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## The Popular and the Nation: The Kalighat Patas

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### **Abstract:**

This paper aims to study the idea of Nation as a visual space/place. Locating the politics of representation in the social, intellectual, economic and religious corpus of a place and studying how the re-presentation of the space is creating new dimensions of viewing through which its major social and intellectual trends can be evaluated or questioned. In particular I would like to study how the Kalighat painters of mid and late nineteenth century, used their subversive gaiety in adapting themselves to a developing metropolitan city.

In retrospect, the Kalighat patas give a unique glimpse into the restructuring of standard conceptions and tradition which, when came in contact with European influences, were transformed. If we view the idea of nation as a process of becoming rather than a consolidated existence, then the patuas offered a glimpse into an alternate Nation building. The patuas through their subversive portrayal of the chief figures that functioned on the ideological and social scene offered a critique of the educated Bengali Upper classes and their idea of the space/place they inhabited. When pitted against the growing consciousness about Nation and its derivative Nationalism among the educated Upper classes and the political intelligentsia of Bengal, the critique of the migrant and economically under privileged class of the patuas raised very relevant questions about negotiating India's colonial history when conceiving of her as an independent nation.

**Keywords: Kalighat patuas, nation, nationalism, hyperreal, colonialism.**

Kalighat painting or 'patochitro' also known as 'Bazaar paintings' in the European circle was a unique intervention of the native popular and folk artists of Bengal in the dominant discourse of the colonial visual culture. In the Kalighat paintings dating from 1850 to 1930, the subversive gaiety produced by the complex hybridity of migrant communities, which were adapting themselves to a developing metropolitan city, was celebrated. The age-old hierarchies of power were in transition and the basis of power shifted from hereditary to educational and financial status. The art of the patua grounded in the decaying feudal relations of an agricultural society had to adapt to the mechanized economy of the city in order to survive. The transition brought in its wake a turbulent re-setting of moral, ethical standards and aesthetic norms but also led to a massive proliferation of new visual imagery. But the 'Bazaar paintings' were not being considered in the major debates regarding the status of 'Indian art' and the 'artist' where the attitudes of the colonizer and that of the educated middle class were fraught with contradictions, unable to grasp and define a 'national' aesthetic.

Kalighat paintings through their subversive portrayal of the educated upper classes and the political intelligentsia of Bengal who determined the ideological and social scene, offered a critique of the way the educated Bengali Upper classes were conditioning themselves and moulding the space/place they inhabited. In the exaggerations and observation of details that intensified the parody of social norms and stereotypes, humour was working as a form of protest against complete rupture of the artisan-patron relationship in the new social scenario. But protest was also being made by creating a network of references amidst various folk art practices that had travelled to and survived in the city. This network of reference aimed at creating an alternate nation space as opposed to, the one in the making, in the bourgeoisie quarters. The creation of the popular which is usually 'written out' of orthodox nation building processes therefore can be seen as housing the possibility of a 'nation' space within itself. If 'nation' and its derivative 'nationalism' is not forced to define itself as a consolidated absolute that assures a homogeneous group identity, then perhaps the heterogeneity of popular culture can attempt to define 'nation' on much more fluid terms and look at nation building as a process rather than a static construct.

### **The shift in patronage:**

Ratnabali Chatterjee in her book *From the Karkhana to the Studio* (1990) translates a portion from Kaliprasanna Singha's *Hutum Panchar Naksha* (1861-62) where he describes how the Nawabi age had given away to the British Rule and previously social inferiors from lower castes like "Nabo Munshi, Chhire merchant and Pute oil maker became the Rajas. Krishnachandra, Rajballav ... fell from grace and with them disappeared the Hindu Religion, charity to the poor, the poet's honour, interest in learning, and good plays. Half Akhrai, Full Akhrai, Panchali and Jatras came into being. Money gained a higher social status than aristocratic birth." (Chatterjee 54) The claims to social prestige for the Babus lay in observance of certain traditional practices like granting patronage. The life-style of the babus and the parvenu class in general shaped the popular culture of the period. In the 'daladali' between the Babus and their factions and the coercive practices of the *paiks* and *barkandazes* over the poor, the rural migrants traced a pattern of continuity of the rural power relations. But this sense of identification was severed when the Babus neglected the social practices that legitimized the zamindars use of force (Chatterjee 55).

