



Historical Legacy and Revival of a Lost Art Form of Calcutta: A Case Study on the Kalighat Paintings.

ARITRA BISWAS

University of Calcutta, Department of Geography, Kolkata, India. E-mail: aritrabiswas453@gmail.com

Abstract: Calcutta is known as the cultural capital of India for its eccentric art and architectural beauty. Calcutta was the hearth of numerous magnificent art forms that evolved during the colonial period. In the middle of the nineteenth century, a spectacular art form was introduced by the *patuas* of the rural outskirts of Bengal around the Kalighat Temple. The respected art form is known as the Kalighat School of Painting. Simple styles and features made these paintings one of the most popular art forms of Calcutta between the mid-nineteenth and late nineteenth centuries. Kalighat paintings illustrate both divine and contemporary themes. The manifestation of divine figures through the Kalighat paintings made the deities so attractive to the people. Socio-cultural landscapes and urbanity of modern British-occupied Calcutta were reflected vividly through these wonderful pieces of art. But from the early twentieth century due to the ignorance of elite-class Bengali people, Kalighat paintings lost their prestigious status. Although the invasion of printed and coloured paintings from abroad was one of the main reasons behind the elimination of the Kalighat paintings from the Kalighat region. However, at present, the revival of this heritage art form has been noticed in Kalighat and Kolkata. This paper attempts to discuss the art excellence of the Kalighat School of Paintings and its revival status.

Keywords: Babu, Elite, Hearth, Urbanity, Patua.

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INTRODUCTION

During the Colonial period, Calcutta was the cultural capital of India due to the amalgamation of its rich tangible and intangible cultural elements. Art is one of the significant elements of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage in West Bengal as well as in Kolkata. Around the early nineteenth century, a wonderful art form was introduced by the *patuas* (painters) of Bengal beside the Kalighat Temple area along the bank of the river *Adi Ganga*. The art form is known as Kalighat Paintings or Kalighat Pot. However, the origin of this heritage art form is debatable. The artists or painters known as *Patuas* mainly came from the rural interiors of South Bengal. The paintings were famous for their distinctive

and simplistic styles. At first, the paintings were made on cloth scrolls, for this reason, the paintings were called Patachitras (*Patt* means cloth) but afterward the cheap mill-made papers occupied the position of clothes (Roy, S., n.d.). Kalighat Patachitra is a very unique art form compared to others in terms of its style and methods of painting. The paintings are drawn through several stages. The use of detailed lines and contours is one of the main features of this painting. In the early nineteenth century, mainly the mythological characters and events were depicted through the Kalighat paintings, but later the contemporary socio-cultural and religious scenarios, behaviours, and daily life of the elite class, and poor class people were depicted. The colours that were used were mainly produced from natural elements such as turmeric for yellow, hibiscus and bark of trees for red, leaf pastes for green, and indigo, for blue, etc. The painters came and settled around the peripheral areas of Kalighat temple for income generation by selling their paintings as souvenir products. In the nineteenth century, Calcutta was the economic and cultural capital of British India, and Kalighat temple was one of the famous pilgrimage destinations which attracted a huge number of pilgrims and foreign visitors. Due to the famous pilgrimage destination, pilgrims bought the paintings of mythological deities with them. From the early twentieth century onwards the popularity of Kalighat paintings had been declining due to the ignorance of Europeans and the modern elite class people of Calcutta towards these hand-painted art forms and interest in cheap, printed materials like lithographs and oleographs due to the colonial influence. But in recent decades the revival of Kalighat paintings has been noticed. Kalighat paintings have been painted at the premises of Kalighat Temple where they actually originated. Now the original art form has been moderated by the artists to popularize their own styles. Only a few artists are still practicing this heritage art form in Kolkata and other parts of Bengal.

OBJECTIVES

The study has been carried out by formulating several objectives related to the past and present status of the Kalighat school of paintings, which give clear insights into their attractive beauty and revival. The objectives of the study are listed below-

- To elaborate the distinctive style of Kalighat paintings and depicted themes.
- To understand the causes of the revival of Kalighat Paintings.
- To evaluate how the revival process is being continued and the recent status of Kalighat paintings.

