



Gendered Strokes: Tracing the Visual Discourse of Gender in 19th-Century Kalighat Paintings

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Representation and negotiation of gender roles in 19th-century Kalighat paintings offer vital insights into the evolving social fabric of colonial Calcutta. These urban folk artworks, rooted in both religious and secular themes, reflect how identities—particularly those tied to femininity and masculinity—were being contested and reshaped in a time of rapid socio-cultural change. **Methodology:** The study is based on close visual analysis of select Kalighat paintings sourced from museum collections and private archives. Attention is given to iconographic details such as posture, attire, expressions, and compositional strategies. These elements are examined to decode the underlying gendered messages embedded in both divine iconography and everyday domestic portrayals. **Results:** Portrayals of powerful goddesses like Kali, alongside depictions of domestic women and satirical representations of the babu-bibi dynamic, reveal how artists subtly challenged prevailing norms. The images register tensions around gender expectations, marital relationships, and shifting notions of power within both traditional and colonial frameworks. **Conclusion:** Though often created within commercial circuits, Kalighat paintings engaged critically with contemporary issues. The study concludes that these artworks functioned not only as visual storytelling but also as cultural commentary—subtly navigating and resisting dominant gender ideologies of the time.

Keywords: *Kalighat Painting; Gender Roles; Babu-Bibi Satire; colonial Bengal; visual culture; femininity; Masculinity; Goddess Representation*

INTRODUCTION

The Kalighat painting tradition, which flourished in 19th-century colonial Calcutta, stands as a compelling confluence of popular visual culture, urban modernity, and indigenous artistic expression. Originating near the Kalighat temple, these paintings were initially intended as religious souvenirs for pilgrims. However, over time, the art form evolved into a dynamic medium that reflected the socio-cultural milieu of a rapidly transforming colonial city. Amidst this evolving landscape, Kalighat painters—many of whom came from rural patua communities—began to portray not just deities and epics, but also scenes from everyday life, satirical critiques of the nouveau riche Bengali 'babu' class, and complex representations of gender dynamics.

This paper situates Kalighat painting within the broader discourse of gender in colonial Bengal, examining how the visual language of this folk tradition articulated, reinforced, or contested prevailing gender norms. The frequent portrayal of women—both divine and mortal—alongside subversive depictions of domestic power relations, suggests a nuanced engagement with the shifting roles of men and women in the public and private spheres ([Archer, 1971](#)). Moreover, through humor, irony, and exaggeration, Kalighat artists created a mirror to society that not only documented but interrogated its gendered contradictions. By tracing gendered themes within this artistic tradition, the study aims to uncover how visual culture participated in the formation of gender identities and contributed to the complex cultural fabric of colonial Calcutta. The Kalighat pata thus becomes more than an object of aesthetic appreciation—it emerges as a site of cultural commentary and gendered storytelling. Scholars from around the world have deliberated on the histories of people and places for decades, exploring diverse fields of thought to highlight the evolving prominence of cultural identities and artistic traditions. Within this discourse, the Kalighat Patuas hold a significant place, embodying the rich confluence of rural craftsmanship and urban transformations. Emerging from the folk art traditions of Bengal,ⁱ these artists not only preserved the vibrant heritage of scroll painting but also adapted their practices to the dynamic socio-economic contexts of colonial Calcutta.ⁱⁱ Their work reflects the intersection of mythology, social commentary, and visual innovation, offering a unique lens to study the complexities of identity, tradition, and modernization ([Bagchi, 1993](#)).

