



BATTALA PRINTS AND OLEOGRAPHS

Hello! Everyone welcome to today's episode. Today you will study about the popular printmaking themes during the colonial period in India. Here we will focus on the Battala prints and oleographs by Raja Ravi Varma with their respective popular themes. The subject expert is Ms. Sonam Chaprana who is active as a painter and printmaker.

Introduction

During the British rule in India two popular printmaking medium rooted and flourished i.e the woodcuts of Battala and oleographs of Raja Ravi Varma during the 19th century. The printmaking techniques of Battala woodcut and oleographs of Raja Ravi Varma were more prevalent and powerful attraction to the people during this period. Moreover these were the most affecting mediums when India was experiencing the social as well political changes. **These mediums helped Indian artists to discover their own style and identity to reach the common people.** It was during this period when the common people were privileged to have art pieces in the form of oleograph in their homes. These prints show the European influence on Indian people and their acceptance of western culture. Also the Battala prints are evidences reflecting the development made by the woodcut artists and how people started accepting the machine produced prints which were brought by the Britishers in India. The social and technological history of printmaking by woodblock of Bengal reflects the tradition which these artists had worked and the aesthetic values that they had created and the iconography of woodcuts which they left behind for their successors. As far as oleographs are concerned these took up the market after the Battala woodcuts and were the main reason for their



decline. Raja Ravi Varma's oleographs which were more colourful and attractive took up the market and gave a new face to the Indian gods. The gods and goddesses were printed who resembled more human faces and were shown in man-made environments. **Both the mediums explored the popular themes i.e. Gods and goddesses and different myths.** In addition Battala woodcuts print artists were showcasing the prevailing social scenario which was affecting the majority. Most importantly these popular themes flooded the market during the 19th century but even today these are popular and admired by people.

Battala

In the history of printmaking in Calcutta, Battala prints have contributed most in popularizing the religious themes and reaching the middle class people. This art in the form of woodcut prints has flourished in Calcutta during the nineteenth century. The use of prints for the very first time was made widely by the masses whether it is an individual experience of a child learning to read and write the alphabets, or the collective practice of a community of adults making use of it. Such a moment occurred in early colonial Calcutta when an economically and educationally backward general public encountered a new technology i.e. the printing press. This is for the very first time took place in 'Battala', the term derived from the area in north Calcutta is known by that name, where the first Bengali printing presses were set up in the early 19th century, and which brought out cheap popular books. These



books constitute a literary genre which records the efforts of the underprivileged people to use this newly introduced print media to come up with their ideas and, to share it with the readers. Battala prints are mainly influenced by the pat paintings of Kalighat.

Probably, Battala prints were first developed due to the impact of European woodcuts on the art of Calcutta, which was the capital of British India, thereafter this art rapidly developed into an important craft industry. **Woodcut prints which were sometimes coloured were extensively used in illustrating books and almanacs, for advertising, typography and display prints etc.** The area of their manufacture was on the whole was the modern North Calcutta, where the Battala presses were located.

Biswanath Dey set up the first printing press, publishing the first title under imprint 1818 in Bandha Battala, which is now Shovabazar. The region around Battala emerged as the core group of Bengali printing and publication.. **There were several small presses mushrooming all over Shovabazaar, Darjitola, Ahiritola, Kumartuli, Garanhata, Somalia, Baghbazar - areas of north west Calcutta.**



Features of Battala prints

- **Bold and linear quality differentiates it from other prints.**
- **These prints were flat, decorative, two-dimensional pictures, in marked tones of black and white.**
- **The figures of Battala, like the figures in the rural pats were nicely stylized and non-naturalistic, with the emphasis on heavy black, curvy lines, and blunt hatchings to convey a sense of volume and density added with cross hatchings, patterns or ornamental motifs were added.**
- **These prints were cheap and of bad printing quality.**
- **Mixed influences from different art style like Kangra art, Mughal art and European art can be seen in depictions of costumes, depiction of portraits with floral patterns, depiction of pillars, flying angels etc. respectively.**

The colours applied with hands to the basic black colour. Red, yellow and green colours were only used by rural artists.



The prints included illustrated almanacs, periodicals, religious texts, diabolical, supernatural, romantic, humorous, legendary, historical, biographical & criminal, books on history, biographies, plays, mysteries, adventures and even erotica.