METHODOLOGY

Being descriptive and analytical in nature, the entire study has been conducted through the glimpses of literature surveys, analysing several research and web articles, books, etc. Photographic illustrations of Kalighat Paintings from their time of arrival in the first half of the nineteenth century to the present have been used for the analysis. Photos of paintings have been collected from books, web platforms, museums public places, etc.

DISCUSSION

The transcendent nature of Kalighat paintings has made it one of the most aesthetic art forms in India. During the mid-nineteenth century, when a large number of pilgrims came to Kalighat, a group of painters known as patuas came to the Kalighat Temple to sell their paintings. As selling paintings was the sole source of their earnings, they started to make more paintings on cheap and easily available

mill-made paper instead of cloth in one day to get more income. Different types and their painting style have been discussed below:

Kalighat painting is broadly classified into two types- Oriental and Occidental. The oriental theme was the first and foremost style, which is characterised by the paintings of gods, goddesses, and mythological events (Fig 3). During the mid-nineteenth century, patuas sold these paintings near the temple where the pilgrims purchased these excellent paintings as souvenir items. The majority of figures were single figures, but afterward multiple deities were painted on a single piece of paper. The most popular painting on an oriental theme was Goddess Dakshina Kali of Kalighat (Fig 1), which met the needs of pilgrims. Pilgrims were mainly interested in buying the painting of the goddess Kali as a souvenir product of Kalighat. Besides this, Shiva and his first consort Sati, Panchanana Shiva and Parvati on their vahana bull Nandi, Ganesh Janani, Mahishasuramardini, Jagatdhatri, ten incarnation or Dashavatars of Vishnu, Ganga, Radha and Krishna, war between Hanuman and Ravana, Krishna killing Bakasura, Krishna and his elder brother Balarama, Jagannatha, milking of Krishna, etc. were predominantly found.

While on later, during the late nineteenth century and onwards, the oriental themes were shifted towards depicting the chaotic socio-cultural scenarios of the modern British-influenced society of Calcutta. These are known as the Occidental theme. During this time, patuas started to show the affairs of elite-class Bengali men (Bhadralok Babus), their westernised and extravagant lifestyle practices, vulgarities, different occupations of society, crime scenes, etc., through their paintings. It has been fairly assumed that the artists had excellent observational power and painting skills so that they would have easily depicted the vulgarity, sarcasm, and everyday life of modern urban society through their paintings. Several thrilling crimes have been represented with the help of Kalighat Paintings. The most exciting and burning event in 1873, popularly known as the Tarakeswar Murder Case was incredibly depicted through the Kalighat paintings. A young married girl named Elokeshi was beheaded by her husband named Nabin Chandra Banerjee (Wikipedia., n.d.). This was the most shaking event at that time in British India. A young man, Nabin killed his wife due to hearing the affair of Elokeshi with a priest locally known as *Mahants* of the Tarakeswar temple. One day Nabin beheaded his wife with a sharp dagger used in every Bengali household called *Aash Bonti* and surrendered to the police. During the late nineteenth century, Kalighat artists painted this thrilling event with their magical touch of brushes. Kalighat paintings of the Tarakeswar Murder case reached the masses all over Bengal. At this point, the lack of media was compensated by the Kalighat Patachitras. Patuas did not stop only depicting the murder case but also were interested in the picturization of sarcasms of the elite class Babus of Kolkata. The elite class Bengali men influenced by Western culture during the nineteenth century were called *Babu* (Fig 5). The appearance of Babu's illustration is a modish rich gentleman of society, with nicely combed oily hair, holding the end of their dhoti and wearing a Punjabi coat, they used to chew betel leaf or smoke hookah (Sanyal, P. 2013). The extramarital affairs of *Babus* with *Bibis*, scandals, drunkenness, spending money on wine and prostitutes, objurgation by the *Bibis* (Fig 4), etc, were finely depicted by the patuas through their paintings. Hence it has been clear from the above discussion that Kalighat paintings were the mirror of the modern urbanised society of Calcutta during the nineteenth century.

