Modern National Art in Early Twentieth Century and the Decline of *Patna Kalam*

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Abstract: *Starting from the late eighteenth century, Patna Kalam developed and evolved over more than a century in response to uniquely colonial transactions between indigenous artists and a British clientele. The socio cultural context of 'new' India in the early twentieth century gave rise to certain influential ideas in the discourse on Indian art. The rise of the modern national art helmed by Abanindranath Tagore had a profound influence on art and how it was viewed. Patna Kalam's decline was inextricably linked to this.*

Keywords: *Patna Kalam, Company Painting, Modernity, Alternative Modernities, Modern National Art, Modern Indian Art History, Ishwari Prasad, Abanindranath Tagore.*

Patna Kalam was a hybrid school of painting which developed from the interaction between indigenous artists of Patna trained in the courtly Mughal School and British Colonial officials who employed them. This was for the purpose of sketching, drawing and painting illustrations to supplement official and quasi-official documents about the land and culture, flora and fauna, history and geography of India.[1] For a century, this school which mixed the courtly Mughal and Rajput styles of fine art with elements of Western functional illustration, continued to evolve and found a narrow but steady market in Patna for souvenirs, chiefly among its British inhabitants (Archer 1948: 2). It came from

the elite Royal court to the popular market via the Colonial documentarian's office. Arguably, *Patna Kalam* has undeniable claims to modernity in the way it incorporated Western illustrative design elements while simulating an 'authentic' vision of India for a new visual market. However, in the 1900s, the growing concern with art education in India, a burgeoning national consciousness, and the implicit dichotomy between India and the West made it difficult for myriad traditions with divergent claims to modernity to coexist. This paper seeks to explore the decline of *Patna Kalam* in this context.

Making of a National Art in Early Twentieth Century India: In the early twentieth century discourse around art history in India, there was a growing emphasis on identifying the essence of Indian art. This was always framed in opposition to Western art. The lingering effect of this Orientlist focus was a somewhat nebulous definition of a national artistic tradition glimpsed in myriad sculptural, architectural, mural and miniature traditions dating back to an ancient past. The Eurocentric assumption about the superiority of Western art was being explicitly and decisively challenged. For instance, Ananda K Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), a leading voice on the philosophical and artistic merit of Indian art, considered it superior for penetrating the phenomenal experience of the world to strive to "portray the ideal world (Rûpa-loka) of true reality" (Coomaraswamy 1908: 5). He considered traditional Indian art as stemming from a deep spiritual-religious sensibility. Various ancient classical Indian artistic traditions in painting, sculpture and architecture were seen as aspect of a single unified understanding of art which was distinguished from Western classical art by its perceived indifference to superficial realism. This kind of discourse not only helped establish the idea of the 'great tradition' of national Indian art, but also marked up a space for contemporary metropolitan artists like Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951) who turned away from Western training towards indigenous inspiration.

The mainstream art education apparatus in India gradually imbibed this discourse and in turn further shaped the course of Indian art. At the outset of his career, E B Havell (1864-1937), Principal of Government School of Art, Calcutta was keenly interested drawing from a traditional Indian idiom in the making of a suitable modern design aesthetic for practical utilisation in handicraft and other commercial productions. In his later years at the college, Havell went on to embrace and expound on the indigenous fine art traditions, which he argued were imbued with a spiritual quality completely misunderstood by the West. After his departure from India in 1905, Havell wrote more about the fine art

traditions in India and challenged the prevailing attitudes about the superiority of mainstream Western art. He presented a vision of the true artistic tradition of India from sculpture to architecture, from mural to miniature as an organic whole with a wellspring of divine spirituality. Talking about Abanindranath Tagore and his followers, he said,

"The deeper significance of the movement lies, however, not so much in its actual accomplishment, as in the clear evidence it gives of a spiritual resurrection, of the re-awakening of the artistic soul of India from the narcotic slumber, induced by the deadly drugs of a soulless pedagogy, in which there are never dreams of beauty or visions of a fairer world" (Havell 1928: 277).

