



Negotiating Performativity and Commodification: The Artistic Shift from *Pattachitra* to *Kalighat* Paintings

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Abstract

Pattachitra, a traditional scroll painting art form that relies on oral storytelling and ritualistic modes, transitioned into single-sheet *Kalighat* paintings in the nineteenth century colonial Bengal. This marked a significant change in painting techniques, iconography, subject matter, and audience engagement. Using Igor Kopytoff's framework of cultural biography of things, the paper traces the trajectory of this evolution from ritualised performance to commodified market goods and eventual museumisation. Situating these art forms in the framework of commodification and singularisation, the paper explores how traditional folk art forms accommodate changing sociocultural dynamics, performance, and cultural resistance. Using Richard Bauman's insights on metacommunication and framing, the paper analyses how the performative aspect of *Pattachitra* was reconfigured in *Kalighat* paintings through bold stylistic exaggeration and satire, instead of the oral-visual storytelling of *Pattachitra*.

Keywords: Commodification, *Kalighat* Paintings, *Pattachitra*, Performativity, Singularisation

Introduction

Folk art is often associated with tradition and continuity and is regarded as a site for upholding cultural uniqueness. Practiced mostly by rural artists, it is regarded as an unchanging time capsule, a residual home for cultural uniqueness to assuage the anxiety produced by the idea of losing cultural heritage in globalised urban centres. However, folk art traditions are in no way temporally and spatially fixed and dynamically adapt to changing socio-cultural

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contexts, often retaining certain core elements. The transition from *Pattachitra*, a ritualised and performative tradition of scroll painting, to *Kalighat* paintings, an urbanised art form, reflects such a transition in the visual lexicon of Bengal. While *Pattachitra* was highly embedded in oral narration and communal performance, *Kalighat* paintings became commercialised single-sheet artworks for an urban audience. This was not just a stylistic change, it was an alteration that fundamentally reconfigured the function of art, how audiences interacted with the form, and how it was manipulated in the hands of the artists. It shows how traditional folk arts negotiated between cultural resistance and economic survival when confronted with urbanisation and commercialisation.

Igor Kopytoff's concept of the "cultural biography" of things examines how objects gain different meanings as they move through social and economic contexts. Kopytoff asserts that much like humans, objects also have a "cultural biography", which showcases how the status of an object changes within society. The objects go through a process of commoditisation and singularisation, where commoditisation is the process of ascribing market value to an object, placing it in a process of transaction and singularisation is when it is removed from the market and considered singular and unique. He problematises these processes and argues that "the same thing can be treated as a commodity at one time and not at another . . . the same thing may, at the same time, be seen as a commodity by one person and as something else by the other" (64). Employing the framework, the paper examines how *Kalighat* paintings were commoditised as they moved away from the oral-visual storytelling mode of *Pattachitra* to a static frame in an urbanised milieu. However, it argues that for the *patua* artists, the art form was not just a commodity but a medium for expressing their alienation in the Westernised metropolis, attributing a singular status beyond market value. The study contends that although the paintings of *Kalighat* lost the seeming performative element of *Pattachitra*, the artists used visuals to reinterpret the performance. Using the concept of "metacommunication and framing" proposed by Richard Bauman, it can be seen that the performance aspects were reconfigured in *Kalighat* paintings as the paintings were framed within the visuality itself. By examining the changes in artistic methods, iconography,

and the intended use of both art forms, a change in folk tradition is identified as it deals with shifting cultural contexts and social realities.

