3.1 History and Origin

Kalighat paintings, as the name suggests, were created in the Kali temple area on the bank of the Ganga in South Calcutta. Kalighat paintings refer to the class of paintings and drawings on hand-made or more usually on machine-made paper produced by a group of artists called 'Patuas' in the neighborhood of the famous Kali temple at Kalighat in between 19th and earlier 20th Century (Ghosh: 1926). The place Kalighat is very famous for the temple of Goddess Kali. This temple was founded in the year 1798. Mother Goddess Kali is worshiped here. The abstract quality of these works resulting from the spares composition, graceful line and brevity in representation in volume, appealed to the newly formulated modernist aesthetic (Ghosh: 2011). There is a delicate freshness and spontaneity of conception and execution in this old brush drawing. There is a boldness and vigour in the brush line which may be compared to Chinese calligraphy (Ghosh: 1926).

The exact date of beginning the activities of the patuas at Kalighat is difficult to trace as there are no historical documents about the origin. From the surviving evidence it can be said with reasonable certainly that the painting of this class did not predate the beginning of the 19th century and did not continue in their original form after the first quarter of the twentieth (Jain: 1999). Sarkar & Mackay (2000) remark that "The Kalighat School of painting
is perhaps the first school of painting in India that is truly modern as well as popular. With their bold simplifications, strong lines, vibrant colours and visual rhythm, these paintings have a surprising affinity to modern art”.

The style originated from the narrative scroll paintings of rural Bengal. Historically speaking, in the mid 18th century a number of skilled artists moved to Kolkata from the rural Bengal especially from 24 Paraganas and Midnapur and set up stalls outside the Temple. In the villages they had painted long narrative stories on scrolls of handmade paper often stretched to over 20 feet in length and were known as patachitra. Each section was known as a pat and the artists therefore became known as patuas. The patuas would travel from village to village, unrolling the scroll a section at a time and singing the stories to their audiences.

The patuas who painted the Kalighat images were a mixture of Hindus and Muslims community. They used raw materials what were available in their village. These included many vegetable dyes and plant extracts that were made into paints by mixing with a variety of different binding media, including one made from Tamarind seed and also a natural gum from the bel fruit (Bengal quince). The patua scroll painters migrated from this part of rural Bengal to the growing metropolis of Kolkata, which expanded rapidly due to the commerce principally generated by the British settlers in the southern part of the city from the mid eighteenth century onwards. The artists who migrated to the city became makers and painters of terracotta images that were also produced as souvenirs for pilgrims visiting the Kalighat shrine in Kolkata (Archer: 1971).
Primarily, traditional *patuas*, potters of Bengal, *Sutradharas* and *Bhashkaras* who had migrated from rural Bengal and settled in and around the temple and practiced their work of art. They had applied a unique style which is the amalgamation of two styles. One is traditional and other European style. Finally this style became known as Kalighat style. Regarding this matter Jain mentions the almost polemic debate on the origin of Kalighat style and whether it stemmed from the earlier tradition of manuscript painting and *patua* scroll painting or was a result of exposure to European artistic conventions where every contour was shaded with European fashion (1999). Guha remarks that while one group of local painters gave themselves over fully to the drill and demands of British commissions, there were other groups most notably the Kalighat *patuas*-who continued to operate in the autonomous space of black town, within an indigenous sphere of taste and practice (1992).

### 3.2 Themes of Kalighat Paintings

The subject matter of Kalighat paintings had wide variety. Hindu Gods and Goddess and contemporary social events are depicted in the Kalighat painting. Kalighat paintings are not only based on mythological subjects but also secular theme. The main themes of Kalighat painting in the early 19th century were religious, but from the middle of the 19th century a lot of secular themes were seen. The artists also depicted humorous themes; showing Kolkata society as it was changing as a result of the British influence. Amongst the deities, Goddess Kali (Plate.3.1) was the popular subject for their paintings. Apart from that Shiva in the form of Panchanan or standing along with Parvati (Plate.3.3) or carrying Sati, Lakshmi herself or in the form of Gajalakshmi or Chandi as Kamalekamini, Durga as Mahishasur mardini
(Plate.3.4), and other Gods and Goddesses like Kartikeya, Ganesha, Saraswati, Jagadhatri etc. all were depicted in the Kalighat paintings (Sanyal: 2013).

