

Folk and Minor Art in India
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Lecture – 37

Cultural Condition: Colonial and Postcolonial Bengal – part11

So, we are going to talk about the visual culture of the Berthala and Kalighat painting and the time when it flourished and grew and what was the kind of culture that the common people underwent parallel to the rural folk art culture. As we knew that the common rural painters had to move towards the nearby villages when Calcutta saw the face of urbanization during the just pre and post colonial era.

It was very important to see how the urban aesthetics grew and at the same time, the rural sensibilities survived with minimum conflict and this is also true that many of the traditional rural art died at that point of time, but it was fortunately a temporary death that survived and even in today's time there are evidences of Kalighat painting. So, even after the tradition declined, they revived again and right now, we have realized it is historical value and we appreciate them from a completely historical relevance of it. More than the popular culture, they are museum pieces now and it is very fortunate that we are able to track the history through the found evidences though the more it is, the more satisfying it would have been. So, the artist blocks makers and the new hybrid aesthetics which is our focus for the talk now.

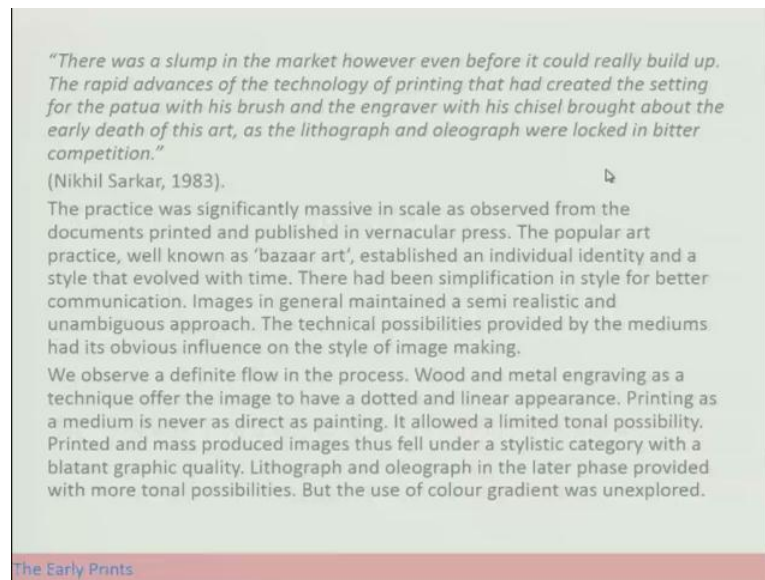
After the very declined, there were the artist block makers from this urban folk art and craft styles who found their new job of making almanacs and the stock blocks often the labels, handbills, campaign pamphlets, advertisements in leaflets during the same period of time and the almanacs were reaching out each and every household. So, let us see the condition which is a newly achieved political freedom of the country and it is a newly achieved mass literacy and at the same time, the printed material that came with the smell of modernity, the technological empowerment and the progress was identified and understood through all these things. So, they were closely associated and they were lifting the face of modern sensibilities. The getting of an almanac in hand which is printed and affordable just got associated with the modern life. So, anything that is printed came with a new excitement.

In today's context, it is very difficult to understand that because everything can be printed very easily by us now in a domestic condition, but there had been some official branding that was associated with the printed text and it is not the hand written one, but there is a seal or a printed thing that has multiple additions which has a marked publisher who is authorized to print that and it gives us some kind of permit to judge the quality. So, whatever was printed became authorized and that got connected to the quality stuff and it was just a very superficial way of understanding the visual culture and judging the quality, but it was the truth for the time.

Consequently, these graphical presentations in the form of printing, the hand block printing and also the mechanized printing aim at capturing the regional sentiments for obvious reasons that when it is reaching out to the common mass then unless you make it regional, specific to a small area to the culture of a small community, it would not see its optimum success. So, it was the intelligent way to aim at the regional sentiments and all those printed things were getting the essence of the regional culture of that time and there had been a printing tradition that got developed into the vernacular languages. Printing press is getting established in different states and they printed things in many different regional languages and almost all languages got the privilege of the printing blocks that was there. It was also formed into the industry that served the identity of ritualistic causes and practices of the urban and rural mass.