The name *Pattachitra* comes from the Sanskrit “Patta”ⁱ, denoting “cloth,” and “Chitra”, referring to “picture,” describing its intrinsic medium: scroll paintings of narrative. *Pattachitra* was practiced traditionally by *patuas* (or *chitrakars*) and fuses visual imagery with oral recitation—*pater gaan*—when the rhythmic unrolling of scrolls (*pat khelano*), synchronised with song and hand gesture, transforms static images as an active narrative experience. This multimodal practice was not simply an art form but a ritualistic and communal experience deeply embedded in religious, social, and cultural life. The historical trajectory of *Pattachitra* extends across centuries, with early examples preserved in collections such as the Chester Beatty Library, which houses a Seventeenth-century *Pattachitra* depicting the *Bhagavata Purana* (Das 102). The *patuas* or *chitrakbaumas* of Bengal practice *Pattachitra*, a vibrant oral and visual tradition in which they produce intricate scroll paintings that function as both artistic and performing media. These scrolls, called *pattas*, tell stories from mythology, religion, and popular culture in successive panels, each containing multiple visual cues that guide the viewer through the story. *Pattachitra*’s themes, which include stories like *Chandi Pata*, *Durga Pata*, *Manasa Pata*, and *Krishna-Lila Pata*, is based on divine intervention, cosmic struggles, and moral lessons. The performative dimension of *Pattachitra* necessitates its analysis as a dynamic form of folk performance rather than a static artistic tradition.

Richard Bauman, in his work *Verbal Art as Performance*, shifts the analytical focus from folklore as static cultural material to folklore as a communicative practice, emphasising the dual nature of artistic action—the enactment of folklore—and artistic event—the performance situation encompassing performer, art form, audience, and setting (290). Central to Bauman’s theory is “framing,” a process through which “metacommunicative” cues signal to an audience that what follows is a performance rather than a straightforward representation. Drawing on Erving Goffman, he argues that “framing” is achieved through culturally conventionalised markers

that structure audience perception, ensuring that performance is recognised as distinct from everyday communication as he asserts “performance sets up, or represents, an interpretative frame within which the messages being communicated are to be understood, and that this frame contrasts with at least one other frame, the literal” (Bauman 292). While verbal performances rely on poetic forms, distinctive speech registers, or formulaic openings, visual performances employ exaggeration, symbolic distortion, and established artistic conventions to cue their performative nature. Crucially, Bauman emphasises that performance is inherently interactional—the performer actively structures the audience’s engagement through framing devices that shape how the message is interpreted.

Bauman’s framework provides a critical lens for understanding how visual storytelling traditions employ framing mechanisms to structure audience engagement. In this context, *Pattachitra* emerges not as a fixed text but as a dynamic performative act in which the painted scroll serves as a visual script, animated through the *patuas* oral narration and physical gestures. Even though these scrolls contain static images, *Pattachitra* is distinctive in that it is animated through the narrativisation of the performer. The painted scroll serves as a visual script, which is animated by the *patua* as he combines it with songs and expressive gestures. The artistic and symbolic meanings are tied to the contexts in which it is created and performed. As such, it functions as a multimodal, participatory experience as opposed to a passive visual object. As a framing technique, unfolding the scroll signifies the change from casual conversation to an immersive storytelling act. The paintings have a hierarchical composition that showcases divine figures through structured iconography that asserts their sacred authority. They also reinforce the divinity through oral narration, where the *patua* reciting mythological tales ensures a controlled, linear engagement with the narrative.

As a folk art, *Pattachitra* is a multimodal performative tradition in which meaning is created through the interaction of visual, oral, and gestural modes of expression rather than being restricted to one semiotic mode. Kress and van Leeuwen explain multimodality as the