Objectives of the study

In this context, the study of Kalighat paintings offers a vital lens through which to examine the intersections of art, identity, and urban transformation. The journey of the Patuas from the rural heartlands to the bustling lanes of colonial Calcutta is not merely a tale of migration but a narrative of adaptation, resilience, and innovation. Their art became a space where tradition met modernity, where the vernacular interacted with the colonial, and where visual storytelling evolved to reflect a society in flux. Engaging with Kalighat paintings, therefore, allows for a nuanced understanding of how regional artistic practices responded to and were reshaped by the shifting contours of 19th-century Bengal. Building on this contested understanding of regions and regional identities, the case of the Kalighat Patuas exemplifies how artistic traditions can both preserve and transcend regional boundaries. While their origins were firmly rooted in the rural landscapes of Bengal, where art was deeply intertwined with community and ritual, their migration to the urban center of Calcutta marked a pivotal shift.ⁱⁱⁱ Here, the Patuas recontextualized their art to appeal to an emerging cosmopolitan audience, blending traditional techniques with new thematic and stylistic elements ([Banerjee, 1987](#)). This transformation reflects the dynamic interplay between continuity and change, as the Patuas navigated the tensions between preserving their cultural heritage and responding to the demands of a rapidly modernizing colonial society.^{iv} Thus, the Kalighat Patuas emerge as a symbol of the fluid and contested nature of regional identities, constantly reshaped by historical, economic, and cultural forces. The 19th century witnessed Bengal undergoing profound transformations, as colonial modernity reshaped its social, cultural, and economic fabric. Amid this evolving milieu, Kalighat paintings emerged as a significant artistic expression that mirrored the complexities of its time. [Basu, \(2010\)](#) Rooted in the folk traditions of rural Bengal, this art form underwent a remarkable metamorphosis when the Patua community—traditional scroll painters and storytellers—migrated to the burgeoning colonial metropolis of Calcutta. This migration was not merely geographic; it symbolized a broader shift from rural artisanal practices to an urban economy driven by market demands, colonial consumerism, and cultural hybridity.^v Calcutta, established as the British Empire's capital in India, was rapidly transforming into a center of commerce, administration, and cultural exchange.^{vi} This urban expansion attracted diverse groups seeking opportunities, including the Patuas. Traditionally itinerant artisans, they brought with them a rich heritage of patachitra (scroll paintings), which evolved in response to the demands of their new environment. [Chatterjee \(2000\)](#) The cityscape of Calcutta,

with its teeming bazaars, temples, and cosmopolitan populace, became a fertile ground for artistic reinvention. [Bhowmick \(1995\)](#) The bustling vicinity of the Kalighat temple, a major pilgrimage site, provided the Patuas with both a steady stream of patrons and a platform to transition from rural storytelling to urban commercial art. The evolution of Kalighat paintings is intricately tied to the socio-political and economic forces of colonial Bengal. [Chopra \(1990\)](#) As the Patuas settled in Calcutta, they adapted their art to cater to an increasingly heterogeneous audience comprising pilgrims, traders, and colonial officials. [Das \(2010\)](#) They replaced their traditional medium—long narrative scrolls—with single-sheet paintings that were easier to produce and sell. [Ghosh, \(2003\)](#) These paintings, characterized by bold outlines, vivid colors, and satirical depictions of contemporary life, were both affordable and accessible, making them a popular commodity. [Guha Thakurta, \(1991\)](#) Yet, beneath their surface simplicity, Kalighat paintings carried layers of commentary on the social hierarchies, moral dilemmas, and cultural negotiations of the period. [Ghosh, \(1986\)](#) The migration of the Patuas to Calcutta was emblematic of a broader cultural collision between rural and urban, traditional and modern, popular and elite. [Mukherjee, \(2023\)](#) The art form not only reflected these tensions but also served as a conduit through which the Patuas navigated their identity in a rapidly changing world. [Mitter, \(2007\)](#) This paper critically examines the evolution of Kalighat paintings, tracing their journey from rural origins to urban marketplaces and, eventually, to prestigious art galleries in the West.viiBy situating these paintings within the socio – political and cultural contexts of 19th-century Bengal, the study illuminates how this unique art form encapsulates the era's broader dynamics of migration, transformation, and modernity. [Said, \(1978\)](#) The migration of the Patuas to Calcutta was not merely a physical relocation but a significant cultural transition. The Patuas, originally hailing from rural Bengal, were traditional artists who practiced patachitra, an art form deeply intertwined with oral storytelling and religious themes. In their villages, these itinerant painters traveled from door to door, narrating mythological stories through painted scrolls.viii However, the socio-economic pressures of colonial Bengal, coupled with the lure of Calcutta as a growing commercial hub, compelled many Patuas to leave their ancestral homes in search of livelihood. This movement from agrarian settlements to the urban sprawl of Calcutta marked the beginning of a profound transformation in their art and identity.ix Calcutta, as a colonial city, was a melting pot of cultures, ideologies, and economic systems. It offered the Patuas a new canvas—both literally and metaphorically—to reimagine their artistic traditions.x The bustling Kalighat temple precinct, where pilgrims from across the region gathered, became the epicenter of this transformation. Here, the Patuas transitioned from their labor-intensive scroll paintings to smaller, single-sheet artworks. This shift was pragmatic, driven by the need to produce quickly consumable and affordable art for a transient urban audience. These single-sheet paintings, now known as Kalighat paintings, were sold as souvenirs, catering to the spiritual aspirations and aesthetic sensibilities of both local devotees and visiting Europeans. The content of Kalighat paintings also underwent a significant evolution in response to their new urban context. While religious themes continued to dominate, reflecting the temple's devotional atmosphere, the Patuas increasingly incorporated secular and satirical motifs. [Sarkar, \(1987\)](#) These paintings critiqued contemporary social issues such as the hypocrisy of the nouveau riche, the moral corruption of colonial officials, and the changing roles of women in society. The Patuas, through their art, thus became chroniclers of the rapidly changing social landscape of colonial Bengal.xi Moreover, the Patuas themselves were not immune to the broader forces of colonial modernity. Many among them began adopting elements of Western art, such as shading and perspective, which they combined with their indigenous techniques.xii This hybrid style reflected not only the cultural intersections of colonial Bengal but also the adaptive resilience of the Patuas in preserving their artistic identity amidst change. [Mukherjee, \(2024\)](#) The migration of Kalighat paintings from the local bazaars of Calcutta to prestigious Western galleries further highlights the complex trajectory of this art form. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, European art collectors and scholars began to recognize the aesthetic and historical value of Kalighat paintings, leading to their export and exhibition abroad. This global recognition, however,