The economic circuit of production, distribution and consumption of Kalighat patas in the urban bazaar space can be seen as the subaltern voice. The economic success of the Kalighat patas (at least before the cheaply produced lithographs and prints captured the market) validates the fact that the patua and through him the larger section of the migrant poor of the city could register their critique of the cultural trends among the rich and respectable sections of the society which were rapidly changing under the colonial influence.

### **The Kalighat painters and their craft:**

The space of the Bazaar by its nature was a contrast to the pristine sophistication of the White town. The bazaars had certain cosmopolitan features where various groups of artisans settled in hutments around the houses of rich natives, and these new urban lords from the very beginning, set up a control of this space on an inter-personal basis with the artisans who occupied this place (Chatterjee 49). The patuas had always been dwelling on the fringes of society even in the rural space. "Practicing Patuas are considered to be somewhere in between the religions. They depict Hindu gods on their scrolls, sing about Hindu myths, and their patrons are exclusively Hindus. On the other hand, they practice their rites of passage

according to the Islamic rules, “albeit in an unorthodox manner” (Hauser 110). In the city, the patuas settled around the temple of Kali with the aim of availing the prospects of the thriving market of visiting pilgrims.

The kalighat painters had severed connections that the picture had with the musical narrative that accompanied it in traditional patua culture. There used to be long vertical scrolls divided into several sections with selected episodes painted on them linked together by a certain pictorial vocabulary that the viewer could understand, these pats were not meant for sale. The Kalighat pats were plates complete by themselves and were improvised, keeping in mind the market’s demand. Cheap folio sized paper was made available from the missionary printing press in Serampore near Calcutta, from 1800 onwards. The introduction of water colour by the British provided a cheaper and more readily available alternative to the tempera or gauche used by the patuas earlier. Water colour spread on paper more easily and gave fluidity to the lines, which made production of paintings cheaper and faster (Banerjee, 1989: 131). The forms were simplified to bold outlines often executed in a single stroke and filled in with bright colours but the line work had a continual rhythm, rapid sweeps automatically swelling and thinning as they progress to give shape to the curving exuberance of the playful Kalighat style. The patuas were originally potters engaged in modelling clay images, it is due to this influence that they strived to give a volume to the figures and they appeared detached from the background.

The change in production relations also led to changes in the subject matter of the pats. Previously it was limited to myths and divinities but in the city it acquired a secular character. The influences contributing to this style ranged from Ajanta and Bagh cave paintings, Indian miniature paintings, terracotta art and Bengal Bronze sculptures to the western proscenium theatre, photo – studios, British school books and oleographs. This city-bred folk art retained its communal base redefining western influences in the traditional Indian context to develop a form and content that subverted the very metropolitan culture that influenced its growth, the subversion and humour being specifically targeted at the ‘privileged’ class that had ostracized the lower orders. Laughter of the socially inferior or the colonized, directed towards the colonizing superior structure, destabilizes the power equation and challenges the very idea of superiority that justifies the hierarchy, by exposing it as ridiculous and therefore not absolute. Popular culture, not limited by patronage or conventions of high art was able to voice the curiosity and alienation felt by the larger Indian society outside the privilege of European ‘enlightenment’, towards the acculturation of the higher ranks of society, who combined native ways of life with European art of living to produce a confused social self. This ironic vision became a means of critiquing the decadence in society. The Kalighat pats had created a repertory of images in response to the colonial cultural space. The characters usually portrayed had evolved into stock representations of certain cultural aspects, the Babu being such an example. The images circulating in the market therefore produced meaning by building a mutual reference circuit - referring to each other, thereby constituting what can be called the ‘hyperreal’ order of the colonial space. This can be further studied in reference to the Elokeshi-Mohanto scandal where the real life scandal had produced images of itself in theatre and kalighat pats, the significance of which could be devised by referring to the stylistic features of this school of painting. The sequence of paintings had successfully distilled reality into the hyperreal of images that referred to each other to constitute a sense of social meaning.

### The Kalighat patas:

Depiction of mythological figures had also undergone a change. The songs of Ramprasad , *padavali-keertans* and *mangal- kavyas* had effected a “domestication of the divinities” (Banerjee 82) which was taken further in the ‘*tarja*’ or poetic duels of *kobi-walas*. Pats showing lord Shiva carrying little Ganesha in his arms and trying to distract him with his *damru* when Parvati dressed as a ordinary Bengali house wife looks on indulgently, or pats of Krishna and Yashoda, showing the mother of the lord engaged in household chores or milking a cow, while looking after her child was a reference back to the daily life of the people. Images of Saraswati, the Goddess of learning seated on the lotus with her traditional veena replaced by a violin or of Kartik painted after the Calcutta dandy or babu, sporting an Albert fashion hair style, wearing English heeled and buckled shoes, a small moustache and a shawl draped over one shoulder assert that even gods were not above western influence.

