CHAPTER – II
ART OF BENGAL
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Bengal is an Indian province in North Eastern India, occupying the fertile areas of the delta of the Ganges. It has often been an independent Kingdom and its people, who are of mixed stock, speak Bengali. Bengali is one of the major modern languages of India arising from a Sanskritic base and was already a separate language in late Pala times.1 Bengal has a long tradition of painting activities from a fairly early period which continues to date with not much interruption. With the advancement of time the art of painting in Bengal took distinct turns at various crossroads of human history.

From around the beginning of the ninth century A.D., we start getting stone carved and metal cast sculptures with remarkably common stylistic features from as far apart places as Bodh-Gaya in the west to Comilla in the east and from Kushinagar in the north to Sundarbans in the south. As we go on getting them from the present day Bihar, West Bengal, Bangladesh and Nepal, till the beginning of the thirteenth century, we became aware of the common stylistic development of the art of sculpture in this vast region. The same can be said about the illustrated manuscripts painted between the
tenth and the thirteenth century, commonly called the Pala paintings, as the earliest of these Buddhist manuscripts was commissioned by a Pala King. We have to regard the Pala-Sena art as an important landmark in the history of art of Bengal. Because this homogeneous body of art had a unified developmental history and a well recognizable distinctiveness.

The ninth to the thirteenth century sculptures and paintings are by no means the earliest objects of art from Bengal. Besides the pre-historic and the proto-historic terracottas found from various sites of West Bengal, a large number of terracotta toys, dolls, small votive figures, small ritual figurines, seals with designs, and images in relief and sealings with incised designs and images have been found from Chandraketugarh in North 24-Parganas and Tamluk in Midnapur and other places of deltaic West Bengal. On stratigraphic considerations these are dated between the second century B.C. and third century A. D. While a large majority of these are folkish objects with strong local characteristics, the votive figures and ritual figurines exhibit attempts to come to terms with the pan-Indian iconography, being developed from the Sunga through the Kushana periods. When large stone carved and metal cast sculptures began to be commissioned in Bengal, from around the
fourth century A.D., the Puranic Brahmanical and the Buddhist iconography had taken such a commanding hold over the actual process of making of the ritual objects, that the Purva-desiya Bhaskaras had to imitate the Madhya-desiya models. This gave rise to the eastern school of Gupta sculpture in Bihar and Bengal.

The extension and consolidation of the Turko-Afgan domination led to the demise of the power of the earlier patrons of high arts, which in its turn disrupted the continuity of the earlier tradition of sastrīya-margiya art. Bengal art came to a turning point. Recent discovery of some fragmentary evidence of fifteenth century illustrated manuscripts from Husain Shahi Bengal, the glorious period of development of Bengali literature and music, has dispelled the notion that the Sultanate period of Bengal was totally bereft of visual arts. Stylistically these paintings bear family resemblances with the contemporary Sultanate Paintings, especially of the Chaurapanchaika variety from Jaunpur.

Although there is no historical evidence to prove it, one may not be wholly wrong in assuming the distinctiveness of Bengal art stemmed from continuous though not unchanging, traditions of folk arts and crafts. The woodcarvings and terracotta sculptures of different periods from different parts of Bengal exhibit some
common and persistent stylistic features. The subterranean presence of these folk elements in all efflorescence of high art gave to the Bengal high arts their distinctiveness. Indeed some varieties of regional high art of Bengal have been sophisticated versions of folkish prototypes.

The situation, however changed drastically after 1765, when the British East India Company took over the revenue management of Subah Bangla (the present-day west Bengal, Bangladesh, Bihar and Orissa) and especially after 1793 when by the enactment of permanent settlement the Company's government changed the system of land revenue administration so completely that the whole gamut of land-centred human relations in rural areas changed. These changes were compounded by wilful suppression of Indian crafts and manufactures to turn India into an importer of machine-made goods from Britain after 1813. All these factors disrupted the continuity of the more professional rural and arts. Bereft of patronage, the rural artisans and craftsmen either became marginalised peasants or started to migrate to Kolkata the developing port city for the colonial expropriation.