The artists were not trained engravers and carvers but included people of all castes. Initially ironsmiths, silversmith, coppersmith and goldsmith etc. were involved in the trade.

- Battala printed books were taken to the villages and smaller towns generally by travelling hawkers.**
- The printed illustrated books followed the same social themes and style as the Kalighat paintings. As a result Battala prints replicated the Kalighat images, repeating the same line of satire, mocking the dandyish Babu, his corrupt lifestyle and his defeat by immoral women.**
- The Battala engravers also handled other assignments such as the cutting of large letters for billboards and posters, designs for advertisements, labels for various commodities, etc. Depiction of portraits of Nelson and Napoleon on biri' packets.**



- **Battala prints were mainly carried out to reach the general masses, purposely to educate them, thus the language used in these books was effortlessly understood by the local citizenry.**
- **Use of Bengali script can be seen in these woodcut prints, referring to the title of the illustration and appearing as a name of an artist/engraver.**
- **Concept of Nayak and Nayika was also considered as followed in Kalighat paintings. The couples sitting together and appearance of European furniture can be seen.**

In comparison with European prints these prints were rough and lack sophistication.

Battala illustrations: Popular themes and their multiplications

Battala books were getting famous day by day among the masses. One of its remarkable achievements is known as Annadamangal, traditionally recognized as the first book in Bengali well printed and well illustrated. It consisted of six illustrations showing, Annapurna, Sundar's journey to Bardhaman, Sundar entering Bardhaman, Sundar and gatekeeper, the meeting with Vidhya and Sundar, and the Sundar catching the thief. All of these



illustrations are metal engravings and wood. Two of metal engravings are engraved with the name of an artist, Ramchand Roy. The success and popularity of the experiment tried out in Annadamangal led to a growth of interest in illustrated books and a rise in the number of similar publications in Calcutta. As the publishers realized the potentials of the illustrated books and their growing popularities so they also published other titles. **The titles like Sangeet tarang, Gouri Bilas, Gangabhaktitarangani, Batrish Simhasana etc. was published. Metal engravers and woodcut artists like Krishnath Mistry, Harihar Bandyopadhyay, Madhab Das, Biswambhar Acharya, Rupchand Acharya, Ramsagar Chakrabarthy, Manohar Karnakar were quite known for their distinguished works during this period.**

Battala books were mainly developed in the interest of the middle class of Calcutta. Every possible change was introduced to the publication so as to satisfy the interest of the masses and make it more favourite among all ages. The publication has already involved most of the artist classes and even the Brahman classes also took interest in working with the artists.

Battala illustrated books further divide into two new directions – the periodicals and the almanacs.



The Periodicals

The periodical were published so as to provide the information, illustrations relating to the topic and were made more decorative to the public. **'Pashvabali' (The Animals), was the first periodical in Bengali which featured woodcuts of birds and beasts with information about them.** It was illustrated by a missionary, Reverend John Lawson, it was printed in Bengali but the publisher, printer and the illustrator were the foreigners. **'Bibidhartha Sangraha' (miscellaneous Digest) was the first Bengali periodical which was edited by Rajendralal Mitra.** It was designed and published for the Bengali people purposely to educate them, for their entertainment, which can be easily read and understand by all age group. The periodical was illustrated in Bengali and the pictorial decoration was the primary reason for its success and influenced later periodicals also.

Almanacs

The first almanac was printed around 1819 (according to Bisvakosh, it was the Sanders Company that published the first Bengali almanac, compiled by Haladhar Vidhyanidhi, the date was not recorded but it is assumed to be printed around 1819). An almanac is an annual publication that includes information such as weather forecasts, farmers' planting dates, tide tables, and tabular information in a particular field or fields often arranged according to the calendar etc. Astronomical data and various statistics are also found in almanacs.



The almanacs for the 1232 of the Bengali calendar which was published in 1825-6, has emphasized on astrology but also provided information on court fees, postal rates etc. Later on many additions were made to the upcoming almanac like geographical and historical account of India based on both history and mythology, List of holidays, information about the fairs held in Bengal, agricultural advices, weights and Measures in various districts, diseases and preventive methods. Earlier preparing hand written almanacs was done by the Brahmans who earned their living by this work.