combination of various representational modes, including images and spoken or written words, constructing meaning within particular sociocultural contexts (20). In *Pattachitra*, meaning is achieved with the interaction of several modes—visual imagery, oral narration, gesture, and rhythmic performance—transforming the painted scrolls from static paintings into a fluid, adaptive, and interactive storytelling practice. The narrative structure of *Pattachitra* challenges conventional conceptions of storytelling. Unlike single-frame paintings with predetermined meanings, *Pattachitra* offers a flexible narrative structure that adapts to its performative context. This adaptability enabled the form to remain relevant across diverse audiences and historical periods. As Balraj Khanna in the book *Kalighat: Indian Popular Painting, 1800-1930* observes that *Pattachitra* functioned as a multifaceted cultural medium, asserting that: “This was art, religion, education, and entertainment all rolled in one newsreel, a one-man museum of the moving image, poetry and song” (20). Outside of Brahminical literary traditions, the *patuas* reclaimed narrative authority through their art. These artists incorporated religious and mythological tales into the everyday lives of marginalised rural communities by adapting them orally, in contrast to Brahminical bards, who mainly relied on canonical Sanskrit texts. This creative agency positioned *Pattachitra* as an assertion of cultural identity through vernacular visual and oral traditions. Crucially, *Pattachitra* functions not as a static form bound by fixed textual sources but as a fluid site of meaning-making, continuously adapting as it travels across geographical and temporal boundaries. As it travels across regions, new socio-cultural influences are integrated while retaining core elements of its origins. This syncretism is evident in depictions of Manasa Devi, a regional snake goddess of Bengal (see fig. 1). Ananda Coomaraswamy and Sister Nivedita, in *Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists*, interpret the legend of Manasa Devi as reflecting the historical conflict between Shiva worship and local female deities in Bengal. Over time, Manasa (or Padma) was integrated into Shaiva traditions as a form of Shakti. They note that, for many worshippers, the mother goddess remains more immediate and personal than the distant Shiva, who, in popular legends, is depicted with human-like qualities (323–30). *Pattachitra*’s narratives visually negotiate her presence rather than fully assimilating her into Brahminical frameworks. In contrast to

textual versions that eventually make amends for their differences, the *patas* frequently highlights Chand Saudagar's (the merchant) (Endnote ii) disobedience, leaving the resolution vague. This suggests that *patuas* prioritise localised interpretations over strict textual fidelity.



Fig. 1. Manasa Pata

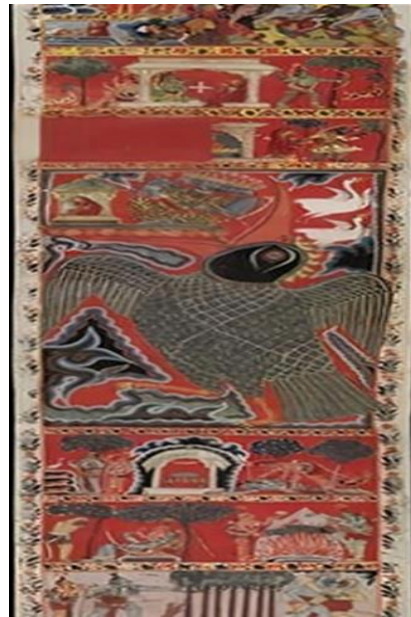


Fig. 2. Ramayana Pata

Amitabh Sengupta, in his book *Scroll Paintings of Bengal: Art in the Village*, attributes this fluidity of performance and representation to the *patuas* storytelling process, which largely relies on oral transmission and collective reinterpretation (20). By drawing upon inherited myths, lived experiences, and contemporary events—ranging from political upheavals to natural calamities—*patuas* ensure their narratives resonate with audiences. Multiple versions of the same narrative coexist, bearing witness to local sensibilities and contexts. Kapila Vatsyayan, in the foreword to Sengupta's book, makes this observation, arguing that although mythology and heroic actions are the core subject matter of *Pattachitra*, the tradition is