In contrast to the domesticated deities it is the babu who is portrayed as inaccessible.



figure.1 “portrait of a dandy: a contrast”

He has intellectually and culturally distanced himself from the uncouth native. He sports an expensive shawl thrown over his shoulder; buckled shoes, flaunts a chic dhoti and its fanning pleats, and holds a hookah in his hand while sitting cross-legged on an elaborately carved European chair with one hand resting on the arm of the chair, imitating popular photo-studio portraits of the time, see figure.1. “Portrait of a dandy: a contrast” (Archer 63) Perhaps one can trace within this a tendency to mythologize the then contemporary social reality. The stylistic features used to portray Gods and Goddesses were being applied to the upper class mortals and one can also suspect that some of the patas depicting religious figures like Shiva for example were actually paintings of ‘Swang’ performers dressed as the god. The complex cultural aspect of the cosmopolitan space that Calcutta was finds expression in the approach of the patuas to their developing city life.

Sumanta Banerjee in his *The Parlour and the Streets* lists the outward manifestations of the *babu* or *bhadralok* i) residence in a ‘pucca’ house, either through ownership or renting; ii) attention to ones sartorial style in public; iii) use of chaste Bengali that was being shaped from the middle of the nineteenth century; and iv) a noticeable knowledge of English language and manners (page 54). The extravagance of the *Babus* in throwing parties or organizing expensive pastimes was critiqued by illustrating proverbs and doggerels that used to make rounds in the city streets. The disruption of the traditional class hierarchy that had guaranteed the employment of artisans by patrons had created a crisis in art and this disruption was shown in the figure of the ‘fallen *babu*’ at the mercy of women (Chatterjee

68). Here the disruption occurs in the gender hierarchy where the female form does not suggest erotic gratification but a sexual dominance contrasted to the weakness of man see figure.2. “The submissive babu”.

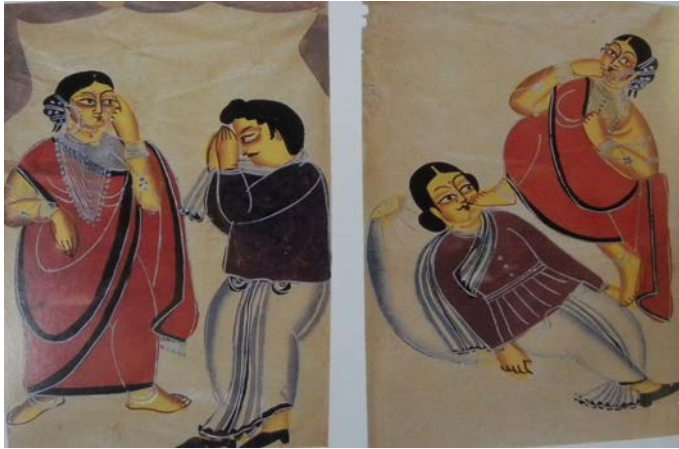


Fig.2. “the submissive babu”

Religion and social reform were tightly wound and the opposing factions of *Dharma Sabha* led by Radhakanta Deb and the progressives led by Raja Rammohan Roy debated over issues like ‘abolition of sati’, the polygamy of *kulin* bramhins, widow remarriage and raising the age of consent for women. The popular artists knew that the social reforms will better the life of the privileged sections of the society only, yet the changes will affect the power structures of gender within the institutions of family and patronage implicating their position in society. Therefore not only in Kalighat patas but in Dashu Ray’s songs and doggerels as well in the performance of *jhumurwalis* a sarcastic attitude towards women’s education was registered. (Banerjee 113)

The changes threatened to hit the institutions central to the social fabric, marriage and bramhminical patriarchy. The image of women in kalighat patas ranges from Goddesses to housewives and prostitutes: the *bibi* is a parallel of the *babu*. The courtesan figures borrow from the traditional depiction of *nayikas* in feudal high art tradition, whereas on the other extreme the voluptuous forms of wives and prostitutes are shown to dominate the man sexually and physically. The paintings were also borrowing from the visual register of jattras and proscenium theatres. Most of the paintings on the Elokeshi scandal<sup>1</sup> are conceived under a proscenium arch reminding the viewer of scenes witnessed on stage, which was very probable as over twenty-one farces had been written on the topic.