But it was the Kolkata-ward migration of urban artists from the disbanded courtly ateliers of northern India that was bringing about
the decisive changes in Indian art scene. Towards the fourth quarter of the 18th century, in the court of the puppet nawabs of Murshidabad, the East India Company's rule had firmly entrenched in Bengal and the hub of activities had shifted to Kolkata. European Painters had already started coming into India in search of fortune. European prints (engravings, etchings etc.) had started coming into India even before that if the incursion of European prints and European artists had been instrumental in the waning of the medieval traditions of paintings, the decisive factor had been the emergence of new classes of patrons with differing tastes. An art school was established in Kolkata in 1854, with the blessing of the colonial government, resulting in making pre-art school artists redundant.

Apart from the migrant rural artists who took to painting in oils, there were groups of artisans who started migrating to Kolkata in search of employment. Some of them, with skills that could be used for the newly established nexus for printing designs and images, began to be employed by the various survey offices, being set up from the first decade of the 19th Century. After having picked up the techniques of intaglio and relief printing of matrices made by metal engraving, etching, aquatint, wood engraving and wood cut,
they would retire and set up printmaking establishments in Chitpur region of north Kolkata to cater to the ever expanding needs of the burgeoning vernacular printing and publishing industry. Even the entry of art school trained print-makers with their equipment for lithographic printing as competitors, could not make much of the dent in their market; for the burgeoning market had space for everyone, till the coming into vogue of processed block printing of designs and images in the first decade of the 20th Century.

The most significant body of drawings and paintings of nineteenth century Bengal, however, are the Kalighat pats, created by a close knit group of clay modellers and painters from rural areas who settled down in the vicinity of the Kali temple of Kalighat locality in Calcutta, in search of employment.

Although the stylistic ancestry of Kalighat pats can be traced back to the rural pats of Bengal, the differences between them make Kalighat pats more significant as works of Art. Yet, the curious fact is that these drawings and paintings on rectangular sheets of untreated paper surface, done in ink and water soluble opaque colours, were made as cheap souvenirs for selling these to the pilgrims to Kali temple at throw away prices. Social significance apart, the style of figuration, division of flat unadorned pictorial
space by rhythmic lines, and the division of the same pictorial space into mosaic of flat colour masses etc. make Kalighat pats aesthetically satisfying objects of art. Despite their being earliest examples of urban popular art, their art, their form and substance held out levels of promise for future generations of art practitioners. The Kalighat pat, once again proved the innate strength, resilience and adaptability of the folk art traditions of Bengal. But the painting activities in Bengal with a definite regional character had originated and developed only at the beginning of the 20th century. The new style known commonly as the Neo Bengal School gained immediate acceptance all over India and later became internationally known. Bengal School is an important episode in the history of Bengal art. In this regard a brief account is given in the following pages.
ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF BENGAL SCHOOL

An extremely long period of British rule and domination awakened the spirit of Indian nationalism and the Indian people's search for a national identity.

This in turn gave birth to various movements in social and cultural fields. The arts were no exception. 'The Bengal School' is the name given to a new style of painting that was the first aesthetic development that appeared at the turn of the century.

E.B.Havell, a connoisseur and promoter of Indian art, was appointed Principal of Calcutta Art School in 1896. In 1905 Havell persuaded Abanindranath Tagore to join the School as Vice-Principal and together they introduced traditional Indian techniques of art in the school. Nandalal Bose, Surendranath Kar, Asit Kaumar Halder, K Venkatappa, Samarendranath Gupta, Kshitindranath Majumder, Sailendranath Dey joined as disciples of Abanindranath and helped introduce a new revivalist style of painting. In the nationalistic fervour of the time it gained tremendous popularity and spread all over India. In fact, the 'Bengal School', as it was known, was the first recognized art style of modern India.
Havell and Abanindranath insisted on the revival of traditional Indian art styles. In fact, the revivist art introduced by Abanindranath was actually a synthesis of Ajanta, Mughal, European naturalism, and Japanese wash techniques. This new art style, done mostly in watercolour and depicting Indian religious, mythological, historical and literary subjects, also gained the approval of the Indian nationalists. Abanindranath preferred historical and literary subjects rather than religious and mythical ones, and with his sophisticated taste, sense of proportion, and observation he could impart a quality of grace and charm to his works.

