carbon black etc.

**Preparation of Colours:** These colours were obtained and grinded from different natural resources like: yellow was obtained from **turmeric root** and **haritala**, blue from petals of **Aparajita flower, indigo, indican Indian**, black from burning on **oil lamp** under a pot. Red from **Gerumati or red clay**. For ornaments in the paintings **gold** and **silver** colours were used. Pigments were binded with natural gums like **Bel fruit** gum and crushed Tamarind **seeds**.



The colours used were first prepared manually but later "Patuas" took the benefit of watercolours which were manufactured by factories in Britain.

**Preparation of a base:** a required amount of gum obtained from natural resources is applied to the paper or cloth so as to get the desired stiffness and to protect the painting.

**Application of colours:** variety of colours included deep and light shades of green, blue, red, turquoise, yellow, violet, brown and black. The patuas generally preferred yellow for the colour of the body in figures and sometimes Indian red for the same. Clothes of women are generally depicted as sarees of red colour and if shown in white then the folds of drapery are painted with blue or black bold lines. Sometimes for the background, light washes of yellow are painted in some paintings but the artists preferred green as their favourite colour for background varying in shades of light or dark. This application of colour with dark and light shades of colours against a flat background gives a rounded three dimensional volume.

**Brushes:** The brushes used for these paintings were made of squirrel hair or goat hair. These brushes were traditionally made at home by these patuas.

These patuas included the potters, carpenters and stonebreakers also in the traditional art practices in Bengal which inherent correspondences between Kalighat paintings as it has got the sculpting qualities of all of painting subjects with quality of roundness and three dimensional qualities. These paintings are characterized by formal and linear economy,



expressive gestures, quality brushwork and flawless rhythmic strokes.

### **Treatment of figures:**

Females in the paintings are referred as ***Bibi, heroines and courtesans***. The females are shown with ordinary and round faces that are never looking directly to the onlooker. These figures are shown looking to their sides, on their right or left. Eyes are drawn and painted with black outlines which are pointed at the end and eye ball which is comparatively smaller to eyes is shown touching the upper line of the eyes. Chin is shown round and lips are painted in red colour are divided with black line. Thick and heavy necked figures have horizontal shades or shown covered with ornaments.

Female figure occupies a major part of these paintings. Soft, delicate and full bodied, sensitive colours and carefully modelled. The tightly fitted clothes and folds along with wet drapery effect give a suggestion of the curves and bulges of the body.

Male figures are referred as ***babus*** in these paintings. They are shown clean shaven, short, glued and shaped moustache, well groomed hair with side partition which imitates the style of European elite class(also Prince Albert). He is shown wearing a dhoti, a shirt which has fancy yoke and a shawl falling on his shoulder. He is shown wearing buckled shoes and sitting in cross legged posture.



## **THEMES OF KALIGHAT PAINTINGS**

Kalighat paintings were started with the themes of Hindu god and goddesses along with their incarnation were painted by the artists in large numbers. These artists defined figures of deities, gentry and ordinary people with deft and vigorously flowing lines. Gradually the subjects of these paintings included the social issues which were prevailing at that time. There were romantic depictions of women. There were satirical paintings which depicted newly rich and the changing roles of men and women after the introduction of westernisation and education for women. The social sentiments were expressed by the artist directly to the viewer in the medium of paper.

### **Religious and mythological themes**

Kalighat paintings were mainly sold to the devotees who visited the shrine of goddess Kali. As these paintings were taken back by the visitors as a religious memento so it was quite obvious that more emphasis was given to mythological and religious themes. Mahabharata and Ramayana episodes were depicted in large numbers as well as scenes from the life of Krishna were depicted by the patuas. These paintings depicted a wide variety of religious themes and mythological characters. Portrayal of goddess Kali was favourite among all but Gods and goddess like Shiva in the form of Panchanan, Shiva- Parvati sitting together with Nandi .lord Shiva mourning for Sati, goddess lakshmi depicted in the form of Gajalakshmi, Durga depicted as Mahishasurmardini. Chandi as Kamalekamini and other gods and goddess like Ganesha with Ridhi Sidhi, Kartikeya, Saraswati, Jagadhatri Lava kusha taking Hanumana. etc were depicted in large numbers by the patuas. Also different



incarnations of Vishnu like Balrama, Krishna Parshurama, Vishnu, Lord Rama, different scenes from the life of Krishna like Krishna with Gopis, affair with Radha, Krishna milking a cow and killing Putana etc. included by the artist to reach the masses. Apart from Hindu religious themes interestingly Kalighat paintings also depicted Islamic icons.