often came at the cost of decontextualizing the art from its original socio-cultural milieu, reducing it to mere exotica for Western consumption. [Chatterjee \(2000\)](#) This narrative of migration, adaptation, and globalization underscores the broader dynamics of colonial modernity in Bengal. The story of the Patuas and Kalighat paintings is a testament to the resilience of folk traditions in navigating the challenges of urbanization and cultural hybridity. It also reflects the enduring capacity of art to bridge the local and the global, the traditional and the modern, and the spiritual and the commercial. By examining this journey, the study offers deeper insights into the interplay of migration, cultural exchange, and artistic innovation in 19th-century Bengal.

Art as Everyday Expression: The Democratization of Creativity

The evolution of Kalighat paintings in 19th-century Bengal compels us to rethink the traditional definitions of “art.” Rooted in the folk traditions of rural Bengal, Kalighat paintings underwent significant transformations as they entered the urban milieu of colonial Calcutta. These works challenge the elitist frameworks often associated with art by highlighting the intersections of aesthetics, commerce, and social commentary. This section explores how Kalighat paintings transcend conventional categorizations, examining their dual function as both aesthetic expressions and urban commodities. Kalighat paintings emerged as an art form deeply embedded in the lives of common people. Unlike the classical art traditions patronized by royalty or the affluent elite, Kalighat paintings were produced by marginalized artisans—the Patuas—who tailored their creations to resonate with a diverse audience. The simplicity of their visual language, combined with vivid colors and bold outlines, made the art accessible to all, regardless of social or economic standing. By shifting the focus from grandiose themes to everyday life and morality, Kalighat painters democratized creativity. Scenes from Hindu mythology coexisted with depictions of domestic life, social vices, and humorous satires of contemporary events. For instance, paintings of popular deities like Kali and Durga were sold alongside satirical pieces that lampooned corrupt colonial officials or the nouveau riche. This blend of the sacred and the profane not only broke down barriers between elite and popular art and also redefined art as a reflection of lived experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A wide range of scholarly works has explored the emergence and evolution of Kalighat paintings in 19th-century Bengal, with a focus on their visual style, thematic diversity, and socio-political undertones. Scholars like Jyotindra Jain, in *Kalighat Painting: Images from a Changing World* (1999), have highlighted the hybrid nature of these works, emphasizing their departure from rural scroll traditions to urban visual culture. [Das \(2010\)](#) in his *A study of scroll painting in Indian art with special reference to West Bengal folk art* (2023), have focused on the stylistic, material and thematic features of scroll painting in India, with particular emphasis on the regional folk traditions of West Bengal. Tapati Guha-Thakurta’s seminal writings explore how Kalighat paintings interacted with colonial modernity, reflecting transformations in public taste, morality, and visual representation. Mildred Archer’s *Company Paintings* and her archival insights into European collectors’ interest in Indian visual art forms have also been significant in tracing the commodification and internationalization of Kalighat art. Sumanta Banerjee’s sociological approach, especially in *The Parlour and the Streets*, contextualises Kalighat painting as part of a broader narrative of urban spectacle, colonial encounter, and emerging Bengali middle-class morality. In my paper, (D.Mukherjee, *Kalighat painting and the changing notions of nationalism: A case study of the folk painters of 19th century Calcutta*. *Journal for ReAttach Therapy and Developmental Diversities*, 6(9s2), 1460–1465. <https://www.reattachtherapy.org/> , 2023) have examined Kalighat paintings as a medium of political expression, analyzed how folk painters reflected and reshaped ideas of nationalism in nineteenth-century Calcutta. Further, the work of scholars like Stuart Blackburn and Christopher Pinney has framed Kalighat art within the larger context of vernacular creativity and popular print culture in South Asia. H. [Bannerji, \(1989\)](#)