The Kalighat patuas has shown an interest in portraying animals and birds which might be an influence of Mughal as well as contemporary British artists. Several scenes of animals like cat, elephant, horse, tiger, lion etc. and birds like pigeon, duck, peacock etc were represented in Kalighat paintings. Beside these prawns /lobsters, fishes like Rui, Shol etc. were the popular themes in Kalighat paintings. Plate.3.5 shows a cat eating a prawn. Here artists applied yellow and black colour over the body of cat. Black lines were applied to depict only the shape of nose, eyes and legs of cat. Beside these they also painted various scenes from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Different incarnations of Vishnu like Parashurama, Balarama, Krishna, Rama etc. and series of scenes from life of Krishna like milking a cow, killing Putana, affair with Radha, Kaliya daman etc. all were represented in Kalighat repertoire. In the painting of Kaliya Deman (Plate.3.6), here artist has applied transparent blue over Kaliya’s coils and the tail of his wives to depict water. Krishna stands over the Kaliya, according to legend lived in one of the ponds of the river Yamuna. The painting also exhibits the two wives of cobra pray to the deity to forgive and free their husband.

In the painting of Kalighat urban sensibility are reflected. In this regard Archer argues that the historical events and characters like Lakshmibai, Rani of Jhansi, Shyamakanta fighting with the tiger, a Bengali women flying up to the sky in a balloon, the elokeshi mohanta affair or the great Tarakeshwar scandal etc. are reflected in those paintings (1971). The other social theme
like *babus* and the *bibis*, the ladies of the town the dancing girl the loving
couples etc. are depicted in Kalighat painting. One such painting is portrait of
a woman. It shows a woman sitting cross legged with folded hands on an
austere pink floor and against an equally austere off white wall. She leans
against a large bloster. A hookah is placed on her left. The woman is wearing
white sari referred to above, with the dotted and linear pattern all over and a
red and blue ornate border. Another painting like "Barber cleaning the
women's ear" (Plate.3.7), a woman is seated on a Victorian chair smoking a
hookah while barber cleaning her ear. Here artist did not use any contour or
out line in the human figure. Their dresses were depicted with blue colour and
black border where transparent quality of colour is highly prominent.

3.3 Style and Technique of Kalighat Painting

One of the major characteristic features that makes Kalighat style of
painting so typical and unparallel is the artists unique handling of the form. A
scene of volume can be evoked in painting either by the emphatic use of light
and shade or by proficient linear treatment of form. About line Sorojit Dutta's
statement is that "*line is the mainstay of the total composition. In those
paintings it is clear that artist has given more intention to the representation of
line*"(1993). The Kalighat *patua* showed an accentuated concern with his bold
contour line-hard outsides and tonal insides- created on single sweeping
strokes. The line had a magical quality suggesting both contour and volume
and hardly betrayed movement of indecision (Som: 1992).

It is also noticeable that how artist used their maximum ideas with
minimum lines and they express their aesthetical taste. For instance Krishna
and Balarama (Plate.3.8) the figures are standing in symmetrical pose. Here
artist used blue, black, yellow, red colour in this painting. They used thin lines
of silver colour to depict heavy ornaments of Krishna and Balarama. There is
a yellow garment behind the two figures which designed by red lines. The
patua painter were deeply rooted in the practice of fashioning and painting
clay images and deities shows one such image indicating the reciprocity of
mutual influence of the duel practices of the Kalighat artists.(Jain:1999)

Sorojit Dutta remarks, in the 19th century quality of line were bold and
sweeping, in the early 20th century this had attained further speed (1990).
Kalighat pata were not product of this particular era it constituted a mirror of
the times (Paul: 1983). Archer states the result in an art, in which though the
ultimate product is a fusion of two techniques – one British, the other
indigenous – the vital elements is Bengali. Bright colours strong line
simplification of composition those characteristics are similar to Bengal. A
close look at the painting would indicate that the Kalighat painter did not apply
shaded contour to express the three dimensional effect but contour itself gives
the three dimensional appeal in the painting which may be seen in the other
folk painting of India (1932). Jain says a sense of volume can be evoked in
painting either by emphatic use of light and shade or by proficient linear
treatment of form. For example babus and bibis (Plate.3.9) wealthy zaminder
were spending their money on wine or women, foppish babus spending their
day and night at nasty places, amount suffering imprisonment for abducting
girls (1999).