**Some examples of religious themes are described below:**

**Goddess Kali, 1865:** This painting was painted in watercolour on paper with opaque technique. This image of goddess is one of the aspects of Shakti in her most terrifying form. She is depicted black skinned with her tongue out and blood dropping out of her mouth, four armed, wearing a garland of human heads. She is depicted in Abhaya Mudra and lower and with her third eye open in anger. In her lower left hand she holds a severed head of an asur (demon) and in her upper left hand she holds a kharga, sacrificial axe. The deity is depicted in one hand as a generous goddess and on the other as fearsome. The image is highly ornated in Kalighat style in tin alloy with necklace, ear and nose rings, amulets and bracelets. The image is also adorned with a headdress. Use of vibrant colours, bold lines with rhythm, wide and fish shaped eyes. She is shown wearing red clothes. Kali is the female consort of Shiva, the Hindu god of destruction or transformer. To honour the Goddess Kali temple at Kalighat in Calcutta was built and dedicated to her. As an offering, living animals are sacrificed daily to the deity. This painting would have been painted and sold as the main pilgrim souvenir from artists' stalls around the famous temple of Kali.

**Durga as Mahishasuramardini, 19<sup>th</sup> century:** This Kalighat painting depicts the ten-handed goddess, Durga, in the avatar





of Mahishasuramardini or the slayer of Mahishasura, the buffalo demon. The goddess is shown wearing a red sari and a yellow headdress adorns her head. Her hair is flowing downwards and she is wearing beautiful ornaments. The goddess carries various weapons and attributes in her hands, she is standing beside her lion, using two of her hands to pierce the chest of the demon at her feet with a spear. Bold and rhythmic lines with suggestion of three dimensional effects with little shading are done. This battle and defeat is the central episode of the Devi Mahatma, a scripture in one of the Puranas, and is celebrated with great zest.

**Hari Hara, 19<sup>th</sup> century:** Kalighat painting done on paper. This painting shows image of Hari-Hara, combined form of Shiva and Vishnu. On the Right side of the painting is light skinned Shiva who is shown holding two different weapons with his two hands. On Left is blue-skinned Vishnu who is shown with his weapons. Shiva is shown with moustache, wearing tiger skin with ban on his head. Vishnu is wearing a headdress, ornaments and wearing a yellow dhoti. Folk art style with thin, bright pigments loosely applied on paper.

**Lord Kartikeya, 19<sup>th</sup> century:** Lord Shiva's son Kartikeya, shown riding his vahana, peacock. He is wearing a turban and ornaments. Shading is done to show the roundness in the picture. He is shown with moustache and finely defined features. This representation of Kartikeya, the god of war and the possessor of transcendental knowledge depicts a Kalighat style of painting. He is shown yellow skinned. The characteristics of precise outlines, rounded contours and distorted figures depict Kalighat style. The painting shows the European influences as shading is done and uses paper.



**Goddess Lakshmi, 19<sup>th</sup> century:** Lakshmi, Hindu the Goddess of wealth, prosperity (both material and spiritual), fortune, and the embodiment of beauty. She is wife of Vishnu. Also known as Mahalakshmi, she is said to bring good luck and is believed to protect her devotees from all kinds of misery and money-related sorrows. Fish shaped eyes and nose is rendered in black bold outlines where as body parts are done in flat colours with a little wash of darker colour on the edges of the drawing to bring out the roundness or three dimensional effects to the painting. In this painting, she is wearing orange clothes which are supported with shading gives the effect of roundness to the figure. Her figure is surrounded with blue flowers on both the sides.

**Yashodha Holding Krishna and Balrama, 19<sup>th</sup> century:** This painting is based on one of the scenes from life of Krishna. Krishna is painted with his mother Yashodha and brother Balarama. Both Krishna and Balarama are depicted with their mother Yashodha, with her left hand she is holding Krishna and with right hand she holding Balrama. All three characters are shown with heavy ornaments but only Krishna is wearing a headdress with peacock feather. Krishna and Balrama are shown with profile faces where as Yashodha is facing frontal. Both Yashodha and Balrama are shown in light yellow colour but Krishna is shown blue skinned. She is shown in traditional Indian dress with bold sweeping lines which is a significant characteristic of Kalighat style.