in his *The Canadian Journal of Sociology / Cahiers canadiens de sociologie*, Vol. 19, No.2., (1989) have analyzed class, gender and ideology within social and cultural formations, offering a critical framework for understanding representation and power relations. [Chatterjee \(2000\)](#) have studied how gender identities and roles are constructed and represented in Bengali folk paintings, especially in relation to patriarchy and social norms. The catalogues of the Victoria and Albert Museum and exhibitions curated by the Indian Museum, Kolkata, have offered invaluable visual documentation. These writings collectively offer a multidisciplinary framework—ranging from art history and anthropology to visual culture studies—for examining Kalighat paintings. Despite the rich scholarship available, certain gaps remain that this study seeks to address. Much of the existing literature tends to either aestheticize Kalighat paintings as folk art or treat them primarily as archival objects within museum collections, often stripping them of their contextual vitality. There remains a lack of detailed engagement with the oral histories and lived experiences of the contemporary Patua community. This thesis aims to fill that gap by incorporating primary interviews with renowned present-day Kalighat artists such as Kalam Patua and Bhaskar Chitrakar, bringing in voices that are often absent in institutionalized discourse. Moreover, while many studies have examined the colonial and commercial aspects of Kalighat art, fewer have interrogated the role of Kalighat paintings in shaping subaltern narratives, gender discourse, and critiques of the colonial bourgeois morality through satire. This research also contributes original insights drawn from firsthand archival studies at the Indian Museum Kolkata, Jadunath Bhavan, and the State Archive at Behala, thereby offering a more grounded and holistic understanding of the historical trajectory and socio-cultural politics of Kalighat paintings. By navigating these unexplored dimensions, the study repositions Kalighat art not merely as an aesthetic form but as a complex, layered, and evolving socio-cultural practice.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology grounded in historical inquiry, visual culture analysis, and ethnographic engagement. The study navigates the evolution of Kalighat paintings not only as artistic artefacts but also as cultural texts deeply embedded in the social, economic, and political fabric of 19th-century Bengal. The primary methodological approach is historical-analytical, supported by archival research and critical visual analysis. Archival materials were examined from the Indian Museum, Kolkata; Jadunath Bhavan Museum and Resource Centre; and the State Archive in Behala. These archives provided access to original Kalighat paintings, curatorial notes, exhibition records, and colonial-era documents that contextualised the production and circulation of these artworks. Additionally, old catalogues, journals, and missionary records were consulted to trace the reception and commodification of Kalighat paintings in colonial and European spaces. To complement the archival dimension, oral history methods were employed. In-depth interviews were conducted with contemporary Kalighat artists like Kalam Patua and Bhaskar Chitrakar, whose narratives offer valuable insights into the transmission of the Patua tradition, its reinterpretation in modern times, and the challenges faced by this artist community in the post-colonial era. These conversations helped bridge the historical with the contemporary, allowing a dialogic understanding of how the tradition has endured, evolved, and resisted. The research also utilises visual analysis as a key tool. Selected Kalighat paintings were studied for their iconography, stylistic features, composition, use of colour, and embedded narratives. Emphasis was placed on thematic shifts—from mythological to secular and satirical—and how these reflected changing socio-political dynamics under colonial rule. A comparative lens was employed to examine how visual elements both conformed to and deviated from dominant artistic conventions of the time, including influences from Company School painting and Western realism. Finally, this study adopts a cultural materialist perspective, which allows for an exploration of the relationship between art, economy, and ideology. It investigates how Kalighat paintings functioned simultaneously as artistic expressions and mass-produced commodities within the bustling marketplaces of colonial Calcutta.

The material conditions of production, such as the use of inexpensive media like mill paper and vegetable dyes, are examined alongside the socio-political content embedded in the artworks.