This topicality of the Kalighat paintings taking up incidents like popular law suits, scenes from a wrestling match between a tiger and Shyamakanta a famous wrestler of those days (Refer to Fig.3), or Rani of Jhansi, the heroine of the Sepoy Mutiny<sup>2</sup> made the genre a medium that invited an immediate visual participation of common people in the socio-economic trends of the time. At the same time sending off references of other popular media and thereby constructing a tissue of references which posited a ‘nation’ space which is created spontaneously in contrast to the laboured complexities of the middle class intelligentsia.

### The paradox of ‘national art’:

The British Governmental policy towards Indian Art was characterized by contradictory attitudes. One was the denial of the existence of Indian art altogether, the standard Macaulay opinion of the racial superiority of the whites and the other less acknowledged one was growing concern of the British mercantile houses at the decrease in the production of Indian luxury crafts<sup>3</sup> as a result of the strategic destruction of indigenous trade practiced by the British. The curriculum in art schools till 1890’s was influenced by James Mill’s opinion that Indian artists lacked scientific knowledge of the ‘language of art’. Mill differentiated between ‘art’ which required the ‘exercise of intellect’ and ‘craft’ that required only skill and said that what the Indians did best was copy (Chatterjee 75 and 76)

Figure 3. “Man wrestling with a tiger”

The mechanization of art, which brought about break in the popular perception schema and the demise of Kalighat style, was the oleographs of Raja Ravi Varma on mythological subjects and German oleographs on the same subject made from paintings of Bamapada Banerjee one of the founder’s of Calcutta Art Studio. These artists transferred the western illusionist style to mythological figures and themes painting them as ordinary Bengali men and women with heads of animals and many hands. The Kalighat style that captured the intense emotional response to religious icons and festivals through their sweeping style and preserved the idealistic portrayal of myths through metaphoric depiction was replaced by the hideous incongruity of the illusionist technique. Also the element of social satire and secular range was rejected and religion and myths became the centre of attention in the printing presses peopled by students of the Art schools trained in wood-engraving, printing and lithography.



Opposition to such view of Indian Art was registered by the rise of a new aesthetic movement in England which demanded the reformation of industrial design. John Ruskin’s admiration of Indian Art was shared by many, chief being William Morris who recognized the “traditional values of life” in Indian art that acted as “guiding principles in their craft” which were long since lost in the European industrialized society (Chatterjee 77). Ironically even when the art schools aimed at rejuvenating Indian crafts for European consumption they ended up destroying the very basis of the crafts by forcing alien art norms on Indian artisans. They were unable to understand the nature of traditional training that was handed down for generations, and how the family acted as the unit of production, and *karkhanas* or ateliers of courts were places where the art was perfected.

The Burns and Havell debate took these issues up on an official platform and Havell placed the blame of the decline of Indian 'skill' and 'taste' squarely on the shoulders of the British. He appointed Abanindranth as Vice –principal of the government art college. Havell also showed little sympathy for the economic and social goals of the Swadeshi movement that did not pay attention to indigenous art and a genuine appraisal of the ideal of Indian Art as mystic and transcendental (Chatterjee 87). A.K. Coomaraswamy defined Indian art from the stand point of ancient canons like the *Sukranitisara* showing art as conceived of as a system of communication- *rasa* and during the same time another Asian expressed in his own words his own traditional art : Okakura's view of 'Asia is one' gave a new voice to the people of the Orient. The swadeshi movement necessitated the development of a unique style of indigenous art that would "cut across class barriers and develop a popular perception scheme" (Chatterjee 101) and Abanindranath and his followers posited a *gharana* which was hailed as 'India's national art by British media (Chatterjee 95). But traditionalists like Akshay Maitreya found the new style lacking in its adherence to ancient canons<sup>4</sup> and therefore denied the Bengal school the status of true Indian art. This contradictory drives between resurrecting the glorious past and revising ancient norms to keep pace with progressive internationalism fraught all attempts to develop a distinct Indian style and aesthetic.