### **Themes showcasing the society**

Apart from the religious themes that flooded the market of kalighat there was one another perspective which was developing among the patuas, who were witnessing the shocking changes taking place with the coming of western culture in India. Bengal faced a shock of erosion of traditional value with coming of European culture.

Patuas were mostly affected by the new machines, introduction of camera, printed news sheets, appearances of oleographs which were threatening them to lose their importance and shift the interest of the masses towards the new media. Due to these insecurities patuas started also working on the social themes so as to retain the interest of their buyers. These patuas were more observant than any other group of people. They have captured every aspect of society even the current affairs during that period.

Samakal pats: In these types of paintings artists have critical studied and portrayed the attitude of the youngsters towards the clothing, toiletries, shoes and accessories etc. Kaliyug pats depicted the bad and corrupted influence of films on the society. Many incidents which were popular among people were depicted like the case of Elokeshi was painted with series of events.

As most of the earlier paintings depicted woman as victimised by the male and often shown in different themes depicting violence against her in the society. But with the introduction of education for woman and westernisation which affected and



attracted the males in the society has completely changed the scenario.

During late eighteenth century with the coming of modernisation, the young Bengali males who became newly rich, educated and trying themselves to mix with the new modern culture were satirically termed as 'babu'. This class of babus was spending money on drinking, throwing parties and spending wealth and time on courtesans. These 'babus' were charmed by the prostitutes. Spending lavishly on courtesans made them penniless and on returning back to their houses empty handed, were beaten up by their wives. Exceptionally, here these females are shown looking directly at the onlooker. He (babu) is shown completely at her mercy. This aspect is completely contrasts the earlier work painted by the patuas.

***Tarakeshwar series*** 1873, kalighat, during 1873, Elokeshi murder case shocked the people of Calcutta. This also took the attention of the Kalighat patuas who were active in picking such themes in the paintings. This scandal took place in Tarakeshwar which was based on an affair of Elokeshi, a young and beautiful lady who was murdered by her husband Nabin Banerji for having an affair with a Mahant or chief priest of Shiva temple at Tarakeshwar. Her husband Nabin killed her by cutting her throat with a fish knife and for this crime he was sentenced for life imprisonment and the Mahant sentenced for three years of imprisonment along with a fine. These series of painting has depicted scenes like

**Elokeshi meeting the Mahant in the temple:** An episode of the Tarakeshwar affair. The Mahant of the Shiva temple is shown seated on a striped rug in front of the temple, with a



man standing behind him. In front of Mahant stand three women: Elokeshi, the young and attractive wife of the clerk Nabin, is holding up a plate with her left. Behind Elokeshi stands her younger sister Muktakeshi and to the right stands, the female servant in the family who is looking boldly at the waiting Mahant.

### **Elokeshi is offering betel and hookah to the Mahant.**

Here in this painting Elokeshi is shown offering a betel leaf to the Mahant of the temple who is shown holding a hookah while seating on chair. Elokeshi is depicted as courtesans where as Mahant/priest is shown with appearance of 19th century Bengali babu.

**Mahant fanning Elokeshi:** Episode of Tarakeshwar affair. The Mahant is shown fanning the young Elokeshi who is seating on a chair. The Mahant is shown standing beside her wearing a dhoti.

**The Mahant offering Elokeshi childbirth medicine to drug her before raping her:** Depicts the 'Mahant (the priest) of the Shiva temple at Tarakeshwar, he standing next to Elokeshi who is seated on chair she is attractively dressed in a bright red sari. He is wearing a white pleated dhoti against yellow flesh tones. The priest offers her a glass of 'child birth medicine' with a view to drugging her or intoxicating her before rape.



## **Nabin attacking Elokeshi**

This work of art shows image where Nabin stands poised to behead his wife Elokeshi with a fish knife. This painting has some of contents which indicate influence of modernisation on the Bengal culture. There is black bag which lies in front of Elokeshi and Nabin is holding an umbrella in his left hand. Elokeshi is depicted as yellow skinned wearing a burgundy sari; she kneels before him with her face turned away and hands raised to protect her from Nabin's action.

## **Nabin killed Elokeshi**

### **Trial of Tarakeshwar scandal**

**Woman beating a man with a broom**, 19<sup>th</sup> century, Kalighat, watercolour 43x28cm, Herwitz

**Woman trampling her lover**, water-colour from Kalighat, c. 1900. Victoria & Albert Museum.

This painting depicts a courtesan trampling on her lover. This painting is painted with large washes of colour with less shading. The woman is shown wearing a pink sari with black border and her lover is depicted following the typical 'babu culture' with nicely done hair in the painting.