Natun Panjika (New Almanac), it was the first illustrated almanac (Panjika) to be appeared in prints initiated by Krishnachandra Karmakar which was published by Chandrodaya Press Serampore around 1847. The success of the almanac can be traced from its sales figures i.e. its circulation began with 4,000-5,000. Popularization of almanacs brought a thematic split in woodcuts which were now more devoted towards the entertainment of the frequent buyers. Krishnachandra, tried to satisfy the growing demand of almanacs by introducing more new readership materials to attract the masses and these were illustrated too. Jamai shashthi, Bhai Phonta, Gajan, Hadak, Rathajatra and the other popular celebrations were popularized in the almanacs.



The Battala themes are categorised into two parts:

- **Mythological and Religious themes**
- **Social themes**

Mythological and Religious themes

The religious prints will feature god and goddesses from Ramayana and Mahabharata and stories from Bengali folks. Some of popularly illustrated themes are Shiva and Parvati, Durga, Kali, Lakshmi, Saraswati, Kartik, Hanuman, Narshimha, Ganesha, Radha and Krishna etc.

Although the themes were mainly taken from Kalighat style paintings but there were always other elements in the pictorial representation which reminds of European influence on the paintings. **European influences can be seen in the use of orders (pillars), use of angels, watercolour, thin paper, Venetian glass lamps, appearances of people wearing coats, trousers and hats, in architecture gothic arches, curling curtains etc.** These appeared in religious as well as semi religious themes done in woodcuts.

Despite the fact that so many elements of other art influences were present in the Battala prints, the artists remained grounded on their traditional tastes as the characters they have drawn were never realistically. Artists on the same themes have worked differently which confirms the other



aspect also that the artist was struggling between the contemporary as well as traditional practices.

Social

The social themes included the life of the Europeans who has settled in India, the educated society of Bengal who referred as Babus and seminars and interestingly all the Calcutta scandals of that time. The babus society is derived from the Kalighat pat which are known for mockery of the babus. **The themes were same as the portrayed in Kalighat paintings like famous Elokeshi murder case, satires, popular proverbs, crime, domestic violence, mysteries, adventures and even erotica etc.**

The most important artists who are known for their contribution in the woodcut tradition of Battala are Krishna Chandra Das, Madhabchandra Das, Gopicharan Karmakar, Hiralal Karmakar, Panchanan Karmakar, Gobindachandra Roy, Kartikchandra Karmakar, Benimadhab Bhattacharya and TDD etc. The artists' names were engraved on the bottom of the prints and sometimes their addresses were also mentioned but dates were never recorded.



Medium of expressions

Battala books have already made their space in the hearts of people so it was the easiest way for the writers to reach a broad range of readers to express their emotions. These books were spiced up with different day to day experiences, who wrote and expressed their conditions regarding the constant demand of money from their wives and who felt harassed, their attraction towards the European culture. The social satires, women's writings, and a special group of publications composed in a style that served the Bengali Muslim readership in those days. The woman described as nagging, dominating and alluring in the part of the male writers. **The Battala publication was portraying the socioeconomic scenario of the society through its readership.** Another face of the contemporary Bengali social cultural life was Battala books by Muslim authors, which were written in a hybrid Bengali (known as 'dobhashi', mixing Urdu, Arabic and Persian words). Along with the usual stuff of moral messages, social commentaries and romantic stories which it shared with other Battala publications.

Commercialization

These publications have also played great role in the commercializing the different products as the images printed and used along with the calligraphy were woodcut prints.



These prints possessed sharp edged calligraphy alphabets with decorated patterns.

Like Kalighat paintings Portraits of Nayak and Nayika also appear in these woodcut prints which are heavily filled with floral patterns and volume is obtained with cross hatches. Sometimes individual portraits of Nayak and Nayika appears and in other representations they are shown sitting on chairs around a table.

These woodcut prints brought more significant changes as compared to company period and Kalighat paintings as it signify important changes in the social position and commercial prospects of these artists who were engaged in the production of prints. **The production of these prints moved towards its decline with the coming of cheap chromolithographs in the market which were produced by Calcutta Art Studio and presses run by the Britishers.**

Oleographs: Origin and it's beginning in India

Oleography is a technique used for large scale quality colour printing. It is litho printing (printing with stone) but with more colour palettes, using a large number of stones. The number of stones required depends on as many colours or tones which were present in the oil painting which



was to oleographed. **Modern Oleography which was popular in those times was based on methods invented by George Boxter, a British printing expert in 1835.** Later at the end of the 19th century, with new methods of colour printing started in western countries, although this method became less popular in Europe but started becoming popular in India. **In India it was Raja Ravi Varma who started printing oleographs as he felt to popularize more of Indian themes among the masses.** He was a celebrated artist among both the Europeans as well as an Indian elite class who were fans of the western way of paintings.