The implementation and practice of printing added a flavor of modernity to the way of living of that time and the common mass got introduced to printed almanacs, advertisements, pamphlets, product package labels and felt a sense of attachment with anything that is printed and mass produced as a part of the modern life and these were mainly created using woodcuts and wood engraving techniques in the beginning following by black and white colored lithography techniques which came slightly later, but it took over very quickly.

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There was a slump in the market however, even before it could really build up. The rapid advances of the technology of printing that had created the setting for the Patua with his brush and the engraver with his chisel brought about the early death of this art, as the lithograph and oleograph were locked and bitter competition Nikhil Sarkar 1983. The practice was significantly massive in scale as observed from the documents printed and published in vernacular press. The popular art practice, well known as bazaar art, established an individual identity and a style that evolved with time and there had been simplification in style for better communication.

Images in general maintained a semi realistic and unambiguous approach. The technical possibilities provided by the mediums had its oblivious influence on the style of image making. We observe a definite flow in the process and wood and metal engraving as a technique offer the image to have a dotted and linear appearance. Printing as a medium is never as direct as painting and it allowed a limited tonal possibility, printed and mass produced images thus fell under a stylistic category with a blatant graphic quality. Lithograph and oleograph in the later phase provided with more tonal possibilities, but the use of colour gradient was unexplored.

The rise of nationalistic movement in 20th century, formed the basis for a particular awareness which came among the local mass to maintain separate identity for the indigenous and foreign mechanized images simply through the graphical representations

and as we have seen that the graphical representations were not just the alternative of paintings, it came with a different sensibility, it had a different identity because of the technical aspects that was related to that. So, everything had to be counted in terms of pixels, even before the introduction of offset printing and which came about to the culture after like much later, but still looking at the engraved pieces having cross hatches and dots got introduced to people so that was more like the graphical quality that got and that was also liked by the painters and the paintings were also getting enriched or they were getting a new sensibilities rather and by incorporating all those things. We have seen that, even though those things were made it for a very different purpose, the block makers the engravers who worked on woodcuts they also incorporated some of those images into their work.

After the country's independence in 1947, the new experience encountered a new aesthetics, an entirely indigenous experience that was not sought after and the images on indigenous commodities flagged the noticeable popular style. So, very inviting and it was with a blend of folk and urban flamboyance which was well placed to influence the common man. People were looking for the freedom, the self governance with lots of doubts and it was not very well expected for many of the people although they felt that it may come. So, it was like a hope and hopelessness, the blend of which was there into the expressionistic sensibility of that time. It came with lots of political caricatures, satire to pleasant subject matters to the utopian village scene and many other things that was part of the content, but right now we are focusing on the technical aspect that gave it a visual identity.

The graphical representation of those images was basic, Mondrian and somewhat crude due to the technological limitations of that time, but surprisingly that apparent not so glamorous trend of image making continued to remain unchanged for decades and even this is evident that after the introduction of the much more finer and sophisticated printing techniques, some brands wanted to stick to the earlier visual identity because of the cause that all those brand images came with a lot of trust. So, when we try to establish some sense like this is a 300 years old brand, a new sensibility in the printing technology could have been considered as a spoiler for that.

Even after the new technologies were introduced, the older sensibility remained for a very long time and surprisingly even in today's time we see that often the prints are done

by using a new technology, but it gives us the visual image which is reminiscent of the past. They are again like based on the different cultural understanding of people and many of the popular visuals today is following the similar aesthetics as we explained in spite of all the technical advancement they are provided with. In the initial years, the restricted colour pallet caused by the technical limitations and economy in printing cost added to the style of the new minimalist sensibility that continued for a very long time even when the restrictions were lesser with the introduction of offset press the old images prevailed.