Mukul Dey mentions “From the study of drawings it will be found that
Patuas were expert in handling the brush and colour and they were keen
observers of life, with a grim sense of humor” (1933). Kalighat painters also nicely presented the women figures in their composition. For example portrait of women (Plate 3.10) where showing a women with her long curly hair and worn a white colour sari. In this half length portrait colours were used red, yellow and black. Artists used fine and flowing lines with red colour to depict sari. These flowing lines indicate a design as well as dimensional appeal of the garments. All the lines were represented with red colour. They depicted jewellery with very thin lines. The typical white sari with typical red lines and yellow border with dotted design were nicely depicted in the painting.

Light and shade gives a three dimensional appeal in the painting. We know every folk community of India they makes the painting only with line and colour. They do not use light and shade. But when we looking to the painting of Kalighat then we find a three dimensional touch.

After pencil sketch or lithographic outline, the painting was given to novices who applied flat tone on the limb and clothing of figures. In this context Jain mentions “the final finishing done with graded tones and sweeps indicating volume pulsating with life drawing of facial feature, toes and fingers and bounding of forms in swift, fine and unmediated outline, lending them a sense of spirit and energy often missing a highly labour expressions, was apparently the work of the same bold and rehearsed as was the initial pencil drawing.

During the first quarter of the nineteenth century, lithography reached India and, by the mid nineteenth century, several presses had been established. Only lithography of a very simple and rapid kind was sometimes
used. The Kalighat painters adopted lithography in the 1840s. Metallic tin was also identified on the paintings. Tin has been used in Indian paintings of various different schools from the eighteenth century onwards, often as a substitute for silver. It is occasionally used to depict water or a reflection in a mirror. Unlike silver, tin is not prone to tarnishing, is readily available throughout India and is quickly and easily made into a satisfactory paint in comparison with gold or silver prepared from metallic leaf (shell gold/silver). It is also comparatively cheap to produce and is attractive to the viewer.

Kalighat artists used tin extensively to embellish their paintings and to replicate the surface effects of jewels and pearls. Silver and golden lines are not found in other folk paintings like Kalighat. But it can be seen in the painting of Mughal and Rajput painting. Artists of Kalighat did not follow any of the rules or theory of art set out in the silpasasthras or prescribed Hindu cannon of art. They influenced by the life style of nouveau rich babus, fashionable bibis, courtesans and fisher women. In the paintings of Kalighat their habits, posture, gesture, their way of sitting, standing, walking, and their style of makeup, dress, their hobbies and pastime all are reflected. The male and female figure depict in the painting in different way like sitting and standing, single and pair, young and old. For instance Saraswati (Plate.3.11) or of a courtesan by picking out one of his stock images, showing a woman seated cross legged, playing a string instrument. In the case of the Goddess he placed a crown on the hand of the selected female type seated her lotus in a lotus pond. Leaves of lotus are very nicely drawn in the two sides of painting.
Kalighat artist depicted figure in very simple way. Generally the faces of human figure are depicted in profile in all type of Indian folk painting. The faces of human figure of the Kalighat painting are not almost in profile, it can be seen frontal and full of three quarter (2/3) view. The Kalighat school of painting is perhaps first school of painting in India that is truly modern as well as popular. Those paintings are characterized by bold simplifications, strong line, vibrant colour, and visual rhythm.

According to Mukul Dey the method of drawing, was very simple and a family affair. He described “One artist would in the beginning, copy in pencil the outline from an original model sketch, and another would do the modelling, depicting the flesh and muscles in lighter and darker shades. Then a third member of the family would put in the proper colours in different parts of the body and the background, and last of all the outlines and finishing would be done in lamp black. They would generally mix these colours with water and gum and mould them on a round stone with a granite muller”. Plate.3.12a, b and c provide valuable information about the Kalighat artist’s method of working.