never limited to a strict textual foundation. As she claims, “[t]he *patua* is not illustrating a verbal text. He is creating a verbal and visual text, as also a kinetic text, simultaneously. Spontaneity and simultaneity are his artistic impulses which he still follows” (9). Such flexibility can be seen in the reinterpretation of the *Ramayana* by the Bengali *patuas*, illustrating how *Pattachitra* does not re-run canonical texts but reworks them to represent local virtues and oral traditions. *Pattachitra* also differs quite significantly from Valmiki’s *Ramayana* and even Krittibas’ regional adaptation by omitting characters like Manthara and Kaikeyi in selective choices. These selective choices illustrate that the *patuas* were less interested in the written text but their flexibility reordered the epic’s moral and ethical priorities. Furthermore, the omission of violent scenes like Rama’s killing of Vali or Shambuka indicates how *patuas* gave primacy to moral virtue and divine justice over martial exploits. Pika Ghosh in her article, *The Story of a Storyteller’s Scroll* develops this point, illustrating how *patuas* rework the *Ramayana* visually through the selection of telling (170–73). In several scrolls, the narrative starts not with Rama’s exile but with Jatayu’s meeting with Dasaratha. A dominant segment is given to Jatayu’s struggle with Ravana, which is mostly unrepresented in textual versions (see Fig. 2). There are *patas* that start with the grand description of Jatayu devouring Ravana’s chariot during Sita’s abduction, visually highlighting Jatayu’s resistance as a significant moment of the epic. Such reorganisation is not arbitrary but a representation of how oral traditions determine the priorities of the *patua* artists in storytelling.

Within colonial Bengal, the rise of the urban market and the decline of ancient patronage ignited a shift away from *Pattachitra* to *Kalighat* painting, altering not only the aesthetic of the style but also the very function. The economic culture of Bengal was reshaped through British colonial domination, compelling countryside artisans to alter their practices to survive in the growing urban marketplace of Calcutta. *Pattachitra* depended upon oral narration and shared involvement. In contrast, *Kalighat* paintings developed out of the metropolitan market of colonial Calcutta, where portability and instantaneous visual recognition outweighed the sequential performance of narrative. When *patuas* moved into the city, especially around the Kalighat temple, they adjusted their creative

practice to respond to the needs of the new public—city pilgrims, merchants, and the Bengali middle class. Originally meant as souvenirs for pilgrims at the Kalighat temple, early *Kalighat* painting was still observed to hold on to the religious iconography and themes of *Pattachitra*. But pressed by the requirement for quick production, urged by temple pilgrims who ordered and paid in advance of their visit and picked it up on return, stylistic modification was imperative. The long scroll narrative paintings evolved into one-sheet paintings, with complex compositions giving way to large, simplified figures with little background detail for speedy visual recall. Even traditional homemade dyes gave way to watercolours, indicative of both the pressure of production and the needs of a newly emerging urban market.

The move from *Pattachitra* to *Kalighat* paintings demonstrates what Igor Kopytoff identifies as the “cultural biography” of things, asserting that objects adapt different meanings as they move through varying social and economic worlds. Unlike the ritual economy within which *Pattachitra* existed, being invoked by performance, *Kalighat* paintings entered the colonial economy as commodities, being pieces of art objects. The availability of mass-produced paper, the needs of urban pilgrims, and the emerging consumer culture in colonial Calcutta contributed to turning them into easily marketable commodities. These instances represent what Kopytoff identifies as the movement of objects between singularisation and commoditisation, since *Kalighat* paintings oscillated between religious piety and trade. Kopytoff contends that “in small-scale societies, the tendency is to set aside a sphere of objects that are not commoditized, whose exchange is circumscribed, and whose singularity is protected” (73). *Pattachitra* was part of this category, as it refused to be commodified since its worth lay in performance, not material possession. Yet, as *patuas* moved to colonial Calcutta and found a new urban clientele, their art was subject to a commoditisation process, wherein *Kalighat* paintings on single sheets were marketed as commodities instead of participatory art. As *Kalighat* paintings evolved, they moved away from religious iconography to indulge in bitter social satire, exaggerating and distorting figures to comment on colonial modernity and indigenous hypocrisy. This transition reflects the tension between tradition and