So, when we see that the technology evolved over the period, the colour lithography wooden metal engravings as mediums had their own technical restraints which influenced the making of the images. The obvious basic colours well defined edges with the compulsory use of crude contour lines and decorations which are often not so necessary, but it is necessary to establish a visual identity, still stand as the characteristic feature of a particular taste of a particular time. Most interestingly, there are brands that wanted to keep up with the trans factor as we know and the contemporary scene of hybrid aesthetics is an obvious outcome of this mixed possibilities and the boundary is wider than ever before and the urge to timelessness is a choice and not a compulsion any more.

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(Subramanyan, 2007).

India was not an exception but as compare to the other colonies it had a considerable number of visionary leaders in opposition. The political move from the part of the foreign rulers to control that robustness of constant opposition was initially directed to the education system that has the sole power to manipulate a generation to come under colonial control. The intellectual minds at that point of time realized the immediate need,

'to catch on to the ropes of the new education (whatever its inadequacies) and hoist themselves out of stagnation; to step out into the modern world.'
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The Early Prints

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So, as I said that to catch on the ropes of the new education, even if its inadequate in any term, it is very important to lift it and raise it from the stagnation and with that one can step out to a new world that we will show as the phase of modernity, the modern sensibilities that is a new thinking and the refinement in our thinking, the reformation into the culture. It is almost like forming, reforming coming up with new forms and understanding the virtues of the past and that way it went on and in this context, again we are coming back to the two main factors that is the nationalism, the spirit of nationalism and the spirit of modernism and how the folk idioms are connected to that. So, it is more like when we are going to the cultural diaspora of the folk sensibilities and we are engaging ourselves into the cultural discourse and we are helpless but looking at it from that cultural context where the whole occurrence of stepping into a modern world however, which is subject to complex evaluation, but it actually took place in many different ways than one. So, foremost attempt was made by the nationalists.

To clear the cloud regarding what is the index of India? How should we recognize India? What is the term Indianness? What gives us the hang and feel of being Indian? or something which is made in India and the answer to the moves around it just rotates to the central concepts that include ethnicity, origin, indigenoussness, spirituality, identity, antiquity, ethics, aesthetics and many other analogist factors of consideration that

formulates the cultural structure of a community and hence contributes into the making of a nation. We discussed in past few lectures about the basic methods of conducting the empirical research when we have a certain data in front of us and we are coming into a direct contact with that and in our mind we cannot be totally fresh and pure because as human beings, we hold within us a lot of preconceived notions, our age old values, the age old value system, our understanding, the basic ethical understanding, they are the part of it, the basic philosophies and also our judgment, but above all we try to connect all this experiences that are apparently fresh and new and we connect them into the form of stories and from there we build up narratives.

So, the narrative formation gives us the overview of the context and when we bring the phenomenon of nationalism, modernism we cannot free ourselves from their nationalistic ideas and modernistic ideas that are already there into our knowledge from Europe, America and Australia and all other places because we cannot travel in time and be completely free from all those preconceived notions as I called it and look at it from a fresh perspective and I do not even find any relevance of that. So, in that way it is very important to build up the story, connect them and understand the real essence of it and that can help us to assess the modern day's folk art from a liberal point of view.