Strikingly, the strong position and status of higher middle-class women of Calcutta are also wonderfully depicted in the Kalighat paintings. The everyday lifestyle of the women of Calcutta during the nineteenth century is illustrated in the light of Kalighat paintings. Women of higher middle-class

families from Calcutta are studying, playing musical instruments, being entertained by the servants and attendants, playing with their pets, their sexuality, and luxurious life, etc have been depicted meticulously in Kalighat paintings. It is interesting to note that these themes are very common in Mughal Miniature paintings but not in rural Bengal. Kalighat paintings wonderfully presented these themes to Bengal (Archer, G.A., 1971). Eventually, the daily lifestyles of middle-class Bengali households such as housewives, women cooking in the kitchen, a Vaishnava priest or *Bostom* coming to beg, the mother breastfeeding her baby, etc were nicely portrayed through the Kalighat Patachitras. Several types of occupations in Calcutta and Bengal, such as Fisherman or *Dhibar*, *Bhistiwala* or water carrier, Cobbler, Barber, Carpenters, Artisans, Brahmins, and Wrestlers have been intricately picturized through the Kalighat Paintings.

Instead of having proper education, the painters had tremendous analytical and artistic sense. They applied their inherent knowledge to paint several subjects based on the Bengali proverbs. Bengali proverbs had a great influence on Kalighat paintings. Several paintings, based on proverbs are: *Alaler Ghorer Dulal*, *Bou er Bhera* (sheepish lover), *Beral Tapaswi* (a saint Cat), *Sheyal Pandit* (a knowledgeable fox), etc.

Animals are also a potent feature of Kalighat paintings. *Patuas* meticulously depicted the figures and behaviours of animals. Animals were drawn as both single figures and accompanied by people. The behaviours of animals in the household such as a cat sitting in the kitchen for fish, the woman running with a broom behind a cat, a water Snake swallowing fish, a dog following his master, a woman giving grains to the pigeons, and nourishing a peacock, etc. The famous single-figured animals that were shown in patachitras are cats eating lobster, tiger attacking leopards, crows, etc. The famous natural history drawings of animals influenced by British technique that has shown in patachitras are a cat eating a lobster (Fig 7), a tiger, an attacking leopard, a rui fish, fresh-water prawns, cranes (Archer, G.A. 1971), etc.

FEATURES OF PAINTINGS

Kalighat painting is popular for its idiosyncratic nature and simplistic way of drawing. Previously, the drawings were made on cloth which was very time-consuming but later, for getting more money, the *patuas* started to draw the paintings on paper. The methods of drawing involved multiple stages. According to the eminent art enthusiast Mukul Dey, one artist at first outlined with a pencil, after that, another artist gave the colours, different shades of the muscles and other body parts, and the end, border lines were drawn by the final artist with the help of lamp black. Another well-known art collector, Ajit Ghose, has described the Kalighat Painting style as The lines are drawn in whole figures in such a way that it clearly defines where the artist first touched the brush on paper and where it finished the work. It has been evident from the paintings that the use of lines and contours while drawing the figures are important features.

A salient feature of Kalighat paintings is the use of watercolours influenced by the British (Archer, G.A., 1971). Colours used for paintings were traditionally produced from natural substances. Pastes of hibiscus and rose petals, crushed leaves of teak tree used for red dye. While the Aparajita flower (*Clitoria Ternatea linn*) and Indigo were abundantly used for the shades of blue, rice grains and lamp inks served black, turmeric roots were crushed and pasted that were used to produce yellow, and different kinds of leaves used for making shades of green (Bhowmick, C, A. 2017). Mixing of several fruit pulps, such as gums of bel fruit (wood apple) and crushed tamarind seeds were used to give

different colour effects and media. Other colours such as silver made from colloidal tin was mainly used to show the jewellery and pearls of figures (Chaudhuri, S., n.d.).