modernity, as artists reinterpreted their visual language to fit the altered socio-political landscape of Nineteenth century Bengal. One of the key themes of this transition was the representation of the babus—rich, Westernised Bengali elites—who came to symbolise cultural alienation and moral debasement of the new middle class. Sumanta Banerjee, in the book *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth-Century Calcutta*, observes how migrants from Bengal's countryside, bringing their traditions of folk art with them, synthesised new themes from their city environment to respond to the realities of urban life. While this critique found its expression in folk performances such as *bratas*, *kobi Gan* (poetical contests), *jatras* (folk drama), and satirical songs, it was in *Kalighat* paintings that it was most apparent (Banerjee 134-36). Tapati Guha-Thakurta explores this dynamic further in *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal*, arguing that while *Kalighat* paintings evolved in the colonial urban environment, their aesthetic sensibilities and thematic preoccupations were deeply rooted in the rural traditions (21). The migration of the *patuas* to Calcutta exposed them to new influences. However, instead of abandoning their art tradition, they adapted it to become an instrument of satire and social commentary. The negotiation of rural sensibilities and the alienation of the colonial city influenced the content and visual style of *Kalighat* paintings so that they were at once a product of their time and a resistance to it. Jyotindra Jain also places *Kalighat* paintings in the wider negotiation of colonial modernity and native traditions. At first, the paintings followed traditional religious themes, showing deities and mythological figures in contained narratives. As the style evolved, artists moved beyond religious iconography to depict contemporary social events, actively responding to the rapidly transforming world around them. This was not simply thematic but a visual development. While earlier paintings were contained within their pictorial space, later ones broke the fourth wall, with figures turning outward to face the viewer directly (Jain 13). This innovation entailed a move from a passive narrative to a more confrontational and interactive art experience, emphasising the performative nature of *Kalighat* paintings.

While *Pattachitra* accessed a performative and communal culture of narrative, *Kalighat* paintings expressed a new form of visual modernity that was at the heart of the visual vocabulary of colonial Bengal. They conjoined religious iconography with contemporary life by illustrating gods and goddesses as everyday middle-class protagonists, frequently represented in recognisable domestic settings. They also satirised Westernised values and provided commentary on affairs of the day by recontextualising mythological narratives. By bringing the sacred and profane together, religious figures were made more relatable and became conduits for social commentary, allowing the artists to speak to their audience both sardonically and reverently. A classic instance of this tension is presented in the *Kalighat* painting by Kali Charan Ghosh titled *Woman Trampling on Her Lover* (see Fig. 3). The painting recontextualises the traditional iconography of *Kali* standing over *Shiva*, translating it into a contemporary scenario where a mistress overmasters her lover. By accessing religious imagery, the composition enhances its satire of gender and morality, presenting the courtesan as a transgressive and overwhelming figure. This showcases how *Kalighat* painters reconfigured sacred symbols to enhance their satire, employing tradition not as inheritance but as an active tool of social commentary. In his reading of *Kalighat* paintings, Jyotindra Jain shows how divine iconography was entirely reworked to depict urban social realities and altered devotional sensibilities. He illustrates: “The image of the deity was constructed in the image of the man and whatever model of the latter was available in the society of the time was used as a prototype by the *Kalighat* artists. No wonder then that in such an environment the goddess Saraswati played the violin, Shiva looked like a middle-class family man, and Kartika a Calcutta dandy in these paintings” (Jain 93). A larger cultural shift is discerned here, where gods are assimilated into colonial Bengal’s emerging middle-class consciousness, shifting the focus away from hierarchical, cosmic grandeur towards personal, humanised relations. As opposed to *pattachitra*, where Shiva is *Nataraja* or *Mahadev*, cosmic power symbol, *Kalighat* painters depict him as a pot-bellied, casually attired Bengali gentleman, appearing like a wayside shopkeeper or lower-middle-class patriarch. His ascetic aloofness is replaced by domestic comfort, as he hugs infant Ganesha in his arms, while Parvati, as a

Bengali bride, claps to amuse the child (see Fig. 4). Shiva's *damru* (drum), which signifies creation and destruction, is depicted as a cosmic resonance instrument. In Kalighat, it is a child's rattle, stripped of its metaphysical connotations and recontextualised in a mundane domestic setting. Similarly, while Parvati in conventional iconography is depicted as *Mahishasura Mardini*, she is reimagined as a maternal figure, her martial power replaced by affection and domesticity. In some paintings, Shiva is depicted as a hemp-smoking ascetic, while in others he appears in a sexualised form, indifferent to his sagging loincloth and displaying an uninhibited physicality (see Fig. 5).