He is known for his works like portraits of kings, officers and clients from elite class etc. and depiction of women of different type in his work of art with mythological and religious content. To Disperse images of his painting, printmaking was the best medium to make it possible so that the multiplication should be in large number altogether maintaining the quality of his work.

Ravi Varma started his press in Ghatkopar, Mumbai in 1894 from where the first oleograph 'Birth of Sakunthala' was produced. The press was shifted to Malavli near Lonavla, Maharashtra in 1899 from where thousands of Oleographs were produced. Oleographs were used to reproduce oil paintings of popular myths, legends, gods, and goddesses. They constituted the new



wave of Western-style art that explored Indian themes. **This marked the beginning of Calendar art and the first instance of combination 'high' art with the 'popular' art.** The themes were dramatised and exaggerated with the expressions of the characters which were portrayed. With a new approach to realistic work of art, Ravi Varma conceptualised the divine figures with natural environments. Frontal figures of deities and backgrounds are attempted with the natural environment, use of theatrical light in the compositions shows the influence of theatre on Varma's work. This art got popular and its circulation reached subcontinent as well as beyond that also.

POPULAR THEMES OLEOGRAPHED

Raja Ravi Varma applied himself to the perfection of western academic techniques of oil painting. The presence of British portrait painters, prints of European neo-classical paintings and the art training he had left us with no doubt that his art constituted the best and most improved form of representation during that time. Despite being an excellent painter he is also widely known for his outstanding contribution in collection of Oleograph prints which were initiated by him during the 19th century in India. **He is the most prestigious name in the emerging circle of Anglo Indian Art and transformed into the most popular symbol of popular art.** These oleographs



have the same subjects as his paintings i.e these all were also printed with religious and Indian mythology. His works are considered to be a prestigious contribution in the nationalism as the subjects of his works mainly comprised of Indianness in them even with Western techniques.

The Hindu gods looked like real people. His depiction of Goddesses Saraswathi and Lakshmi received nationwide recognition and all previous representations faded from the memory of the masses. (Plate 4, 104)

The unforgettable impression of Gods and Goddesses that Indians have during a century was all credited to Varma's distinguished work. **His contributed works included Panchdev, Vishnu on Garuda Vahana, Hanuman, Radha, Ram meets Ravana killing Jatayu, Radhi Sidhi with Ganesha, Birth of Ganga and Durga etc Arjuna and Rambha, Menaka and Sakuntala, Draupadi, and Sudekshna, Savitri and Satyavan, Shakuntala's love letter, Damayanti** etc. Almost all characters and scenes from the Epics and Puranas had been drawn by him giving a realistic appeal. Ravi Varma's youngest brother Raja Raja Varma, himself an artist had travelled with him during his journey to Madras and other Northern States. He has painted and printed most of the Panoramic background landscape scenes and widely recognised for this contribution among all.



This popular art of oleograph prints is the major contribution to Calendar Art in India. With the arrival of Raja Ravi Varma and Bamapada Banerjee in the last quarter of the 19th century, the European way of making art began popular. Both were successful in spreading innumerable oleographs countrywide. Simultaneously, it is important to note that Ravi Varma's hard working dedication towards the 'western' style of paintings ran parallel to a traditional education in the classics of Sanskrit, Malayalam and Kathakali literature. **His works combine with his own experimentation with the composition of Malayalam Shloks and more important, with a contemporary blossoming trend of Sanskrit-style 'Mahakavyas' in Malayalam literature.** Together, these provided a productive basis for 'traditional' and the 'modern' Indian art.