Art as Commodity: The Economics of Urban Marketplaces

Kalighat paintings epitomized the commodification of art in colonial Bengal's burgeoning urban economy. The migration of the Patuas to Calcutta marked a significant departure from their traditional practice of barter-based artistry in rural villages. The bustling marketplaces around the Kalighat temple offered them a steady flow of customers, including pilgrims, traders, and colonial officials. To cater to this new urban audience, the Patuas abandoned their labor-intensive scroll painting tradition in favor of smaller, single-sheet artworks that could be mass-produced and sold at affordable prices. These paintings, often created in workshops with assembly-line techniques, were shaped by the dynamics of supply and demand. The use of inexpensive materials, such as mill-made paper and vegetable dyes, further underscored their status as commodities rather than exclusive luxury items. This shift raises critical questions about the nature of art. Can art that is mass-produced and commercially motivated still hold cultural and aesthetic significance? The Kalighat painters challenge this dichotomy by demonstrating that commodification need not undermine artistic integrity. Instead, it can create new avenues for cultural expression and engagement. The economic imperatives of the urban marketplace were intricately tied to the demands of a growing colonial audience. European visitors and collectors, fascinated by the exoticism of Indian culture, played a crucial role in shaping the themes and styles of Kalighat paintings. The Patuas incorporated elements of Western art, such as shading, perspective, and realism, into their work, creating a unique hybrid aesthetic. This cultural hybridity is evident in the subject matter of Kalighat paintings. Alongside traditional depictions of Hindu gods and goddesses, the artists began portraying secular themes that reflected the colonial encounter. Paintings featuring Victorian fashion, European lifestyles, and colonial institutions highlight how the Patuas adapted their art to cater to the tastes of their colonial patrons. Guha Thakurta, (2011) However, these works also served as subtle critiques, using satire and irony to comment on the moral contradictions of colonial modernity. Kalighat paintings transcended their function as decorative objects by serving as tools of social commentary. The satirical nature of many works reflected the Patuas' keen observations of the rapidly changing social landscape of colonial Calcutta. Paintings critiquing the hypocrisy of the upper class, the corruption of colonial officials, and the shifting roles of women reveal the artists' engagement with contemporary issues. For instance, images of babu culture, which depicted wealthy Bengali men indulging in hedonistic lifestyles, juxtaposed with scenes of traditional piety, highlight the tension between tradition and modernity. These works not only entertained their audience but also provoked critical reflection on the societal transformations of the time. The commodification of Kalighat paintings did not diminish their cultural significance; instead, it facilitated their journey from local bazaars to prestigious art galleries in the West. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, European collectors began to recognize the artistic value of Kalighat paintings, leading to their inclusion in museum collections and exhibitions. This global recognition, however, often came at the cost of decontextualizing the art from its original socio-cultural milieu. Stripped of their local significance, Kalighat paintings were often reduced to objects of exotic fascination. Nonetheless, their international acclaim underscores the fluidity of art and its ability to transcend geographical and cultural boundaries. The journey of Kalighat paintings from rural folk tradition to urban commodity and global artifact challenges conventional definitions of art. By interrogating the frameworks within which these works are positioned, we uncover their multifaceted role as aesthetic expressions, commercial products, and social commentaries. The story of Kalighat paintings reminds us that art is not

confined to the walls of elite galleries but thrives in the dynamic interplay of tradition, innovation, and commerce. It is through this lens that we can truly appreciate the enduring (Ghosh, 1986) legacy of Kalighat paintings in the cultural history of Bengal. The evolution of Kalighat paintings encapsulates the cultural, economic, and political transformations of 19th-century Bengal. Born out of the rural traditions of the Patua community, these paintings underwent significant changes as they migrated to the urban landscape of colonial Calcutta. The interplay between their rural origins and urban reception highlights the dynamic exchange of cultural values and artistic practices. However, the story does not end in Calcutta; the eventual appropriation of Kalighat paintings by Western galleries complicates their narrative, raising important questions about representation, commodification, and global art histories. This section explores these themes, providing a comprehensive understanding of the legacy of Kalighat art.

Rural Roots: The Traditional Identity of the Patuas

The origins of Kalighat paintings lie in the folk art traditions practiced by the Patua community in rural Bengal. These artisans, known for their scroll paintings or patachitra, combined visual art with oral storytelling to depict mythological tales, social customs, and moral lessons. Their art was deeply embedded in village life, serving religious and cultural purposes rather than commercial ones. (As shown in Figure 1, the changes in artistic techniques are evident)

In the rural context, Patuas often acted as itinerant artists who traveled from village to village, offering their painted scrolls and narratives in exchange for food, money, or other necessities. Their art was communal and participatory, relying on interaction with an audience that shared their cultural and religious values. This localized framework shaped the visual style of their work, which emphasized clarity, symbolism, and moral themes. However, the socio-economic challenges of colonial Bengal, including rural impoverishment and agricultural decline, prompted many Patuas to migrate to the city. This migration marked the beginning of a transformative journey, as they adapted their traditional practices to the demands of urban markets.

