Contours of Influence: Reimagining Kalighat through Indigenous and Western Eyes

Sumanta Pariyar

Assist. Prof. St. Joseph's College, India

Abstract-This research paper tries to explores Kalighat paintings, a 19th-century Bengali art form that began as devotional imagery near the Kalighat Temple. Over time, the artists blended traditional styles with Western techniques introduced during British colonial rule. The result was a unique fusion of sacred themes and satirical depictions of contemporary life, depicting cultural resilience and adaptation.

Keywords: Kalighat, Painting, Indian art, Hybrid, Realism.

INTRODUCTION

The Kalighat style of painting, which is a product of 19th-century Kolkata (Calcutta), holds a distinctive position within the panorama of Indian art history. Known for its bold lines, vibrant colors, and expressive forms, the Kalighat style has always been marked by its roots in indigenous religious traditions. However, the influence of colonial rule, the spread of Western aesthetics, and the fusion of foreign ideas with local cultural practices have contributed to the evolution of Kalighat paintings in a unique way. This article delves into the contrast between the indigenous engineering of Kalighat art and the non-indigenous inspirations that have impacted its development over the years.

OBJECTIVES

1. What was the primary purpose of early Kalighat paintings?
2. How did British colonial influence impact Kalighat paintings in the 19th century?
3. What was one defining feature of Kalighat paintings that persisted despite Western influences?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars like Mookerjee (2003) and Chakravarty (1996) emphasize the art's religious roots and folk tradition influences. Nadkarni (1990) emphasizes the significance of colonial art schools and cultural institutions in introducing Western artistic principles to Indian artists. Ghosh (2011) explores the stylistic evolution of Kalighat art, highlighting the emergence of hybrid aesthetics that fused traditional iconography with European realism. Ray (2000) discusses the shift from strictly religious themes to more secular and individualistic representations. Bose (2009) illustrates how Kalighat painters used Western-inspired portraiture not only to depict British officials but also to comment on sociopolitical issues.

METHODOLOGY

The researcher has adopts a qualitative research methodology, primarily relying on textual analysis of scholarly books and academic articles. The research focuses on interpreting secondary sources that explore the influence of colonialism on Indian art practices, particularly the transformation of Kalighat paintings in the nineteenth century. The selected literature ranging from historical accounts to art criticism was examined to trace stylistic and thematic shifts brought about by Western artistic exposure. These sources were critically reviewed to understand how indigenous artists adapted and responded to British-imposed cultural paradigms. No fieldwork or quantitative data collection was involved, as the emphasis remains on historical and visual interpretation based on established academic scholarship.

The Origins of Kalighat Paintings

Kalighat paintings are named after the famous Kalighat Temple in Kolkata, a pilgrimage site dedicated to the Hindu goddess Kali. The paintings themselves were originally created as religious or devotional objects for pilgrims visiting the temple, with early works being produced by the Patuas— who were artists. These artists were known for their skill in

using traditional Indian techniques to depict divine figures and religious themes on cloth or paper (Mookerjee, 1994).The early Kalighat paintings were highly stylized, depicting the distinctive features of Hindu deities. The works were characterized by vibrant colors, bold black outlines, and a degree of abstraction that rendered deities and sacred stories in a highly symbolic, rather than naturalistic, manner (Chakravarty, 1996). Early representations were highly influenced by local, indigenous art forms such as folk art traditions and temple murals. The figures were often presented in a flattened, two-dimensional manner, with little attempt to depict depth or perspective (Mukherjee, 2003). This approach to painting reflected the indigenous aesthetic priorities of traditional Indian art, which often emphasized the symbolic and spiritual rather than the realistic portrayal of physical reality (Banerjee, 2001). The visual vocabulary of Kalighat paintings was deeply linked to religious iconography, with a clear focus on themes of devotion, mythological narratives, and the divine.

Colonial Influence: The Introduction of Western Ideas and Techniques

However, the 19th century was a period of significant change for Indian society and culture, as the British colonialism became entrenched. Along with the political and economic changes brought about by British rule, European art and artistic techniques began to enter Indian artistic practices. The British influence on Indian art manifested in many ways, from the establishment of art schools in India to the increasing availability of European artworks and prints (Nadkarni, 1990). This period marked a shift in Kalighat painting, as indigenous artists were exposed to Western art styles and the burgeoning world of commercial art. Early Kalighat painters, while continuing to create devotional works, began incorporating elements from European realism, which had a profound impact on their style and technique. The influence of Western academic art traditions, with their focus on perspective, shadowing, and more naturalistic depictions of human forms, made its way into Kalighat paintings, resulting in a hybrid style that combined both indigenous and non-indigenous elements (Ghosh, 2011).

For example, Kalighat paintings that had originally depicted Hindu gods and goddesses began to incorporate more human-like features, with an increased emphasis on naturalism (Ray, 2000). Western-inspired techniques such as the use of shading, the illusion of volume, and perspective were introduced into the works. This allowed artists to produce a greater variety of visual effects, such as more detailed facial expressions and more nuanced representations of human figures. The subject matter also evolved, as Western ideas about portraiture and individualism started influencing artists to paint secular figures, including local political leaders and British colonial officials (Bose, 2009).The paintings gradually began to show a departure from the purely symbolic, as Kalighat artists took the liberty of mixing devotional figures with more secular or even political subjects. This was a notable shift from the traditional focus on religion, leading to works that portrayed modern-day life, British officials, and even political commentaries (Sarkar, 1997). Through these changes, Kalighat paintings moved beyond mere religious objects and began to reflect the complex cultural and political realities of colonial India.