ICONIC IMAGES OF WOMEN

Raja Ravi Varma's dedication towards western style of paintings and his interest in Indian classics literature as discussed above, resulted in works which explored the related themes. **Depiction of women images included Urvashi, Rambha, Tilottama,, Radha, Hansa Damayanti, & Kadambari, Menaka and Sakuntala, Draupadi, and Sudheshna, Savitri, Shakuntala, Ganga, MatsyaGandhi, Ahalya, Ambika, Ashoka Vanastha Seetha, Bhasmasura Mohini, Kaikei vilaap, Ganesha with Ridhi Sidhi, Indira, Kali, Kumuda Sundari, Lakshmi, Madri, Mahananda or**



Malabar beauty, Mahasvetha, Mandodari, Malati, Manini, Manorama, Padmini, Priyadarshika, Rathnavali, Saraswati, Sharadha, Shusheela, Tara, Varini, Vasantasena, Vasantika, Yashodha etc. These women images were more realised in their natural or life like images as a result of Ravi Varma's enriched knowledge of epics and literature. **For his compositions he depicted fair, plump women, adorned with silk and gold jewellery, eyes bashfully lowered or directly engaging the viewer, became the central icons, highly fantasised scenery of sky, mountains and a lake filled with swans and lotuses.** In Ravi Varma's work, this mix of choices found its best expression in his new genre of mythological works. **Depiction of clothes and costumes, their jewellery and hairstyle was more of a contribution towards nationalism.** Use of dramatic environment and exaggerated emotions and expressions confirms the influence of theatre on these works. Ravi Varma was influenced by neoclassical paintings of his time and this influence lead him create the imagery of life like heroines in his work who were shown surrounded beautiful landscapes and natural views. Here, academic techniques and European history, painting conventions were employed full scale to the regeneration of an inherited range of Indian classical and religious themes. Raja Ravi Varma brought new levels of refinement and mastery of details on the existing realistic mythological pictures produced by Calcutta Art Studio and English presses. **For superior accomplishment of his work of art he engaged himself with live models and extensively used photographs of models and inspiration from European paintings.** He evolved with a new iconography of romantic, classical nayikas in Indian art. His acclaimed works like Birth of Shakuntala, Lakshmi, Saraswati



and Hansa Damayanti etc. has set new standards for the portrayal of woman iconic images. His work Shakuntala patra lekan was the main attraction of that time as her colours, dresses, jewels, emotions and the environment surrounding her was appropriate to the theme. Shakuntala, as she appears as a voluptuous fleshy and wrapped in romantic dreams or glancing back at her love has swept over all existing images of Female Nayikas.

Primarily the Ramayana, Mahabharata and the literature of Kalidasa, these were taken into consideration. The artist had chosen from the classic and romantic themes keeping in mind the aesthetics along with cultural and traditional values, the images of women and mythic heroines were ideal national prototype. **Also the women figures were depicted as an object of the male desire, draped in sari, semi nude and their sensuous appearances trapped the spectators.** Gradually Ravi Varma shifted from portraits and more emphasised on the woman's image in the work, through which the whole painting was interpreted whether it is representing a myth or sacred or traditional in its concept.

Towards 1970s Ravi Varma's oleographs have served more towards a social iconography of women images as ideal wives and mothers e.g. Like Indira Gandhi depicted as Mother India, the lady giving alms at the temple, here comes father, the Galaxy of musicians, lady with mirror were some of the works which significantly proves his efforts.

The presence of woman image for commercialization was already set out in the previous art practices and also can be



seen in Kalighat paintings, Battala print before oleographs. These oleograph images were modern but at the same time these were traditional in their representation which was widely accepted by the Hindu sect.

Raja Ravi Varma sought protection through amendment of the existing Copyright Act 1847 (in which fine art mediums painting, carving, engraving, lithography were not included) but he failed to protect the legitimacy of his work with the growing trade of lithographs. These iconic images were commercialised as for printing them on match stick packets, for display prints and also for promotion and endorsement of different products in the marketplace. The other presses started printing pirated oleographs of Raja Ravi Varma's works. The depiction was same as of Ravi Varma's oleographs but some with degraded quality and some presses were printed up to their marks, to stay grounded in the trade. Several themes of Varma's oleograph were printed outside India as well.

By the early 20th century, the Varma's press has encountered many financial issues, the growing threat of plague in the nearby area prevented in the smooth running of the press at Malavli-Lonavla and due to some personal problem at home Ravi Varma eventually decided to sell the press in 1901 to Schleizer, German



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technician who was hired for technical support of his press. Later the press was run by Schleizer for several years but the press was destroyed in a fire and closed down. But even after Varma's oleographs several other presses continued to serve the purpose of calendar art in India with dazzling colours, beautiful images of woman to lure the customers.