Within the political context of the early decades of the twentieth century India – the rise and growth of the Swadeshi movement and a nascent though increasingly robust sense of national identity – the Orientalist conception of Indian art of ideologues like Coomaraswamy and Havell had a great deal of power and influence in determining the scholarship and knowledge in Indian art (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 183). The art history discourse in conjunction with the art practice of artists like Abanindranath Tagore in the early decades of the 1900s saw the development of a new school of 'Indian style' in art.

Abanindranath Tagore was an exceptional artist and public intellectual who had a great influence on the making of a new national artistic tradition. His individual style, "celebrated for its uniqueness and its individuality, became synonymous with an 'Indian style' and 'a national art'" (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 262). He consciously drew from indigenous traditions such as Mughal miniatures, reconfiguring their schemata into a deeply emotive expression. His experiments with Japanese wash technique of Yokoyama Taikan (1868-1958) in his Swadeshi phase, is evident in the interplay of colour and line in one of his most influential paintings, *Bharat Mata* (figure 1). This painting draws its iconography from the Hindu imagery of life giving and nurturing goddesses to depict the personified ideal of the Indian Homeland. It is among the earliest visual representations of India as a Mother goddess. Abaninadranath's consciously non-Western style was feted for exemplifying the vision of the true Indian art which commentators like Havell and Coomaraswamy championed. It inspired a generation looking for the expression of a nascent nationalist identity and became the template for his contemporary artists. Like in this painting, the lack of interest in realism and a concern for allusion and the ideal are some of the distinguishing features of Abanindranath's artistic creed. Later in his career, Abanindranath was also influential in conceptualising folk art as a legitimate expression of authentic unspoilt tradition, worthy of artistic inspiration.[2] His art

not only created the new standard for cosmopolitan modern Indian taste but also inspired an entire generation of artists who found in him a not just a teacher but a *guru*.

Modernity in Indian Art and its Discontents: Abanindranath Tagore was a cosmopolitan intellectual. Part of the urban elite, he was an influential artist who self-consciously chose and theorised his artistic creed; in the process helping to create a new art tradition. Indeed, standard Indian art history discourse centres Abanindranath Tagore when talking about modern National art. Eminent art historians Geeta Kapoor and Partha Mitter affirm his influence in the development of later Modern Art in India. His immense contribution to the creation of a new national art cannot be overstated. Abanindranath's art, his writing about it, and the derivation of his style by his followers established a certain aesthetic as 'true' Indian art. This aesthetic drew from indigenous ancient and medieval fine art traditions consciously eschewing Western academic style (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 285). It also purportedly strove for a self-conscious rather than derivative relation to indigenous traditions. Modernity may to be understood as a new transformed way of doing something, "working on artistic material drawn from pre-existing traditions" (Kaviraj 2005: 517). Hence, this new art has undeniable claims to modernity. However, the all pervasive Euro-centrism of the time tended to aggregate everything into East vs. West dialectic. The conscious rejection of Western academic style by the new modern national art implicitly invalidated any *non-academic* Western influences as well. In effect, indigenous styles like *Patna Kalam*, whose style and technique were heavily influenced by Western illustrationand printmaking could not be categorized at par because of this 'contamination'. This was reflected in the discourse around art.