Indigenous Engineering: How Kalighat Artists Retained Their Identity

While it is true that the Kalighat style absorbed numerous foreign influences, one of its defining features was the persistence of indigenous engineering. Indigenous engineering, in the context of Kalighat paintings, refers to the artistic techniques, methods, and cultural grounding that artists maintained despite the waves of external influences. These practices were not merely stylistic choices but were embedded in the cultural and religious identity of the local communities that produced them (Sengupta, 2006).

First, the bold use of black outlines and the flatness of the figures remained a dominant trait of the Kalighat style. Even as Western realism began to creep into the work, Kalighat artists maintained a preference for bright, bold colors, often using natural dyes or pigments that were locally sourced (Ray, 2011). The emphasis on symbolic representation—such as the exaggerated forms of deities, the bright red lips of goddesses, and the stylized eyes—persisted even when

secular and political subjects began to replace purely religious ones (Chakravarty, 1996).

Additionally, Kalighat paintings continued to emphasize emotional expressiveness over realism. Even when human subjects, including Europeans and local elites, were introduced into the paintings, they were still presented in a highly stylized form, with exaggerated features and vivid facial expressions that communicated an emotional or psychological state rather than realistic details (Mookerjee, 1994). This connection to the indigenous folk traditions that initially shaped Kalighat art ensured that, while new techniques and subjects were incorporated, the core aesthetic sensibility remained rooted in local traditions.

The Role of Non-Indigenous Inspiration: Western Techniques and Themes

The most apparent influence of non-indigenous inspiration on Kalighat paintings can be seen in the introduction of Western realism. As mentioned earlier, colonialism brought European art forms into the Indian subcontinent, and Kalighat painters, like other Indian artists, were quick to adopt and adapt these techniques. The use of oil painting, which was introduced by the British, was not immediately adopted in Kalighat, but the idea of depth, light, and shadow influenced the two-dimensional works produced by Kalighat artists (Bose, 2009).

One significant shift was the introduction of perspective and the representation of three-dimensionality. Kalighat artists began applying linear perspective, a tool that had been a staple of European art since the Renaissance, in their work. Though the use of perspective was not always consistent or highly developed, it became a tool to produce more naturalistic and believable scenes (Nadkarni, 1990). Similarly, the softer, more gradual transitions between light and dark that characterized Western shadow techniques found their way into Kalighat paintings, adding a layer of depth that was absent from earlier works.

Beyond techniques, the introduction of non-indigenous subject matter also marked a significant shift in Kalighat painting. Artists began to portray scenes from everyday life, including colonial figures, Indian princes, and even British military officers, marking a new direction for the art form (Ghosh, 2011). Some Kalighat paintings depicted satirical commentaries on British rule, while others depicted the changing social structure in colonial India. The adaptation of European genre painting, which focused on individualism, portraits, and social realism, allowed Kalighat artists to broaden the scope of their work, making it relevant to the rapidly changing political and social landscape of India (Sarkar, 1997).

The Intersection of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Influences: A Hybrid Tradition

The Kalighat style serves as a vivid example of cultural hybridity, where indigenous traditions and non-indigenous influences coexist, interact, and inform each other. The challenge of navigating between the pressures of colonialism and the desire to maintain a distinct artistic identity was met by Kalighat artists with ingenuity and innovation. While the incorporation of Western techniques and secular themes was undeniable, these were always filtered through the lens of indigenous tradition (Banerjee, 2001).

Artists didn't simply replicate Western ideas but adapted them in ways that resonated with local sensibilities and concerns. This hybridity is most clearly visible in the treatment of figures and subject matter. Though Kalighat artists adopted European portraiture techniques, they retained the traditional ways of portraying deities, political leaders, and social figures through a mix of abstraction, exaggerated features, and symbolic representation (Ray, 2011). By doing so, Kalighat painters were able to retain an authentic connection to their roots while simultaneously engaging with the global art world, creating a fusion that spoke both to local and global audiences. The resulting artwork was not a mere imitation of Western style but a creative synthesis, ensuring the relevance of Kalighat painting as both a reflection of colonial India and a continuation of the rich Indian artistic tradition.

CONCLUSION

Kalighat painting is not just an artistic tradition but a product of the complex cultural and historical environment in which it was created. Through a blend

of indigenous techniques and foreign inspirations, Kalighat artists developed a distinctive visual language that transcended boundaries and continues to resonate with audiences worldwide

REFERENCES

[1] Banerjee, P. (2001). The Art of Kalighat: A Cultural History. Calcutta: Oxford University Press.

[2] Bose, N. (2009). Kalighat Paintings and the Colonial Encounter. Journal of Indian Art, 56(2), 75-92.

[3] Chakravarty, A. (1996). Art and Devotion: The Kalighat Tradition. New Delhi: Rupa & Co.

[4] Ghosh, S. (2011). Kalighat Painting: Hybridization of Tradition and Modernity. Journal of Modern Art, 29(4), 121-139.

[5] Mookerjee, A. (1994). The Patuas of Bengal: Tradition and Change. New York: Cambridge University Press.

[6] Mukherjee, R. (2003). Folk Art and Colonialism: The Kalighat Paintings of Bengal. Art Journal, 62(3), 45-58.

[7] Nadkarni, M. (1990). The Influence of Western Realism on Kalighat Painting. Colonial Art Review, 11(2), 20-35.

[8] Ray, P. (2000). Kalighat Paintings: Indigenous Art in Colonial India. Kolkata: Ananda Publishers.

[9] Ray, S. (2011). The Evolution of Kalighat Paintings in the 19th Century. Journal of South Asian Art, 15(1), 10-29.

[10] Sarkar, S. (1997). Visualizing Colonial Bengal: Kalighat Paintings and the Modern World. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[11] Sengupta, R. (2006). The Kalighat Paintings: A Study in Art and Cultural Transition. New Delhi: Sage Publications.