**Woman leading her sheep-lover**, also a water-colour from Kalighat, c. 1865-70 (Victoria and Albert Museum)

This painting is alternatively known as 'the sheepish lover' where the man is shown wearing a hat covering his hair in



typical of 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengali style parting and moustache but with a body of a sheep. Here a woman is shown with a rose who is leading her sheep lover. She is wearing a red sari with thin silver lines and the lady hold red rose in her right hand. This painting is satirical illustration of woman dominance in Calcutta during 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**Barber with a seated courtesan**, Kalighat paintings, and 1875.

This painting describes a barber who is attending a courtesan. On the left side of the painting courtesan is shown holding a hookah in her hands where as barber shown piercing her ear before inserting an ear ring. The barber is shown wearing a white pleated dhoti, white shirt and a turban.

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

### **Themes on Birds and animals**

Apart from the religious and social themes which were popular among the people one more subject was explored by the artists. Themes on birds and animals were also taken up by the artists. These patuas were more influenced by the documentation of flora and fauna done by the artist who were working for the Britishers. The patuas showed a keen interest in portraying animals and pets which can be an influence from Mughal miniature paintings also where Mughals have given importance to their pets and wild animals in the paintings.



Several scenes portraying animals like cat, tiger etc, and birds like pigeons, fishes, lobster etc were popular in these paintings.

***A cat with a fish in its mouth 1855-60, watercolour, Victoria and Albert museum:*** This kalighat painting depicts a cat with large black marks on its body and a fish in its mouth. This composition is often interpreted as a satirical illustration of a Bengali proverb. The cat is depicted as a false ascetic who despite renouncing the world is unable to control its lust.

***A fresh water prawn with three cat fishes, kalighat painting, watercolour, 1940:*** This work of art shows interest of Kalighat patuas towards water species. A fresh water prawn is shown with a pale blue body with red markings, whiskers and two long claws. Three cat fishes of white and brown colour. This painting illustrates a Bengali proverb.

## **PHASES OF KALIGHAT PAINTINGS:**

### **Development and its Decline**

According to W.G Archer, a scholar, writer and collector of kalighat paintings can be divided into three phases: Phase I- 1830-1870, Phase II- 1870-1890 and Phase III-1900-1930. These phases show the development and decline of Kalighat paintings.

### **First Phase 1830-1870**

During the first phase Kalighat painters/patuas have painted mostly religious themes. The quality of precision and neatness was clearly visible in the paintings. These paintings show a





very serious approach of the patuas for details and accuracy of forms this possibly inspired by the Anglo-Indian drawings of animals and birds. Lines played a very crucial role in these paintings for giving suggestion of depth of light with wide or thin strokes of brushes. Colour was used to define the contours but yet three dimensional qualities were not achieved by the artist during this period. Themes like ***Englishman shooting at a tiger, mouse peep show, jockey on a galloping horse, cat with a prawn*** are some the remarkable examples from this period.

### **Second Phase 1870-1900**

During this period the patuas have started painting themes which were more concerned with the social issues and the changes which were prevailing during this period in Calcutta. Introduction of western culture such as theatrical performances, mechanised reproduction techniques, camera has threatened the patuas. The artists started critising the society and the western culture which was influencing the people visually in their paintings. They were painting more and more social themes, moral –immoral, crimes, and other important events. As these were painted by different patuas in their shop studios so a single theme was available in large variations. During this period the style of kalighat painting flourished as by this time patuas have achieved volume through colour shading in this style of paintings. The growing popularity of these paintings was also due to pilgrims who were visiting the shrine of goddess Kali from different places.



### **Third Phase 1900-1930**

This phase was the diminishing phase of the Kalighat paintings. The patuas who were already threatened by the prevailing western culture now for their survival started working in competition with the machine made prints which were taking the markets. They produced works in large number even at the cost of quality of lines which was the main characteristic of their work. Later these paintings were replaced by graphic arts of woodcut, engravings and cheap lithographs. Among those patuas those did the paintings some took up their previous occupations and some engaged themselves with other works. With the change in demand of work these artists have changed their occupations for their survival. By early 20<sup>th</sup> century this genre of paintings started towards its decline.