The most attractive features of Kalighat paintings were their distinctive styles of figures. *Patuas* wonderfully painted the figures by observing the people of Kolkata at that time. The women portrayed in Kalighat paintings were bulky in shape similar to the Bengali household woman. They were depicted as heavy-muscled, well-breasted, with curly hair and large, extended eyes called *Potol Chera Chokh* (Fig 8). The women of Calcutta and Bengal followed a unique style of wearing a saree known as *the Aat Poure* style, which is also a prominent feature of the appearance of women in the Kalighat painting style. The elite class Bengali man also featured in Kalighat paintings as the *patuas* observed in Calcutta. The men have a fair complexion, are well-dressed, nicely parted hair, have a mustache, etc. The appearance of the Bengali woman influenced the artists to draw the goddesses in the same style. Therefore, metaphorically in Kalighat paintings, the attires of deities appeared as the higher middle-class Bengali woman of Calcutta during the nineteenth century.

REVIVAL OF PAINTINGS

The middle to late nineteenth century is considered the golden age of Kalighat paintings. After the early twentieth century, Kalighat paintings started to decline. According to W. G. Archer the practice of Kalighat paintings had completely ceased after 1930 (Sanyal, P. 2013). When painters shifted from the oriental to the occidental theme and were showing the lewdness of Bengali elite class people of Calcutta, people from the higher middle-class society deliberately neglected and refused to accept the artworks of Kalighat painters. Due to the occurrence of cheap oleographs and lithographs in the Indian markets, the demand for Kalighat paintings was declining. German traders extended their path of business when they observed that the glazed, coloured, and printed lithographs had tremendous demand from the people of Calcutta. They started to send more copies of printed lithographs to make a smooth way for the extinction of Kalighat paintings (Sanyal, P. 2013). Previously, the Kalighat paintings were commonly seen in the households of Kolkata, but now these paintings are very rarely observed. Although the names of famous Kalighat painters can be traced from oral traditions. Among them, Nibaran Chandra Ghosh, Kali Charan Ghosh, Nilmani Das, Balaram Das, and Gopal Das, have kept their contributions in the genre of Kalighat School of Paintings (Archer, G.A., 1971).

Despite the disappearance of the Kalighat school of paintings, some British people tried to conserve this art form. In 1879, when the fame of Kalighat paintings was at its peak, two famous paintings on secular themes named *The Jackal Raja's Court* and *A Babu seated on a chair, playing a sitar* were collected by the Victoria and Albert Museum of London. Eventually, foreign travellers also brought these paintings with them as souvenir items. But after the decay of Kalighat Paintings, several foreign travellers collected several Kalighat Paintings and brought those with them from Calcutta. Rudyard Kipling, the son of John Lockwood Kipling donated 233 collections of Kalighat Paintings to the Victoria and Albert Museum on 8th August 1917 (Victoria and Albert Museum, V&A. n.d.).

Hence, the revival process was started even after the loss of its fame from Kalighat. British travellers, artists, and curators decided to conserve these wonderful pieces of art to show the art beauty of Calcutta. The main reasons behind the revival of Kalighat paintings are primarily due to the urge to take back and conserve these explicit art forms. Famous painter Jamini Roy was also influenced by Kalighat paintings and applied the styles to his painting style (Chaudhary, S., n.d.). At present, some of the painters of Bengal are still practicing the Kalighat Paintings in their distinguishable styles.

Among them, Bhaskar Chitrakar from Kalighat, Anwar Chitrakar from Pingla and Kalam Patua are the pioneers of the Kalighat Paintings.

In the modern world, due to the unending internet and web sources, people can easily know about their own culture, indigenous art forms, and their legacy. Therefore, for various purposes (e.g. research, decoration, beautification, etc.), the Kalighat paintings are now being widely used.