Fig. 3. Woman trampling over lover
Kalighat painting



Fig. 4. Shiva and Parvati



Fig. 5. Shiva with Parvati and Ganesha



Fig. 6. Cat with prawn in mouth

The subversion is carried over from Hindu gods to the priestly class, as manifested in the *Kalighat* painting of a cat with a prawn in its mouth (see Fig. 6). On the surface, the painting looks innocent, but its latent satire is revealed through a telling detail. The cat wears a *rasa koli* (devotional bead) on its head, identifying it as a symbol of a Vaishnav priest. Such a subtle but piercing visual metaphor reveals the hypocrisy of those who seem to be devout but secretly enjoy forbidden pleasures, common among the religious elites. Sumanta Banerjee contends that such images were used to “transfer the sanctimonious to the material sphere, in a gesture of protest against the ethereal world built by the Sanskrit-educated Bengali Brahman priests and their followers” (144). By situating both gods and priests in morally compromised, all-too-human situations, *Kalighat* painters satirised religious authority, deconstructed the idealised concept of the sacred, and compelled viewers to acknowledge the contradictions between religious ideals and lived realities in modern Bengali society.

Drawing on Bauman’s concept of “metacommunication and framing” mentioned earlier, it can be argued that *Kalighat* paintings, despite their shift from an oral-visual folk tradition to a strictly visual medium, retained their performative dimension through alternative framing mechanisms. As opposed to *pattachitra*, where performance was enacted through the gradual unfurling of the scroll and oral narration, *Kalighat* paintings relied on visual strategies to engage the audience. However, this shift did not erase performativity but rather restructured it, embedding culturally coded “metacommunicative” cues within the paintings that signalled to viewers how they should interpret these images. The analysis of the *Kalighat* technique highlights how the mode of production itself became a framing device. As *patua* art became commodified, paintings were mass-produced in workshops, where a principal artist created the outlines while assistants—often women—filled in the colours, producing hundreds of *patas* per hour. This shift influenced the visual style, particularly what Banerjee terms “pneumatic inflation”—the use of exaggerated, rounded forms instead of the angular forms of *pattachitra* (134). Although efficiency was a factor, he argues that such a stylistic choice was also an expressive device that enhanced the satirical element of the paintings. Figures such as the dandy, the

prostitute, and the impostor priest were depicted with inflated limbs and bloated faces, visually enacting a critique of their roles in colonial society. Jyotindra Jain's examination of *Kalighat* iconography further illustrates how framing is adapted to new socio-cultural contexts. Moving away from the hierarchical compositions and sacred imagery of *pattachitra*, *Kalighat* paintings domesticated deities, placing them in familiar, often humorous settings. The performative aspect of *Kalighat* paintings, therefore, no longer resided in the act of storytelling but in the viewer's ability to decode the visual cues and recognise the subversive elements within the imagery. In the commercial spaces of colonial Calcutta, where these paintings were displayed and sold, their framing differed from the ritualised storytelling settings of *pattachitra*. Because of the fast-paced, metropolitan setting in which *Kalighat* paintings were viewed, instant visual impact was crucial. Viewers were guaranteed to actively interact with the image, reacting to its culturally rooted framing cues, owing to the humour, sarcasm, and exaggeration.

The transformation of *Pattachitra* into *Kalighat* paintings can be examined as the processes of commoditisation, singularisation, and recontextualisation, highlighting how they acquire shifting cultural meanings as they move through different economic and social frameworks. The transition from *Pattachitra* to *Kalighat* paintings marked the first major shift in the biography of the folk art form. While *Pattachitra* was a ritualised, performative tradition that combined oral storytelling with sequential visual narration, *Kalighat* paintings emerged in colonial Calcutta as a response to urban markets. The narrative sequencing was abandoned in favour of single-sheet compositions, which were commercially viable and easily reproducible. Kopytoff contends that "publicly recognized commodification operates side by side with schemes of valuation and singularisation devised by individuals, social categories, and groups, and these schemes stand in unresolvable conflict with public commoditization as well as with one another" (80). This tension is particularly evident in the trajectory of *Kalighat* paintings, which, while mass-produced for an expanding urban market, were simultaneously singularised as tools of social critique. As Sumanta Banerjee asserts, the cultural expressions of these artists were not merely commercial products but radical manifestations of social