E. B. Havell's view of the great Indian art tradition, in his understanding unbroken from antiquity through the middle ages to modern times, inevitably erased Colonial hybrid schools like *Patna Kalam* as neither their provenance (hybrid, debased by an outside influence, hence lacking claims to the legacy of the classical past continued in an uncorrupted living tradition) nor their consumption (popular, hence outside the realm ofcultured fine arts) could be fit in this narrative. Ananda K Coomaraswamy, in his comprehensive historical survey of the art of the Indian subcontinent, reserved praise for Abanindranath Tagore for his pioneering endeavour to recover old traditions. He dismissed hybrid Indo-European styles of painting as inferior to the great singular ancient Hindu tradition. "The latter part of the 19th century in India has been a blank so

far as any serious work in painting goes" (Coomaraswamy 1913: 98). Art historian Percy Brown (1872–1955) summed up *Patna Kalam* as a minor deteriorated offshoot of Mughal painting. Later still, Rai Krishna Das (1890-1980) presented the Patna Kalam painter as an artisan peddling souvenirs. In *Bharat ki Chitrakala*, he mentioned how "foreigners used this style to get images of occupation, costumes and daily life made to take with them... like the picture postcards of today, Patna Kalam artisans kept *firka* sets ready" [*translation mine*] (Das 1939: 110).[3] In these dismissals and elisions, the division of high – low, artistic – artisanal, self-conscious – derivative, elite – popular, pure – hybrid, formed in the 1920's discourse around art. As a result, there was no space to accommodate the claims to Indian modernity of any art which came from the so called artisanal and popular contexts or which had a Western-Indian hybrid form.

Decline of *Patna Kalam*: the Art of Ishwari Prasad: Meanwhile in Patna by the 1890s, the market for *Patna Kalam* had begun to die down. The idyllic images of everyday life had become relics of the past they sought to represent. *Patna Kalam* had been sustained by British and local patrons, and by a small but until the 1880s, adequate market for cheap souvenirs. But its failure to adapt to changing tastes, and newer modes of representation had a devastating impact on it. According to Surendra Gopal, it was not just the death or departure of old patrons or the advent of photography which caused the decline and disintegration of *Patna Kalam*, but its style was increasingly perceived as debasement. The stereotypical subject matter and stenciled reproduction of late *Patna Kalam* had no scope for artistic innovation appreciable at the time. As a result, when the decline set in, it did not take much time for the school to disintegrate (Gopal 2008: 195). As I argue, most importantly, it was the failure of contemporary discourse on art to make room for the school which ultimately sounded its death knell. The attempt to 'elevate' its popular form to respectable mainstream modernity proved to be fatal.

As stated earlier, the new mainstream Orientalist discourse on Art disregarded the modernity of bazaar or popular art. Indeed, until recently, mainstream discourse on Indian Art History has mostly excluded 'inconvenient to be categorised' art such as Company hybrid Schools and *Kalighat* paintings in the narrative about modernity. The reason for this is that the idea of what is 'modern' in the mainstream art discourse of the 1900s, which laid the foundation for modern Indian art history, among other things focused on the metropolitan, self-conscious artist. The innovation of a non-elite class of artists in response to

challenges of their changing milieu has not been adequately investigated. The hierarchy of the modern metropolitan artist and the traditional artisan has implicitly permeated art discourse and hindered the recognition of alternative modernities such as of *Patna Kalam* artists in the nineteenth century.

Ishwari Prasad (1888 - 1986) was the grandson of *Patna Kalam* artist Shiva Lal through his daughter Sona Kumari. He worked for a Manchester fabric importing firm in Calcutta before he found a position as instructor of 'Indian Painting' at the Government School of Art, Calcutta in 1904 under the Principalship of E B Havell (1861-1934, 1896-1905). After retiring he returned to Patna. Both early commentators of *Patna Kalam*, P C Manuk and Mildred Archer credit Ishwari Prasad as an important primary source of information about the school. He is also credited as one of the last of *Patna Kalam* painters.