PRESENT STATUS OF KALIGHAT PAINTINGS

As discussed earlier at present Kalighat paintings have found their revival through the practice of several artists, interest in Indigenous art forms, through the exhibitions, decoration, etc. It is noteworthy to mention that the actual form of Kalighat paintings has now been moderated by the artists. This is due to the presence of their style and preferences. Therefore, the authenticity of Kalighat paintings has been modified. Several pioneers who are practicing Kalighat Paintings at present are: Bhaskar Chitrakar, Anwar Chitrakar, Kalam Patua, and others.

Among them, only Bhaskar Chitrakar lives at Patuapara which is an adjoining neighbourhood of Kalighat. When the paintings lost their glory after 1930, the patuas started to live in a colony near Kalighat Temple for an alternative source of income. Their colony is named Patuapara as per the settlement of patuas. The painters started making clay idols instead of painting patachitras during the middle twentieth century. Now at Patuapara most of the artists have been involved in making clay idols from inheritance. According to Bhaskar Chitrakar, he is the only descendant of Kalighat painters left at Kalighat. He is still practicing this antique art form with his style. His paintings are so vibrant and depict several interesting subjects. The amalgamation of mythological figures and the daily life of the Bengali people of Kolkata is one of the characteristic features of his painting. Contemporary topics, such as the life of Babu-Bibi of Kolkata, and the socio-cultural issues are also pleasantly portrayed by him. According to him, the Mughal miniature style influenced him to add the touch of Mughal style to his paintings. The influence of various art styles can be seen in his paintings. Although he said that his paintings were mainly purchased by the Bengali people who lived abroad and foreigners. In Kolkata, his customers are very limited.

Anwar Chitrakar is also a famous artist in the Kalighat genre of paintings. He learned the Kalighat painting style from his father, a renowned painter, Amar Chitrakar (Gandharva, A., 2024). He belongs to Pingla, a village in West Medinipur district in West Bengal. Pingla is now the main centre where the Kalighat School of Painting is practiced by the artists. However the art forms of Pingla are different from actual Kalighat paintings. Anwar Chitrakar has also been influenced by Kalighat paintings and the figures of patachitras are similar to the Kalighat paintings. His style of painting is unique in the sense of its intricate detailing. This style is different from actual Kalighat paintings in terms of its detailed finishing. Apart from mythological figures and events, his paintings offer contemporary socio-cultural scenarios. It is most interesting. that he is still using natural dyes in his painting to give it a heritage essence (Artisera, n.d.).

Kalam Patua is also an eminent painter who popularised the Kalighat School of paintings at present. By profession, he is a government employee at India Post. But his magnificent paintings have taken back the legacy of Kalighat paintings. His astonishing styles of paintings offer the most distinguishing figures and events from literature, proverbs, and sarcasm, besides the mythological and contemporary themes. His paintings are the testimony of everyday urban pictures that were observed

in Calcutta during the middle to late nineteenth century. Kalam Patua is one of those who has been practicing Kalighat paintings following the original style. He also hosts several workshops on Kalighat paintings and teaches participants how to draw Kalighat Paintings. However, apart from professional artists other painters are now very much interested in the paintings of Kalighat patachitras for their delicate and distinguishing features.

In case of the revival, the Kalighat temple precinct has a notable contribution. In 2024, Kalighat temple got its first renovation after its establishment in 1809. On the walls of shop counters (Puja item shop) in front of the temple, Kalighat Paintings are presented. The paintings of divine figures in Kalighat painting styles are painted on the walls. Both old and new styles of paintings have shown (Fig 13 and 14). Being the birthplace of Kalighat paintings, again its arrival at Kalighat is considered a great achievement for the art heritage of Kolkata. The Indian Museum (Fig 14), Victoria Memorial Hall, Asutosh Museum at Calcutta University, Gurusaday Museum, and Metcalfe Hall in Kolkata are the special attractions to the art lovers and enthusiasts for the rich collections of Kalighat Paintings (Bhowmick, C.A.,2017). In the Indian Museum, there is a separate art wall where only the Kalighat Paintings have been conserved and displayed. These museum displays are considered an inseparable part of the revival of Kalighat paintings. The revival of Kalighat paintings can be observed in public and recreational spaces, several cultural events, etc. *Durga Puja* is the biggest festival in Kolkata. Numerous artists make themes for pandal decoration. At present, Kalighat paintings are being used for the aesthetic appearance of pandals, idols, etc (Fig 18 & Fig 19). Interestingly, at some metro stations of Kolkata, Kalighat paintings have been depicted (Fig 16 & Fig 17) Therefore, undoubtedly these steps are necessary for the revival of the Kalighat paintings.