Thus a living picture would be drawn in the most simple and apparently easy way as a sort of conjoint family work”. Even the brushes that had been used were made of simple Goat’s tail or squirrel’s hair. One of the earliest pieces of description on Kalighat paintings by Ajit Ghose is also worth to be mentioned here. He said: “The drawing is made with one long bold sweep of the brush in which not the faintest suspicion of even a momentary indecision, not the slightest tremor, can be detected. Often the line takes in the whole
figure in such a way that it defies you to say where the artist’s brush first 
touched the paper or where it finished its work…”

The attributes characterizing almost all Kalighat paintings are:-

a. The Bengali patua used water colours which were easily available in the 
city. It was easily spread with brush and it created shaded lines.

b. They did not paint the background so that the pictures come out in the 
canvas and it is not decorated with various natural and geometrical 
motifs like other folk paintings. The natural science paintings executed 
under the British supervision have a dull, colourless background.

c. The painting generally done on paper. Cut to the same size (7inches x 
11inches) they used shading in the western manner to create the 
volume of the picture.

d. The faces of secular figure as well as religious are not almost in profile, 
it can be seen frontal and full of three quarter view.

3.4 Materials

They used water colours and painted on mill papers. The Bengali patua 
used water colours which were easily available in the city. It was easily spread 
with brush and it created shaded lines. Kalighat paintings were produced with 
variety of water based, opaque colours on papers. Several colours like blue, 
indigo, red, green, yellow, carbon black etc. had been used in Kalighat 
paintings. Some of these colours were made of indigenous ingredients. For 
example yellow was produced from the turmeric root, blue was made from 
petals of Aparajita flower, and black was produced from common shoot by
burning an oil lamp under a pot. Silvery and golden colours were also used for ornamentation. Along with the colours, gum of Bel fruit or crushed tamarind seeds was used as binder. Later on, imported factory-made water colours were available from Britain and patuas took full advantage of these cheaper materials, avoiding use of home-made colours.

Brushes were made from squirrel and calf hair. The cheap pigments were applied in transparent tones in contrast to traditional Indian tempera or opaque colors. With shaded contours and articulated gesture and movement, the figures attained a plaque-like effect on a neutral unpainted ground. The style is characterized by formal and linear economy, expressive gestures, and quality brushwork and flawless rhythmic strokes. For example, goat’s or squirrel’s hair was sufficient to make the brush for sketch drawings, and ordinary black ink formed by burning an oil lamp under a pot formed the main colour for drawing. Other colours would mostly be homemade, being prepared by squeezing different vegetables or by grinding the various stones and earth of different colours. Archer (1953) suggests that Kalighat painting reflects a western influence on the patua artists. The Kalighat painters shifted to manufactured paper as support, from cloth and/or handmade paper pasted on cloth that the rural patuas did. Secondly, instead of vegetable and mineral pigments tempered by vegetable glue that the rural patuas used, the Kalighat patuas started using manufactured water-colours (sometimes mixed with opaque whites) and inks (mainly for contour lines).
3.5 Application of Colour and Line in the Figurative Forms of Kalighat Painting

Most traditional scroll paintings have detailed, or coloured backgrounds while Kalighat paintings have plain, unpainted backgrounds; this is a difference between traditional *pats* and Kalighat *pats*, even those painted during the same period. Archer claims this move towards blank backgrounds in Kalighat *pats* is adopted from British natural history paintings. Only one or two figures are depicted in the painting. The backgrounds were always left plain and they did not apply any decorative motif. After close observation of painting it is clear that line and basic combination of colour is the essential characteristics of Kalighat painting.

At first figures were outlined in pencil and then applied (Plate. 3.12 a) base colour in thick wet strokes. A darker hue was added may be to obtain the sculptural volume of the figure. Finally Silver ornamentation was used as linear design which enlightened the heavy jewellery of figure. They did not give important in anatomical detail. It may be noted that bold quality of line of Ajanta replaced in Kalighat painting. Sometimes the outlines of the whole figure were left incomplete which express the massive quality of painting. Every art lovers may be attracted by the drawing of Kalighat because these drawing have its own indigenous characters. The drawings are so bold and smooth that they give extra ordinary visual rhythm in the figure.