Aspect	Rural Roots	Urban Transition
Identity	Traditional artisans (Patuas) practicing folk art (Patachitra).	Adapted as professional artists catering to an urban clientele.
Art Form	Scroll paintings combined with oral storytelling.	Single-sheet paintings (Kalighat paintings) for quick production.
Themes	Mythological tales, social customs, moral lessons.	Contemporary themes, satire, urban life, and colonial influence.
Purpose	Religious and cultural; communal and participatory.	Commercial; entertainment and souvenirs for urban buyers.
Technique	Use of natural dyes, intricate detailing, and symbolic visuals.	Bold lines, vibrant colors, and simplified forms for faster output.
Economy	Bartered their art for food, money, or necessities.	Sold paintings for cash in the urban market near Kalighat temple.
Social Role	Itinerant artists interacting closely with rural communities.	Static producers interacting with urban elites and middle-class.
Challenges	Rural impoverishment, agricultural decline, limited resources.	Competition, need for innovation, and adapting to urban tastes.

Figure 1: The changes in artistic techniques

In Calcutta, the bustling Kalighat temple precinct provided the Patuas with a new platform to showcase and sell their art. The urban audience, consisting of pilgrims, traders, and colonial officials, differed significantly from the Patuas' rural patrons. To cater to this diverse clientele, the Patuas reimaged their art both stylistically and thematically. The most significant shift was the transition from narrative scrolls to single-sheet paintings. These smaller artworks were easier to produce, transport, and sell, making them ideal for the fast-paced urban marketplace. The Patuas also adopted vibrant colors, bold outlines, and a simplified visual style to appeal to a broad audience. Thematically, Kalighat paintings began to reflect the concerns and curiosities of their urban patrons. While religious imagery remained central, the Patuas also explored secular and satirical themes. Depictions of contemporary life, social vices, and colonial influences became prominent, offering a window into the changing cultural dynamics of Calcutta. For instance, humorous portrayals of babus (wealthy Bengali men) and their indulgent lifestyles revealed the artists' critical engagement with modernity and morality. The urban reception of Kalighat paintings was marked by a dynamic exchange of cultural values. As the Patuas interacted with colonial officials and European collectors, they began incorporating elements of Western art into their work. Techniques such as shading, perspective,

and anatomical realism—characteristic of European artistic traditions—were blended with the indigenous styles of Kalighat art. This cultural hybridity is also evident in the subject matter of Kalighat paintings. Alongside traditional depictions of Hindu gods and goddesses, the Patuas began to portray secular themes that resonated with their urban and colonial audience. Paintings of Victorian women, colonial officers, and scenes of modern life reflected the artists' adaptability and willingness to engage with the broader cultural environment of Calcutta. However, this hybridity was not merely a one-sided assimilation of Western influences. The Patuas used their art to critique and satirize the colonial order, subtly subverting the very culture they were engaging with. This interplay of adaptation and resistance underscores the complexity of cultural exchange in colonial Bengal. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Kalighat paintings began to attract the attention of European collectors, scholars, and institutions. Their vibrant colors, dynamic compositions, and satirical themes appealed to Western audiences, who often viewed them as exotic artifacts of India's "authentic" culture. This growing interest led to the export and exhibition of Kalighat paintings in prestigious galleries and museums across Europe and North America. While this global recognition brought new visibility to Kalighat art, it also raised important questions about the politics of representation. In many cases, these paintings were stripped of their original socio-cultural context and reinterpreted through a Western lens. Bhowmick (1995) They were often framed as "folk art" or "primitive art," reinforcing colonial hierarchies that valued European art as superior. Furthermore, the commodification of Kalighat paintings in the global art market transformed their meaning (Das, 2010). Originally created as accessible art for local audiences, these works were now positioned as collectible objects for elite patrons. This shift highlights the tension between the local and global trajectories of Kalighat art, as well as the power dynamics that shape the circulation of cultural artifacts. In exploring the influence of Western culture on 19th-century Kalighat paintings, we see distinct examples of how the Bengali elite were depicted through a fusion of traditional Indian and European styles. For instance, "The Gentleman with an Umbrella" captures an urban babu holding an umbrella, which symbolizes the modernity and Westernized lifestyle that were becoming prevalent among the Bengali upper class as shown in Figure 2. Similarly, "The English Officer" offers a satirical portrayal of a British officer, reflecting the growing interactions and sometimes tensions between the colonizers and the colonized, while also emphasizing the presence of European authority in colonial Bengal as shown in Figure 3.

In "Bibi-Babu Couple", the painting depicts a babu and his wife, with the bibi wearing a Victorian-style blouse over her saree, blending Western fashion with traditional Indian clothing as shown in Figure 4. Lastly, "Babu with a Hookah" shows a wealthy Bengali babu seated with a hookah, his attire—Western trousers and shoes—reflecting the influence of British sartorial practices on the Bengali elite as shown in Figure 5. These artworks illustrate the complex cultural exchange during the colonial era, where Western and Indian elements coexisted and influenced each other in both subtle and overt ways.