CONCLUSION

Kalighat paintings are considered a most significant heritage art form of Kolkata. From the mid-nineteenth to late nineteenth century, this period is considered the golden age of Kalighat paintings. The simple style and minimalistic detailing of Kalighat figures have attracted art enthusiasts across the world. Calcutta and Bengal found their socio-cultural pictures through the Kalighat Pots. Mythological figures also have been popularized in their own distinctive style through the Kalighat School of paintings. Although from the early twentieth century, these paintings were started to decline and eliminated from their birthplace after the 1930s. But the charming appearance and artistic value of these paintings had attracted the mind of artists. However, at present, the process of revival of this age-old heritage art form has been started in Kolkata and also in the rural outskirts of Bengal. Several artists have found their specialized skills by practicing the Kalighat school of paintings. It is the most fascinating about the revival of Kalighat paintings is that these paintings are again displayed at the Kalighat Temple premises, which is the heart of these paintings. This is the most ensuring step for the survival of Kalighat School of Art at its birthplace. Several museums, art galleries, and exhibition houses are also continuously trying to conserve and take back this art form to its own place. Besides the museums and exhibition centers, in some festivals, public spaces, and recreational spaces, Kalighat paintings are being displayed to enhance aesthetic beauty through their cultural extravaganza. Hence, it is absolutely worth mentioning that the inevitable artistic value of Kalighat paintings has given an extra touch to the cultural heritage and cultural milieu of Kolkata with its historical legacy and revival.

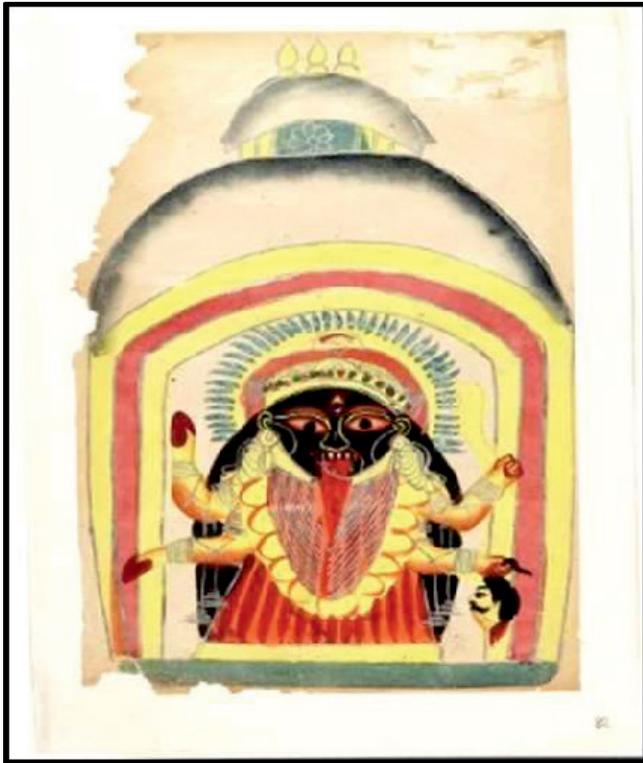


Figure 1: Goddess Kali of Kalighat Source: Wikipedia



Figure 2: Lord Shiva is playing Sitar Source: Captured by Author from Indian Museum