protest, critiquing both colonial influence and feudal customs through an earthy and direct visual language that stood in contrast to the more refined critiques of the educated Bengali elite (10). This dual existence of *Kalighat* paintings—as commodities and as instruments of subaltern critique—illustrates the tension between market forces and cultural expression. On one hand, these paintings were created for sale to temple-goers, traders, and the urban middle class, making them part of a new economy where art was increasingly driven by consumer demand. On the other hand, they remained deeply embedded in the *patua* community’s critical engagement with contemporary society, serving as a visual medium for satire, exposing the contradictions of colonial modernity, religious hypocrisy, and social inequality.

The final transformation of *Kalighat* paintings occurred through the process of museumisation. The subversive themes and the cultural appropriation were objectified as the paintings were reframed as historical artifacts. The performative aspects that get activated as the artwork engages with the audience in its raw form are stripped off as they are placed in a museum and singularised. Anuja Mukherjee, in her article *Kalighat Paintings: A National Artifact, the Folk and Counter Representation in the Making of Modern Art in Bengal*, argues that the “value of art is measured in two social capacities, the first being transfer of ownership to a buyer for his/her own interests and the second being transfer of ownership to museums (either directly or through constantly changing ownership)” (5). *Kalighat* paintings, she contends, were rapidly museumised because they were too radical for domestic display yet too urbanised to be reintegrated into rural folk traditions. Their satirical themes and crude realism made them an uneasy fit for elite households, leading to their reclassification as historical artifacts rather than active critiques of social and political structures. *Kalighat* paintings operated as weapons of the weak, as their satire and pictorial exaggeration subtly undermined colonial and feudal hierarchies without directly engaging in political confrontation. The museumisation of *Kalighat* paintings, while preserving their materiality, distanced them from their performative function, transforming them from living critiques of power into passive historical artifacts.

The marginalisation of both *Pattachitra* and *Kalighat* paintings also underscores the broader struggle of artistic traditions that operate outside dominant literary and institutional frameworks. It shows the privileging of textual traditions over visual and folk cultures. Classical Sanskrit texts have historically been regarded as authoritative repositories of cultural knowledge, while folk art, despite its dynamism and socio-political engagement, has been relegated to the periphery. As Jain states: “In the hallowed space of art history, the folk art of patua scroll painters and the highly innovative and contemporary pictorial expression of the Kalighat artists . . . had no place as these did not have the authority of the sacred text” (9). This exclusion was not merely aesthetic but ideological, reinforcing a hierarchical distinction between high and low art. Folk traditions, without written records, were often seen as temporary, commercial, or less intellectual, which pushed them further to the margins. Their decline worsened with the arrival of photography and academic realism in colonial and postcolonial India. Photography’s precision reduced the demand for hand-painted storytelling, while European-style realism, taught in institutions like the Government College of Art and Craft in Calcutta, was seen as the highest form of art, pushing indigenous traditions aside. As a result, *Kalighat* paintings, once popular in nineteenth-century temple markets, faded from public life. *Pattachitra* survived in rural Bengal and Odisha but lost much of its interactive storytelling role, becoming a static visual form. Today, these traditions mainly exist in museums, private collections, and heritage exhibitions removed from their original ritual and performative settings. This transformation represents a second type of singularisation—turning everyday art into prestigious heritage symbols (Kopytoff 82). However, this also creates a paradox, for while these artworks are preserved, they are now separated from the communities that once created and used them.

Endnotes

- i. Pata refers to the cloth or fabric on which the paintings are made
- ii. From “The story of Mansamangal”

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