Lord Zetland has defined the aim of the Bengal School of art as:

“The new school is consciously and intentionally idealistic. It is the avowed intention of its makers to escape from ‘the photographic vision,’ and to secure an introspective outlook on things, which takes one away from the material objectives of life to a rarefied atmosphere of beauty and romance. Instead of busying themselves with recording the superficial aspects of phenomena, they have worked with a deeper motive and a profounder suggestion, seeking to wean the human mind from the obvious and the external reality of the sense, disdaining to imitate nature for its own sake, and striving to find significative forms to suggest the formless Infinity which is hidden behind the physical world of forms.”

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In the early decades of the 20th century, the Bengal School as a whole became popular, but some individual creative figures attempted to go beyond prevalent trends and tried to gain artistic independence and individuality. Gaganendranath Tagore, Jamini Roy and Rabindranath Tagore are among the best known of these artists. Gaganendranath, the elder brother of Abanindranath, was the first genuine cartoon artist in India to comment upon political and social realities. He was also the first to treat painting as an arrangement of line, form, color and light. He has done paintings of building and interiors by treating light and shade in a somewhat Cubist manner. His mythical and spiritual contemplation pieces, done in form and colour, sometimes reach the state of near-abstraction.

Though the merits of folk-art was not completely neglected at the time, nobody before Jamini Roy could think of applying it in the arena of mainstream art. By abandoning the naturalistic style and taking inspiration from Bengali folk art, he opened a new vista for modern Indian painting. He abandoned the three-dimensional modulation, that is to say, the stress on perspective and light and shade of naturalistic western art. Instead, he took to the two-
dimensional format of flat colouring and undulated outline of the folk tradition. He created out of the folk mannerism a more sophisticated and harmonious form of painting which expressed a new kind of simple beauty while retaining a kind of Indianness.

As a result, the Bengal School became a kind of a sentimental and decorative art and did not develop any further.

Critics like W.G.Archer think that though this movement did not introduce modern art in India "it served as a necessary step to a second movement which begins in the middle of the 1920's and includes the paintings of Shergil, Jamini Roy and George Keyt. These painters were not directly influenced by Havell yet it was he who made their work possible."³
LAKSHMI – SHARA
Teracotta plaque. Fridpur, Bengal.
Early 20th Century

KANTHA EMBROIDERY
Jessore, Bengal.
Early 19th Century
FOLK ART OF BENGAL

With our rich folk and tribal art tradition, every region in the country has a unique art form that has sustained and evolved over centuries. At the same time there are several similarities in folk arts across regions, such as mythological themes, and bold and vibrant colours.

The tradition of “Folk Arts” in Bengal constitutes the distinctive national art of the Bengali people. It is national in more senses than one. In the first place it is rooted in the culture of Bengal and has a continuous history of almost unadulterated development dating back to remote antiquity and is not based on mere imitation of any other tradition of any other part of India or of any other period. Secondly, its practice is not confined to a small number of art amateurs but is widespread among large masses of people of both sexes in rural Bengal. Thirdly, it is intimately related to their social life and expresses their moral and spiritual ideas. And lastly, in its motifs and style it has the distinct and national stamp of the formal idiom and spirit of the Bengali race.¹

The Bengali tradition of village art was discovered in the nineteen-twenties, and due to the work of Ajit Ghosh and G.S.Dutt its
character became apparent. The art of decorative floor and wall designs in tempera and of coloured embroidery exists in a highly perfected form among women all over rural Bengal, and the designs are remarkable for their infinite variety, originality and freshness. Dr. Abanindranath Tagore drew public attention of the art of decorative floor designs in an important monograph published by him. But the art of decorative wall designs in tempera, as practiced by women of Western Bengal, was first discovered by G.S. Dutt in the year 1931. It is marked with great hereditary skill in the use of colour designs as well as vigour of line and beauty of form. The skill of the village women in drawing decorative floor designs in the floors and plinths of their houses, as well as in the floors of their courtyards, is marked by extra-ordinary hereditary genius.