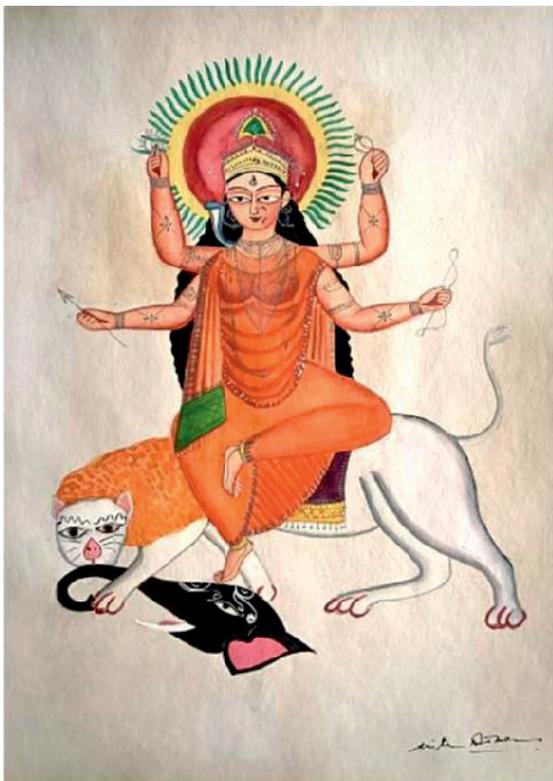


Figure 3: Jagatdhatri Source: Painting by Author

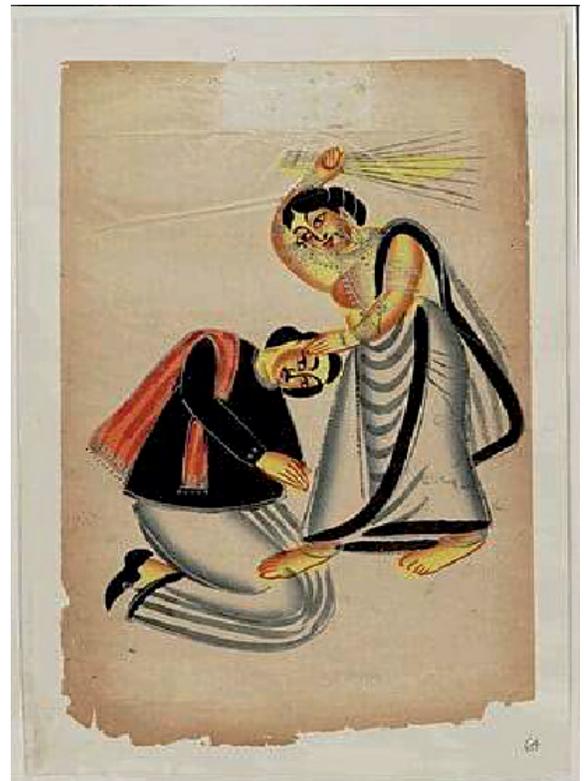


Figure 4: Bibi hitting Babu with a broom Source: Wikipedia



Figure 5: Babu of Kolkata
Source: Colonial Cities: Urbanisation, Planning and Architecture



Figure 6: The Sheepish Lover Source: Colonial Cities: Urbanisation, Planning and Architecture (Research Paper)