Ishwari Prasad was a product of his age who was pulled in opposite directions by his artistic forbears and his influential contemporaries. This is particularly evident in his style as he drew his artistic influences not from his immediate predecessors in *Patna Kalam*, but his extremely talented ancestor from two generations ago. To understand the significance of this, a brief overview of *Patna Kalam* before his time is required. By the 1880s, *Patna Kalam* has almost become a cottage industry in which artists used stencils to bulk produce scenes of everyday life, sets of occupations, sets of servants of the typical British household, modes of transport and so on. These popular paintings were hardly of great artistic merit but were extremely innovative in how they simulated authenticity by deliberately emphasizing their naïve crudeness. Design influences, derived from lithographs and British fashion prints were repackaged in a very recognizably 'native' style as seen in this example (figure 2). Here, the lithographic shading technique known as stippling is used showing depth in form. The style in which clouds are painted is also derived from lithography. Yet the entire composition is unmistakably 'native'.

Ishwari Prasad did not replicate the stereotypes like the popular *Patna Kalam* stencillers of the 1880s. He went further back in his artistic legacy and drew his inspiration from the paintings of his talented grandfather Shiva Lal and great grandfather, Fakir Chand Lal. He sometimes even emphasised one of its supposed parent tradition, Rajput style. In the portrait of E B Havell, Prasad recalls the almost photographic miniatures of Shiva Lal who worked in the 1840s (figure 3). There are various elements in this painting which call for a closer look. The rolled up blind in front of the window is plain unprinted red. This kind of blind, rolled down and partially making up the background, features in the

paintings of early *Patna Kalam* portraitist Fakir Chand Lal as well as of Shiva Lal. Positioned in the front combined with the window framing, it is also reminiscent of a kind of royal portraiture found in Mughal and Rajput schools known as *jharoka darshan*. *Jharokha darshan* portraits typically depict a king, emperor or a high ranking member of the royal family appearing before his subjects. This framing of the British educator may be seen as a light-hearted acknowledgement of his superior position vis à vis the painter/the viewer. It also serves to reconnect *Patna Kalam* to the two major indigenous artistic traditions it is supposed to have descended from.

The rolled up red blind is seen again in this painting of a woman reclining by a veranda (figure 4). The subject of the painting is somewhat unusual for *Patna Kalam* as the woman is shown to be at leisure with an uncommon pet animal by her side in contrast to the contemporary popular *firka* images where the subjects were always depicted as performing a task. Still the figure is drawn in the *Patna Kalam* idiom especially the eyes, facial features, the contours of the body. The strict profile orientation is unusual for *Patna Kalam* and recalls the conventions of Rajput and Mughal styles. Prasad employs the signature oblique perspective of Rajput painting in the positioning of the diwan. Patna Kalam artists of the 1880s no longer used it with any degree of finesse or precision. The blind in this painting, unlike the *jharokha* style portrait of Havell, is not incorporated within the internal design of the painting. That is to say, it is not attached to a window or a balcony opening. It hangs between the viewer and the subject calling attention to itself, identifying the painting with its school, intertextually connected to indigenous schools given legitimacy in the art discourse of his time.

This *Patna Kalam* idiom from an earlier phase of its development was still a hybrid style from the perspective of design elements, material and its market. Yet because the art discourse of the time was vague on technique and more concerned with sensibility, it was possible to cast it as part of the great Indian tradition of art – which included examples as diverse as Mughal miniature painting, Rajput painting and Ajanta murals – ignoring its Western influenced provenance. However, this obfuscation met with limited success in practice. After all, even though Ishwari Prasad taught draughtsmanship at the Art College, he and a few other artists with ties to Patna were the only ones to lean into *Patna Kalam*; it did not really get picked up on a larger scale like Mughal painting, Rajput Painting or the Ajanta murals as a template for design elements by elite artists be it his contemporaries or students.