In pottery, great skill of form and colour design is displayed by the village potters all over Bengal, as well as by their women. The motifs in all these cases are taken from nature, and illustrate the close touch, which the life of these village people had with nature. The motifs are also taken from simple religious subjects connected with the story of Krishna and other mythological subjects, which form part of the religious life of the people.
In almost every district of West Bengal, colonies of Patuas or village artists were found to exist. Many of these gained a livelihood by decorating earthenware plates and pitches by painting the clay images of gods and goddesses used at annual festivals. Some, however, still followed the exact profession suggested by the title ‘Patua’.
PATUA ART

In Bengali, "Pat" means "roll" and "Patua" or "Chitrakar" mean "Painter". The origin of the painted rolls is very ancient. We could find some in the Pharaoh's graves in Egypt. In India the first description of these painted rolls can be found in a sacred text dated 200 BC. Even today, this art form is still used mainly in West Bengal and Bihar State.

This primitive art of painting practiced by the professional primitive painters who are known as 'JADU PATUA' or the Duari-Patuas' ('Jadu'-literally magic; 'Duari'-those who wait at the door) are a community of painters, still found in Midnapur, Bankura, Birbhum and Manbhum in West Bengal, and Singhbhum and the Santhal Parganas in Bihar. They make a living by going from village to village inhabited by the santhals with pictures on long scrolls of paper, painted nowadays with bazaar colours.7

Similar to the scroll-like folk paintings Phad and Pichwai of Rajasthan and Pithora of Gujarat, Patua is a folk art from West Bengal. Patuas are lengthy paintings that narrate mythological stories in sequence. The Patuas (derived from the word Pata which
means a painting, patua also implies a painter) used vegetable dyes to paint rolls of cloth.

Mostly iconic, these were narrated by the ‘Patuas’ who were also singers. They were paid or offered food for their efforts and this was a way of earning their livelihood. They show these and tell the story.

The scroll stem from an old tradition of ‘Paralaukik-Chitra’, i.e. the picture of a dead person enjoys earthly comforts in the word thereafter. After a death in a village home, the ‘Duari-Patua’ would appear in a painting of the deceased, complete in every respect except for the iris of the eyes. The implication was that the dead person was wandering blindly in the other world when his eyesight could easily be restored for a small consideration. The dead man's relatives would provide the ‘Patua’ with a little money, or some articles of daily use for transmission to the deceased whereupon the ‘Patua’ would do the ‘chakshudana’ i.e. 'restore' the sight by filling in the iris of the eyes on the paintings. The practice gradually ceased to be so exclusively funeral.

The subjects painted by the Patuas in West Bengal are extremely varied. Their audience is mainly Hindu or Muslim, sometimes
Catholic. The themes are inspired by the sacred texts of each of these religions, 'the deeds of Krishna', 'the adventures of Rama'. In Birbhum, Bankura and the Santhal Parganas a favourite theme of Satyapir, a muslim holyman who rode on a leopard, while other popular subjects were the myths of Santhals. Mostly their subjects are religious subjects but also profane ones which go from historical epics (local, national or even international: they could evoke the French Revolution as well as the bombing in Hiroshima) to some more general themes (painting about the cyclone which devastated the Midnapur district, or more recently, Mother Teresa's death). They also speak about political subjects, like the regrouping of the land or the family planning.

The actual style of painting differed from district to district–indeed in many cases from village to village–but in every case there was a firm reliance on certain basic principles. There was no attempt at literal description or meticulous portrayal. Shapes and figures were freely distorted. Sharp outlines and strong colours were used, or we can say in point of excellence of line and colour form these paintings are comparable with the famous paintings of the Ajanta caves and those of the Rajput Schools, but whereas the latter excel in refinement, these rural paintings of Bengal excel in the quality of
vigour and boldness of conception and style as well as in the strength and boldness of line and colour design and in their general dynamic quality.