Though Abanindranath Tagore's painting 'The Passing of Shahjahan' (1900-02) and 'Bharat Mata' (1905) were hailed as expressing the nationalist fervour that had gripped the state in the wake of Anti-Partition and Swadeshi movement, Abanindranath himself however was not inclined to entrap the artist's personal freedom by forcibly confining him within the demands of 'national art'. Ratnabali chatterjee translates from Abanindranath's book *Bageswari shilpa prabandhabali*:

"Progress in a nation's ideals and art do not develop simultaneously, through the development of social norms. There should be no one-to-one ratio on this assessment. In fact national aspirations planted on art, is undesirable, for then all art is forced to be limited to the art of the past." (Page 104)

Figure 4. "Caricature by Gaganendranath Tagore"

To refer to a form that has been able to combine ingenuity and tradition in the interpretation of native socio-cultural norms especially in context of this paper, which has been looking at the kalighat paintings and their role in creating a visual register that shows possibilities of nation formation, it is necessary to discuss the caricatures/cartoons of Gaganendranath Tagore. Cartoons had made their entry on to the Indian visual scene with *Cartoons in the Indian Punch* (1859), *Harbola Bharh* (1874), *Basantak* (1874) and *Pancha Nanda* (1872) which followed the principle of European cartoons where visual satires or caricatures proceeded from the distortion of the human form. In the kalighat paintings however native folk perception schema used exaggeration of the ridiculous in the subject matter or the composition of the figure to create humour. The influence of the strong and rhythmical line work of Kalighat is apparent in the works of Gaganendranath Tagore where he combines exaggeration of form with distortion of subject matter to exhibit the absurdity inherent in the Babu culture, see figure.4. "caricature by Gaganendranath Tagore" and in these works we can glimpse the much desired spontaneous outburst of an energetic innovative style that draws from the culture of the people of the land (cutting across social and class barriers ) while also re(de)fining it.





## Endnotes:

- 1) The Elokeshi scandal was about the seduction by the Mohanto of Tarakeshwar, of a woman called Elokeshi. Elokeshi's husband Nabin lived in the city, and on his return to the village home he became aware of the truth. The couple tried to run away but was thwarted by the Mohanto's men; in anger Nabin killed his wife and surrendered to the police. This resulted in implicating the Mohanto who was finally imprisoned.
- 2) The Kalighat patuas painted pictures on many discrepancies of the time, the sly Vaishnavite was a popular theme, and so were other pictures illustrating popular proverbs. The Rani of Jhansi was also a popular theme but nothing more has been retrieved on the Sepoy mutiny and this conspicuous oblivion on the part of the patuas about larger political movements like the Mutiny or Swadeshi is a matter of curiosity.
- 3) Correspondence on the subject of the extension of art education in different parts of India by Alexander Hunter, M.D., F.R.C.S.E. (superintendent of Madras school of Industrial art, Madras, 1867). Letters from A. Hunter to E.B. Powell, director of Public Instruction, Madras, April 1867; Secretariat Library, West Bengal Government. (Chatterjee 112)
- 4) "In Akshay Maitreya's writings between 1903 to 1922, the traditional baishes came to be grouped under historical categories. His premise was based on exposition of ancient Indian canons, especially *Yashodhara's tika* of *Batsayana* and the *Sukranitisara*. In picturesque Bengali he pointed out Abanindranath and his followers had lost its alphabet (*barna parichay*) and, therefore, an art language could not evolve." (Chatterjee 95)

## List of Illustrations:

Figure 1. Picture on the left cited in Archer plate 43 he states the source as “Oval portrait of a Calcutta Dandy. Kalighat, c.1880. I.S. 257-1953.Cat.no.20, iv: p.63” and the picture on the right an oval portrait of an Englishman. <<http://www.milesbarton.com>.>Accessed: 3 Mar 2013.

Figure 2. Kalighat patas, on the left is a painting cited in W.G. Archer, as plate 59, “Sudev conversing with Malati Kalighat, c.1890. I.S.85-1959. Cat. No.28,iv : p.78. The painting on the right is also cited in Archer as plate 77, “Courtesan Trampling on a Lover. By Kalicharan Ghosh, Kalighat, c.1990.I.S.39-1952. Cat.no.36, v: p.93.”

Figure 3. Plate taken from the book *Kalighat Paintings*.

Figure 4. Tagore, Gaganendranath. *Confusion of Ideas; The Realm of the Absurd*.Calcutta.1917. Accessed 6 Mar. 2013. <<http://collections.vam.ac.uk>>

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