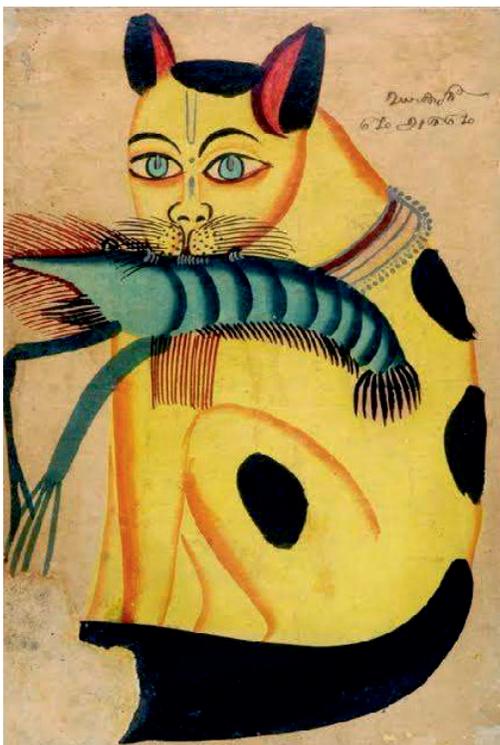


Figure 7: Cat with prawn Source: Pinterest



Figure 8: women smoking Hookah
Source: Wikipedia



Figure 9: Babu enjoying music with wife and pet.
Artist: Bhaskar Chitrakar



Figure 10: Policeman's bribe
Artist: Anwar Chitrakar, 2010

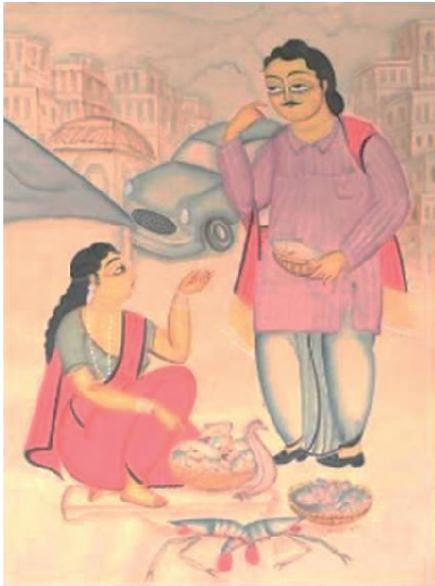


Figure 11: Babu is buying fish
Artist: Kalam Patua



Figure 12: Kalighat paintings (New styles) on the wall of Puja shops at Kalighat.
Source: Captured by Author



Figure 13: Kalighat Paintings (Old styles) on the walls of souvenirs at Kalighat
Source: Captured by Author

Figure 14: Kalighat Paintings at the art gallery of the Indian Museum
Source: Captured by Author

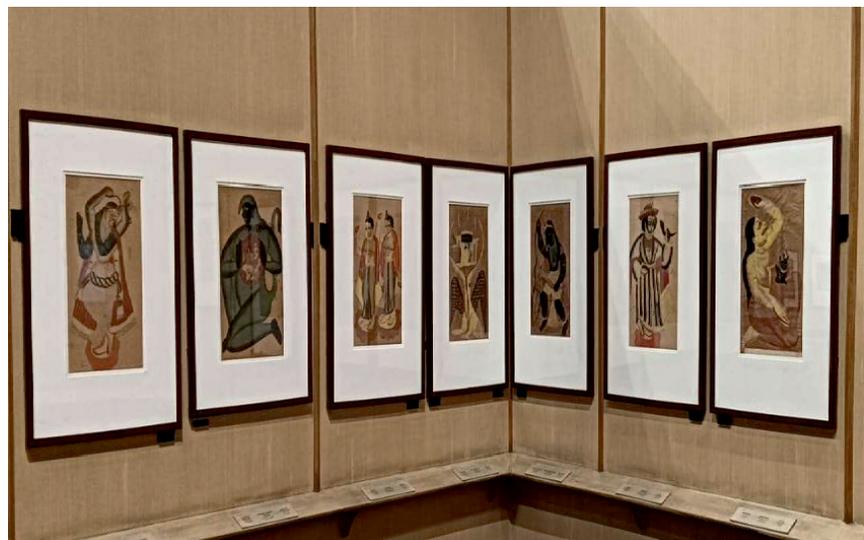




Figure 15: Mahant offering pregnancy medicine to Elokeshi

Source: Captured by Author from Metcalfe Hall, Kolkata



Figure 16: Modern Lady of Calcutta

Source: Captured by Author from Girish Park Metro station Kolkata



Figure 17: Wrestling with a Tiger

Source: Captured by Author from Girish Park Metro Station Kolkata



Figure 19: Decoration of Durga Idol's chalcitra or background with Kalighat paintings

Source: Captured by Author from a Durga Puja pandal at Dumdum, Kolkata



Figure 18: Goddess Kali of Kalighat

Source: Captured by Author from a Durga Puja pandal at Alipore, Kolkata

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