In an article discussing the scroll paintings of village patua, G.S. Dutt pointed out that their chief qualities, 'freshness, simplicity, directness, robustness and power of vivid story telling'—were precisely those most valued in modern painting. 'From the point of view of conception as well as technique, it will be found that the basic characteristic of the art of patuas is the one which the Post-Impressionists of the West have been striving to attain, namely the elimination of all unessential and a dependence on fundamentals'.
KALIGHAT PAINTING - CAT EATING A LOBSTER
Painting on Card-Paper - Water Colour
KALIGHAT PAINTINGS

The Kalighat pats were not just the product of a particular era; they constituted the mirror of the times. The influence of the Kalighat pats has been quite considerable on modern Bengali art.

The development of painting as a medium of cultural expression became popular in Bengal in independence of the conventional art of temples and the influence of the royal court. The traditional and original paintings of Bengal, the ‘pats’, as they are popularly known were usually the representation of mythological stories and folklore in paint and paper. The pats derived their name from the ancient painter-story tellers, the ‘patuas’ who went story telling throughout Bengal using their paintings as illustrations to enable the listeners in the understanding of their stories.

Pat painting gained heights with the emergence of the Kalighat patuas in the scene during the 18th and 19th centuries. These painters came to Calcutta from the surrounding rural areas to earn a livelihood by trading their works of art. They began in a humble way by selling their pats to the numerous pilgrims who visited the famous Kalighat temple. Initially the Kalighat patuas concentrated only on religious subjects for the theme of their paintings. But
gradually the pats became an instrument of satire to mock the growing trend of the western culture.

The ‘Kalighat pats’ existed since 1820. The later inclusion of naturally coloured wood works and the colourful lithography depicting the then social life were inspired by the Kalighat pats. The ‘patuas’, ‘patidars’ or ‘chitrakars’ from Midnapur in rural Bengal, came and settled near the Kali temple on the banks of the Adi Ganga in Kolkata. Though they tried hard not to come under the European influence, they were only partially successful. Thus their pats went through transformations under the impact of the fast growing western urban culture.

As William Archer stated:

*The Bengali patua availed of the water colours then easily available in the city. They did not paint in the background, to save time and maybe to let the picture come out from the canvas.*

The Kalighat pats were generally composed on paper cut to the size of 7 inches by 11 inches, which was the size preferred by general buyers. Shading was used in the manner to emphasis the volume of the picture.
THE TOILET
Kalighat pat on paper, Kolkata
19th century

CAT DEVOURING A FISH
Pat-drawing Kalighat Bengal

SCENE FROM THE
RAMAYANA
Pat-drawing Kalighat Bengal

WOMAN COOKING
Pat-drawing Kalighat Bengal
Theology and mythology predominated the subject of the Kalighat pats. Various Gods and Goddesses are intricately designed and depicted. The pats also depict the social life of Bengal. Some paintings show illustrations of housewives and their various activities, like playing the ‘veena’, the ‘behala’ and the ‘tabla’ (Indian musical instruments), some protecting themselves with broom sticks, some taking care of the child, while others are seen engaged in dressing themselves up. Birds and animals were also sometimes included in the pats.

History too had its influence and provided the patuas with numerous subjects to work with. Figures like Rani of Jhansi, Lakshmibai, Shyamakanta fighting with a tiger, the great scandal of Tarakeshwar, a Bengali woman flying up in the sky in a balloon, or even the affair of Elokeshi and Mohanta, were some of the popular subjects. The elite society, the ‘baboos’ and the ‘bibis’, the dancing girls, the ladies of the town, and the loving couples, all added a touch of excitement and entertainment to the already colourful paintings.

The Kalighat pats were a sort of mirror to the society in which they were produced. These pats were of high significance to the social life of Bengal as they threw witty remarks with a touch of satire.
Snake caught by a peacock
Pat-drawing Kalighat Bengal

Woman belaboring an importunate holy man
Pat-drawing Kalighat Bengal

CUCKOLDED HUSBAND SLAYS HIS FAITHLESS WIFE
Pat-drawing Kalighat Bengal
through the medium of paint and paper. Thus the ‘Bengali baboos’ and the elite of the society did not particularly appreciate them, though they were a treat for the common people.