Figure 2: A portrayal of an urban babu with an umbrella, a symbol of modernity and a Westernized lifestyle. The babu's clothing, including his jacket, indicates British fashion trends.



Figure 3: The English Officer, A satirical representation of a British officer in uniform, highlighting the growing interaction between Indians and Europeans in colonial Bengal, by Hasir Chitrakar, 1800.

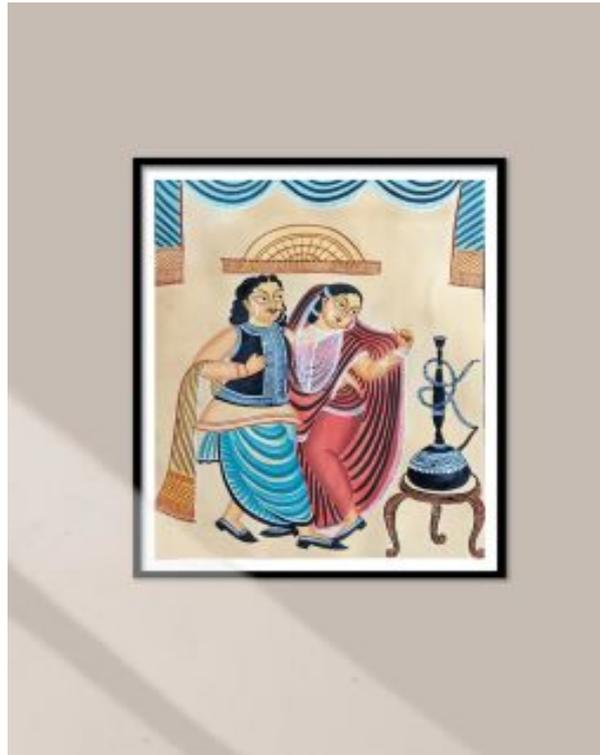


Figure 4: Bibi-Babu Couple, Features a babu and bibi (his wife), with the bibi wearing a Victorian-style blouse over her saree. This shows the incorporation of Western fashion into traditional attire, by Hasir Chitrakar, 1890.



Figure 5: Babu with a Hookah, Depicts a wealthy Bengali babu seated with a hookah, wearing Western-style trousers and shoes. The pose and attire reflect British influences on the Bengali elite., by 1890

Shifting Meanings: The Legacy of Kalighat Art

The appropriation of Kalighat paintings by Western galleries and collectors has had a lasting impact on their legacy. On the one hand, it has ensured their preservation and recognition as a significant artistic tradition. On the other hand, it has often resulted in the misrepresentation and decontextualization of these works, reducing them to mere symbols of exoticism. In contemporary times, efforts have been made to reclaim and reinterpret Kalighat paintings within their original cultural framework. Scholars and curators are increasingly emphasizing the socio-political and economic contexts in which these paintings were created, highlighting their role as both aesthetic expressions and critical commentaries. The shifting meanings of Kalighat art also reflect broader questions about the politics of representation in global art histories. Whose narratives are privileged, and whose voices are marginalized? How can we honor the agency and creativity of the Patuas while acknowledging the complexities of their art's reception and appropriation?

RESULTS

The study reveals that Kalighat paintings played a pivotal role in reflecting the socio-cultural transformations of 19th-century Bengal. Far from being static folk expressions, these artworks emerged as dynamic visual narratives that captured the complexities of urban life under colonial rule. The shift from scroll-based storytelling in rural Bengal to single-sheet, commodified paintings in Calcutta's bustling markets signifies a major transformation in both form and function. The integration of satire, myth, and contemporary themes in the visual content highlights how the Patuas responded to and critiqued the moral, political, and social disruptions of their time. The paintings served as a cultural mirror—accessible to the masses, yet layered in meaning—challenging elitist notions of “high art.” Through a triangulated methodology combining archival study, visual analysis, and oral interviews, the research affirms Kalighat paintings as powerful mediums of aesthetic innovation, cultural hybridity, and social commentary.

Limitations

While the research provides substantial insights into the evolution and significance of Kalighat paintings, it is not without limitations. The accessibility of original 19th-century artworks was limited due to preservation issues and institutional restrictions, which narrowed the range of firsthand visual material. Oral interviews, though valuable, represent only a segment of the living Patua community and may not capture the full diversity of regional or stylistic variations within the tradition. Additionally, the interpretive nature of visual analysis—particularly in decoding satire and symbolism—poses challenges of subjectivity and contextual accuracy. Language constraints and the partial absence of colonial documentation specific to Kalighat art also hindered a deeper exploration of its commercial circulation and patronage networks. These limitations underscore the need for further interdisciplinary research that expands both the scope and methodology to encompass broader geographies, communities, and archives.