The influence of contemporary art discourse had a profound influence on Ishwari Prasad's artistic vision. He decisively turned away from the established style of Patna Kalam to the metaphorical sensibility of Abanindranath in his swadeshi phase. For instance, his painting *Art, the Lady*, (figure 5) decisively turns away from *Patna Kalam* conventions to approximate the Modern National art sensibility. Here it is relevant to look at the figure of the woman in *Patna Kalam* for context. Women in general appear in one of three ways in *Patna Kalam*: portrait, scenes of everyday life and occupation sets. The portraits are usually bust length and in three quarter profile. The full female form is seen in scenes of bazaars or of women going about their domestic life such as fetching water and going for *puja*. Occupation sets portray women either assisting a man with a caste based occupation or by themselves. A significant subcategory of the scenes of everyday life is the paintings depicting dancing girls. There are many paintings of the dancing girl. One set in mica from the 1840s shows individual dancing poses and costumes, with the figure directly facing the viewer. Other depictions feature an audience and background details. Ishwari Prasad's depiction of the female figure unlike the *firka* women of *Patna Kalam*, is emphatically not servant class. In fact there is little in this painting in terms of style and schema which connects it to the *Patna Kalam* of Prasad's immediate predecessors. Deriving his artistic creed in part from the allusive art of Abanindranath as seen in *Bharat Mata*, Prasad metaphorically redeploys the figure of the woman as representing a master art tradition. The painting of art as a middle-aged Indian woman embracing children reads like a commentary on his vision of Indian art. The catalogue entry in the British Library archives identifies the children as English, Indian, Chinese and South Sea Island. The idea here seems to be of Indian art as being a mature tradition (represented as an older matronly woman) which embraces other cultural influences (represented as children) from a privileged position. In this painting, Indian national artistic tradition is not a passive receptacle of outside influences but a possible conduit for a global tradition capable of uniting all regional cultures. This is not a particularly revolutionary idea as by this time it was a well-established rhetoric in the pan-Oriental and global art of well-known artists and art commentators. This painting arguably is the best testimony to the artistic dilemma of Ishwari Prasad who was completely swept up in the National art discourse of the time while struggling with his own inheritance.

It can be argued that Ishwari Prasad was not just an inheritor of the *Patna Kalam* artistic tradition but its reviver, whose enterprise was nonetheless doomed to fail in the artistic context of the 1900s and after. In the Government School of Art he

was appointed to teach traditional methods of Indian painting inherited from his forefathers. According to Tapati Guha-Thakurta, in Ishwari Prasad's advanced design classes the emphasis was on 'original' composition, as against the Western academic art curriculumdriven drill of 'copying' in the other classes (271). Considering that copied reproduction was the mainstay of *Patna Kalamfirkas* from at least the 1840s, this shines an interesting light in how *Patna Kalam* was accessed in the Orientalist art education in the early decades of the twentieth century. *Patna Kalam* in the Academy was primarily seen as a branch of an older artist tradition which was debased by Western influence, and through which traditional design elements of an older indigenous art tradition could be accessed. In the 1850s, in the early decades of art education in India, there was an implicit division of art between Western style academic fine art and indigenous decorative art. By the time Ishwari Prasad was teaching his design class in 1905, this orthodoxy was challenged by Orientalists like Havell, to retrieve an authentic Indian high art tradition. The claims to high art in this Orientalist framework were necessarily linked to a discourse of racial and cultural purity of the ancient civilisation and the survival of its essential traditional sensibility in later art and craft. Earlier commingling of indigenous fine art with Western illustration techniques which produced popular Company schools like *Patna Kalam* was seen as debasement and had no place in this discourse. Therefore, traditional materials for production of *Patna Kalam* were encouraged whereas its most recent style was eschewed for a more 'authentic' idiom from an earlier phase. Ishwari Prasad is known to have manufactured traditional pigments for use of young artists (Manuk 1943: 168). His artistic idiom though sidestepped the recent style of *firka*, for a more idealised version of an arguably fictional style recalling the figures of Shiva Lal, the colour scheme of Sevak Ram and Shiva Dayal Lal, and vaguely gesturing at the lines and contours of Rajput and Mughal styles.