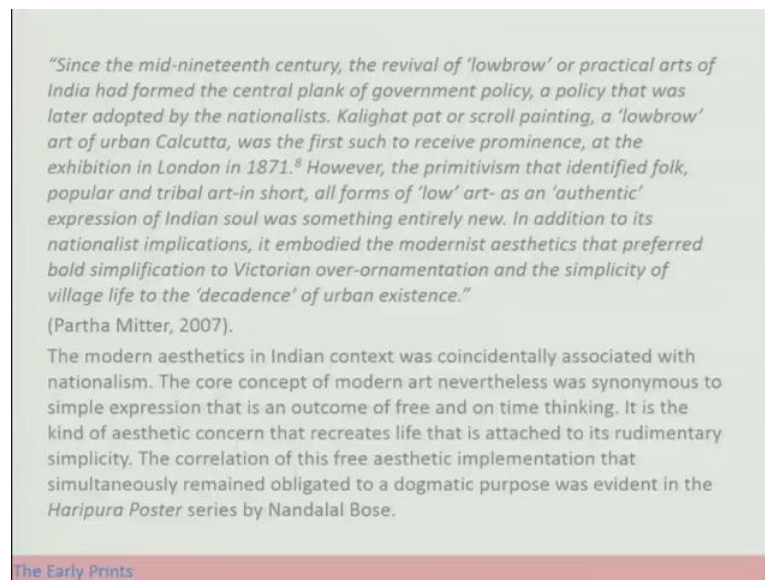
It is very important to be free of barriers when you look at this and be merciless, be brutally honest in the assessment and that will do some justice to the existence and growth of the present practice which is connected to the sensibilities of folk and minor art in the contemporary context. So, the athletic characteristics that has successfully confirmed Indian modernity of today's time, necessitates the maintenance of the culture that proceeded further and in this regard the athletic quality that we associate very intrinsically with the Indian modern phase or the modern Indian culture, the identity of modernity, the modern time in Indian context also needs a proper maintenance because unless that is maintained throughout, it will soon lose its relevance. Keeping all those understanding in mind, we are looking at the existing visual culture from unbiased perspective and that was our aim.

The concept of modern Indian identity was not free from European norms that we discussed in Indian history of about 5000 years. It is merely 600 years that the country was free from the foreign rules. So, the country has been ruled by Indians for only 600 years so far and that has resulted the modern Indian art and culture to attend a discreet

athletic feature and that is undeniable for many different reasons and I would like to mention in this context once again as a reminder that the nationalists as part of the nationalist propaganda say that India has no foreign influence in its culture.

So, when they talked about India and her culture, they emphasized on the Indian indigenous identity and they worked for it, but after we see the phase of independence and got completely used to the independent governance over 60-70 years now and it is no longer important to justify that we are free of foreign influences and specially in today's context when we are exposed to many different cultural exposures, we have access almost each and every thing and it does not really stand very important to see whether it is pure Indian or not and that is perhaps relevant for the global culture but still the contribution made by the nationalist, a sensibility is important to understand the nature of the history of that time. So, in spite of the attempts to keep up with the global upgrading, modern Indian culture holds much dissimilarities and reason enough to create an anomaly within then the global margin. The Indian identity is very old and it has a potential that it always stands out visually and otherwise it requires extensive research and study in the area of Indian visual culture to scrutinize this condition.

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So, again I will quote from Partha Mitter. Since, the mid-nineteenth century, the revival of lowbrow or practical arts of India had formed the central plank of government policy, a policy that was later adopted by the nationalists. Kalighat pat or scroll painting, a

lowbrow art of urban Calcutta was the first such to receive prominence at the exhibition in London in 1871. However, the primitivism that identified folk, popular and tribal art-in-short, all forms of low art as an authentic expression of Indian soul was something entirely new and in addition to its nationalist implications, it embodied the modernist aesthetics that preferred bold simplification to Victorian over-ornamentation and the simplicity of village life to the decadence of urban existence.

The modern aesthetics in Indian context was coincidentally associated with nationalism and the core concept of modern art nevertheless was synonymous to simple expression which is an outcome of free and on time thinking. It is the kind of aesthetic concern that recreates life and that is attached to the rudimentary simplicity. The correlation of this free aesthetic implementation that simultaneously remained obligated to a dogmatic purpose was evident in the Haripura Poster series by Nandalal Bose. So, in our following lectures, we are going to see images of Haripura Poster which was done for a purpose and understand the aesthetic sensibilities which was part of a conscious aesthetic practice and that was a blend of the rural and urban folk and vernacular sensibilities with the conscious academic style and that was very significant for the context.

With that, we will also see a few examples of the Kalighat painting and understand the different phases of the urban folk art tradition to get a thorough idea of the time and the culture of the time.