CONCLUSION

A Complex Cultural Legacy

The journey of Kalighat paintings from rural Bengal to urban Calcutta and eventually to global galleries encapsulates a profound narrative of cultural transformation, adaptation, and appropriation. This dynamic art form not only reflects the socio-economic and cultural shifts of 19th-century Bengal but also challenges rigid definitions of art by bridging the divides between the popular and the elite, the sacred and the profane, and the local and the global. At the heart of Kalighat paintings lies a complex interplay between continuity and change. The migration of Patuas from their rural origins to Calcutta's urban marketplaces catalyzed the evolution of their artistic practices. While the shift to single-sheet paintings and the incorporation of Western influences were pragmatic responses to urban and colonial demands, these adaptations also demonstrate the resilience and creativity of the Patuas in preserving their identity. This narrative underscores the capacity of folk traditions to negotiate modernity without losing their essence, redefining the boundaries of art in the process. The appropriation of Kalighat paintings by Western collectors and galleries further complicates their legacy. While this global recognition ensured the preservation and dissemination of Kalighat art, it also decontextualized these works, framing them as exotic artifacts divorced from their socio-cultural milieu. The politics of representation inherent in this process raises critical questions about how art is valued, categorized, and consumed within global hierarchies. Can the essence of Kalighat paintings truly be understood when they are removed from the context of colonial Bengal and the lived realities of their creators? Moreover, Kalighat paintings serve as a potent medium of social critique, transcending their commodified status. Through their satirical depictions of colonial society, moral decadence, and cultural hybridity, these artworks act as historical records and commentaries, offering a window into the tensions and contradictions of their time. In doing so, they challenge the notion that folk art is merely decorative or simplistic, asserting its role as a vehicle for intellectual and cultural engagement.

Ultimately, the legacy of Kalighat paintings lies in their ability to bridge multiple worlds: the rural and the urban, the traditional and the modern, the local and the global. They embody a dynamic process of negotiation, adaptation, and resistance, reflecting the broader forces of colonial modernity while maintaining their rootedness in indigenous traditions. As we critically engage with Kalighat art, it is essential to move beyond simplistic binaries and acknowledge the multiplicity of meanings these works carry. They are not merely historical artifacts but living testaments to the enduring capacity of art to navigate the complexities of identity, representation, and legacy. By situating Kalighat paintings within their broader socio-political and cultural contexts, we honor the agency of their creators and the richness of their artistic contributions, ensuring that their stories continue to resonate across time and space.

Future Scope

This study opens several avenues for future research on Kalighat paintings and their broader cultural significance. While the current work focuses on the 19th-century urban evolution of the form, further studies could explore the early rural origins of the Patua tradition in more depth, especially in regions like Birbhum, Midnapore, and Murshidabad. Comparative studies between Kalighat paintings and other vernacular traditions such as Patachitra or Company School art could yield richer insights into how indigenous styles negotiated colonial aesthetics. Moreover, there is significant scope to study the gendered perspectives within Kalighat paintings—both in terms of representation and the role of women as viewers or even contributors within the Patua community. Future research might also examine the reception of Kalighat art in post-independence India and its influence on modern Indian artists, contemporary popular culture, and global visual narratives. Based on the findings and limitations of this study, several recommendations can be made for scholars, curators, and policymakers. Firstly, there is an urgent need to

digitize and catalogue fragile Kalighat collections housed in Indian museums, private archives, and temple repositories to ensure broader academic access, preservation, and public engagement. Secondly, ethnographic fieldwork should be expanded to include a wider range of Patua voices, particularly women, younger artists, and migrant artisans, to document the evolving socio-economic and stylistic dimensions of the tradition. Thirdly, collaborative research projects involving historians, art historians, anthropologists, and practitioners can yield more comprehensive insights into the intersection of visual culture, performance, and community identity. Educational institutions should be encouraged to include Kalighat art in visual culture and heritage studies curricula to nurture critical appreciation among students. Furthermore, contemporary artists and curators should be encouraged to draw creative dialogues between Kalighat paintings and modern/postmodern art movements, fostering renewed relevance. Lastly, public policy initiatives must support community-led workshops, exhibitions, and heritage tourism models that not only revive interest in this art form but also ensure economic sustainability for the remaining Patua artists, thereby safeguarding this cultural legacy for future generations

Conflict Of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author expresses deep gratitude to the Almighty for His blessings. Sincere thanks are extended to the author's parents and family members for their constant support. Heartfelt appreciation is also conveyed to the supervisor, Dr. Khushboo Kumari, and to colleagues for their valuable guidance and encouragement throughout the course of this work.

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