Conclusion

The national art discourse of late nineteenth and early eighteenth century had no space to accommodate the alternative modernities of styles such as popular *Patna Kalam* of the time. However, it has definite claims to modernity all the same. The modernity of *Patna Kalam* lay in the way it adapted to its contexts. Over the course of its evolution from the 1800s, it consistently adjusted its style and incorporated design elements from western illustration to suit the demand of the commissioning agent/consumer. Particularly by 1880s, it had become a sort of a 'brand' of indigenous souvenir, meant for the predominantly Western clientele,

purportedly characterised by an 'authentic' indigenous style to go with its 'authentic' indigenous subject. In truth, its subject matter hardly showcased the contemporary everyday life of ordinary Indians or even Patna locals, but a stylisedexoticisedvision of it. The style too was a particular mixture of the lingering features of a local fine art tradition with techniques drawn from Western illustration. It is this deliberate hybridity designed to *simulate* authenticity which gives Patna Kalam its claim to modernity. This deliberate hybridity is also the reason it could not be included in any narrative of a 'pure' Indian aesthetic such as the influential notion of the national art of Abanindranath Tagore and his followers.

Within the Orientalist discourse of fine art in India in the 1900s, there was an implicit hierarchy between the self-conscious and literate high art of gentlemen artists and naive popular arts. There was no framework to evaluate the modernity of an artistic tradition which came out of the British botanist's office in the 1790s and populated in the souvenir market of the 1880s. It is no wonder then that the provincial strategic modernity of the fraud authentic souvenir art had to go unacknowledged as the school was subsumed in the making of the National Indian Modern art.



Figure1. Abanindranath Tagore. *Bharat Mata*.



Figure 2 . Unknown. The Butcher and his Wife

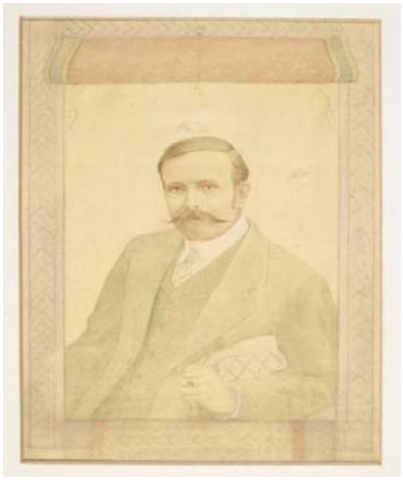


Figure 3. Ishwari Prasad. Portrait of Ernest Binfield Havell.



Figure 4. Ishwari Prasad. *Reclining woman with pet deer.*



Figure 5. Ishwari Prasad. *Art, The Lady*.

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List of Illustrations

1. Abanindranath Tagore. *Bharat Mata*. 1905. Victoria Memorial. Kolkata, India.
2. Unknown. The Butcher and his Wife. c1880. Patna Museum, Patna, India ©Patna Museum.
3. Ishwari Prasad. *Portrait of Ernest BinfieldHavell*. c1904. British Library. London, UK. ©British Library Board.
4. Ishwari Prasad. *Reclining woman with pet deer*. c1940. Victoria and Albert Museum. London, UK. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
5. Ishwari Prasad. *Art, The Lady*. c1930. British Library. London, UK. © British Library Board.

End Notes

[1] Some of the earliest examples of Patna Kalam are the botanical illustrations made by artists Pyare Lal, Brij Lal and Chunni Lal from Patna for an unnamed British Botanist in 1809-1810, now archived in the library of the Royal Botanical Garden, Kew, London, UK.

[2] Later appropriation of the folk, as in the art of Jamini Roy (1887-1972), may be seen as in line with this attitude towards the folk as naïve in itself though ripe for high art 'treatment'.

[3]*Firkas* were sets of paintings, usually small in size, on paper or mica, which depicted thematically related scenes of occupations, costumes, everyday life, modes of transportation, household retinue of a typical British compound, dancing poses, common flowers, birds and so on.

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