This unfinished water colour provides valuable information about the method of Kalighat painting. The various stages completion of paintings informs us how first a sketch was done by pencil and then colours were
applied on the figure. The final outline and fine detail was completed at the end.

Figures were outlined in pencil before the base colour was speedily applied in broad wet strokes. Kalighat paintings at the height of their style in the last quarter of the 19th century condense silhouette and modelling of the figure in sweeping outlines of the continuous brush strokes themselves. Figure 3.1 and 3.2 presents the style of figure drawing of Kalighat artists. The God and Goddesses express through their complexions one or a combination of three characteristics and *gunas*: essence-*satva*, power and action-*rayas* and chaotic power-*tamas*. These too had to be accurately realized; Saraswati, Goddess of learning is pure white, Lakshmi Goddess of wealth, is reddish gold, her *satva* shining through widely *rayas*, while Kali, with her power to dissolve the cosmos, is dark. (Sarkar:1999) The image would be defined by concavelinear and convexlinear parabolically flowing contour lines, denying any anatomical connotation. The innards of the figures would either be coloured flatly or have no colour, denying illusionistic representation of bodily volume. Whatever suggestion of bodily volume there would be the resultant effect of juxtaposition of the convex linear and concave linear modeled line. As these extremely linearly and flatly rendered figures would be posited singly on flat surface, without any suggestion of any image elsewhere in the pictorial space, there would not be any illusion-producing visual element in the painting, consequently the painting would be two-dimensional image on a flat surface, so dearly valued by the Modernists.

Indian paintings provide an aesthetic continuum that extends from the early civilization to the present day. From being essentially religious in
purpose in the beginning, Indian painting has evolved over the years to become a fusion of various cultures and traditions. There are two distinctly visible streams of art in India. One is related to religious traditions and nurtured by the patronage of the rich and royal and carries on mostly by men. The other is rooted in everyday life of folk tradition which is the creation of women folk. In the folk painting elements such as line, colours, give an extra dimensional appeal instead of light and shade.

The art historian Hana Knizkova, her study gives clear idea about the figurative drawing of Kalighat paintings. She tells, "The figures are outstanding for their balance and harmonious faces and their movements are natural. The function of colour is clearly defined; they are chosen the supplement one another and create a balance composition. Sensitive hues are used in shading, chiefly darker tones of the ground colour, and an attention is paid to the transition from one tint to another making certain its comes about in gradual fashion." She further noted that the softly modelled, round face with a straight narrow nose, widely open eyes under high eyebrow arches and softly outlined lips in particularly remarkable (1975). Therefore it can be said that the Kalighat paintings were basically line drawing, the lines which were made in bold single strokes with a brush.

3.6 Conclusion

Kalighat painting is a pictorial invention of rural folk painters in Indian art history. The most distinctive stylistic features are the bold lines used in the outlines and the depiction of form. Hindu gods and goddesses were the early
themes of these paintings. The arrival of the British in India transformed the face of society and a new class of "nouveau riche" emerged.

Kalighat patas were the unique invention of the Bengal patuas, bright colours, simplicity and rhythmic lines are basic character of these painting. Over the flat colour this highly prominent bold black contour creates a contrast feeling in the composition Kalighat painting. The main characteristics features of Kalighat painting are: - Bold contour and shaded lines, calligraphic lines, Flat treatment of colours, Simplified forms with curving lines and large areas of unmixed colour. Earlier sources may be traced back to Ajanta, illuminated manuscript of Pala era, Mughal Rajput style. Although patachitra of Kalighat is a creation of patua classes of painter or chitrakar of Calcutta but the largest number came from Medinipur.

Line not only creates a shape of the object but also it can give the total image of anything. In India, folk painting gives this type of feelings through their colourful line drawings. Sometimes brush strokes give the energetic feeling of line as well as artists skill. The repetition of same kind of line confers a harmonious unification of elements. The vivid lines and mature brush techniques, minute finish, deft precision, rhythmical arrangement of limbs make this style attractive.
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