

Artist Of A Lost Art

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

It's the call of blood, he says. "I was born into a family of wandering scroll painters and storytellers, the patua." His ancestors thrived under the patronage of Nawab Murshid Quli Khan in 18th century Bengal. When Kalighat art evolved as a specific urban painting style, to cater to pilgrims in and around the Kalighat temple, it became a magnet for the patua community to showcase their talent, often on the spot. What started with purely religious themes gradually widened to include changing social mores, scandals and local customs. But with the spread of printing press, cheap printed pictures displaced handcrafted ones and the Kalighat genre all but disappeared by the 1930s. "There was no one even to pass on the technique," he says.

For a family that took pride in the perfection of a line, his name, Kalam or quill, stood for hope. Although his father Bholanath was a farmer, his mother Susari came from a family of pure patua tradition. "Even when I was very young, she used to keep a sharp eye out on whatever I sketched," he says. He still recalls the incredible speed with which one of her brothers, Gopal Chitrakar, used to sketch on mud walls. "The patua and Kalighat techniques demand that one be extremely swift," he points out. At 10, he began to learn from his uncle, Baidyanath Patua, often helping him out with the job of idol-making, especially of Goddess Durga. "But their work was primarily on folktales, gods and epics, not everyday life," he says.

FULL TEXT

With his quiet manner and soft voice, Kalam Patua looks like an average 50-year-old postmaster, which is what he is. But beneath his simple cotton shirt beats the heart of an artist. He is being credited with reinventing the lost art of Kalighat of 19th century Kolkata.

"My job is quite demanding. There is no one else here," says Patua, postmaster to the one-man Chandpara sub-post office, nearly 250 km away from Kolkata. Every day, by 9.30 a.m. he is at the counter, alone, sorting mail and parcels, selling stamps and savings certificates. He is still there, closing up, at 6.30 p.m. "I get restless and yearn to get back to my canvas." He gets his chance late at night, once everyone is in bed. With the glow of fireflies outside his window and rumble of highway trucks for company, the gentle postmaster unleashes a storm of brush strokes and vivid colours on his canvas, to create what is now being celebrated as New Kalighat paintings.

Patua creates the same art that his ancestors practised for over 300 years, but with a twist. In style, it is Kalighat painting, a genre that evolved as popular bazaar art in 19th century Kolkata and all but disappeared before Independence. In content, he has gone beyond the pull of lineage to create his own art. His work is strikingly here and now. If the original genre poked fun at the westernised Bengali, it is middle class double standards in Patua's frames: A couple sipping tea nonchalantly as they watch the 9/11 tragedy on tv or a middle-aged man staring at a skimpily-clad mannequin on a shop window. "That middle-aged man with a spreading midriff and receding hair appears repeatedly in my frames. You can say it's me," he says, tongue-in-cheek.

The art world has caught on. The Victoria & Albert Museum, London, which holds the single largest collection of Kalighat paintings, has acquired and showcased Patua's work in its just-concluded touring exhibition across South Asia. His work is on display at museums across the world: The National Gallery of Modern Art in Delhi to National Museum in Liverpool, UK, the Museum of Civilisation in Canada to Chicago Children's Museum, US. With folk art

yet to get investor-friendly or hit the auction block in India, Patua is happy with his presence in museum circuits. "When I started, my work used to sell for Rs 20-25. Today it fetches about Rs 25,000-35,000," he says.

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A constellation of mentors helped him find new ways to transcend moribund ideas and delve into the dreams and realities of contemporary life: A bureaucrat took him to Jamini Roy's home to show how the celebrated artist was inspired by Kalighat; a museum curator allowed him to study original Kalighat paintings in his collection to understand colouring techniques; an academic gifted him thick newsprint to perfect his art and organised his first solo show in 2004 in Delhi. "From copying works of masters, I started to depict everyday life," he says. "Say, a tailor at work or a man brushing his teeth." Gradually, his themes started to reflect urban angst: Politics to consumerism to sexuality.

What does success mean to him? "It means doing something the way I want to," he says. Success also means carving out a trajectory that attracts more talent to the field. "The genre died as children of artists took to other ways of living. But it is abuzz again." And each success story makes the road ahead that much smoother. Patua recalls paint being made at home, painstakingly, from stones, shells or lamp black. Today, he uses brands like Winsor & Newton. Gone are the days of cheap paper. Durable acid-free and waterproof paper is within easy reach now. But what hasn't really changed is the scant respect with which folk artists are treated by sponsors. International attention can only be a good thing.

"I was very young when I first saw a plane cruising overhead," says Patua. "I had run up to my parents demanding a ride." They had smiled at the audacity of aspiration of the son of a poor farmer to reach for the moon. "I did not make it to the moon but at least I have been up amidst the clouds on a flight."

DETAILS

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