The significance of the Kalighat pats as works of art lies in the fact that the differences between them are remarkable. Moreover, the style of figuration, the division of flat unadorned pictorial space by rhythmic lines, the division of the same pictorial space into a mosaic of flat colour masses and many such artistic details add to the aesthetic nature of the pats.

Yet, the curious fact is that these drawings and paintings on rectangular sheets of untreated paper surface, done in ink and water-soluble opaque colours, were made as cheap souvenirs for selling these to the pilgrims to Kali temple at throw away prices. A coloured pat cost one ‘anna’ or one-sixteenth of a rupee in those days.

The Kalighat pats are the earliest examples of popular urban art. In spite of the fact that these pats could not stand to the onslaught of the more advanced lithography, oleography and much later the block bazaar pictures, it cannot be denied that they proved the
immense strength, the resilience and the adaptability of folk art tradition of Bengal.

Pat making is generally teamwork. The head patua begins with a pat and does the detailing. It is the job of the helpers to complete the work. Vegetable colours and water colours are used.

The present day pats are composed on art paper. Vegetable colours are used. Thin strips of cloth are pasted behind the paper after the completion of the painting. The brushes are made of goat hair.

The patua used primary colours like yellow, red and blue. Green and brown are also among the other colours used. Both vegetable colours as well as watercolours are used to paint the pats. The vegetable colours are extracted from various plants and spices.

Yellow Turmeric Red Catechu (extract from an Indian plant) and beetle leaf Green 'Hilincha' (Water cress) Purple 'Pui' (a creeper - the fruit or seed is crushed to get the colour) White 'Ghusum' (pond) soil Blue ‘Nilmoni’ fruit Brown ‘Morum’ soil Saffron Fire brick Black Burnt coconut shell soot

Due to the level of popularity to which the Kalighat pats rose, the patuas found it difficult to cope with the increasing demand. The extra pressure on the patuas made them turn to lithography to
enhance their productivity. In lithography the outline of the painting is printed in a faint impression and is then coloured.

The pats had a twofold beneficial nature. Apart from being great works of art they educated the people who bought them and on the other hand they provided for a livelihood to all those numerous patuas who were engaged in the making of them.

Writing in 1926 of the bazaar paintings of Kalighat, Ajit Ghosh claimed that

_They anticipated cubism and ‘indeed much of the latest in modern art’. _9

The fluid lines of Kalighat work echo Indo-European influences. These paintings were done on paper and the scrolls with narrative format from the patua art were replaced by single paintings with stylised religious and urban themes. The Kalighat paintings were mainly rendered by painters from rural Bengal.

Celebrated painter Jamini Roy whose works are influenced by Kalighat pats expressed his views on ‘Kalighat pats’:

_“A wrong notion prevails about what is patua-art. Many a one is inclined to identify it with the Kalighat-pats. Not that there is no truth whatsoever in such an idea, but the truth has really a very slender basis. During the early days of the growth of Calcutta as a
city, a group of village craftsmen came to settle in Kalighat and went on with their paintings. They were essentially rustic artists; certain changes in their traditional work were, however, inevitable because of their contact with the urban life. They had to cater to urban taste and had for their market the fair in the city and the suburbs. So their work acquired an urban bias. It ceased to be strictly patua: the language remained largely rustic but the city life had entered into the theme.”

It is unfortunate that such craftsmanship that reached the heights of popularity gradually declined and finally lost its glory and is confined to the four walls of museums. The patuas returned to Midnapur from where they originated. But there are hopes that the pats may once again gain back the lost glory as the demands for them keep rising. Nowadays, most of the pat paintings are exported to foreign countries. But awareness among the Bengalis is on the rise. In 2002 Durga puja a pandal was decorated entirely with pat paintings.
REFERENCES:


9. Ibid. p.103.