

MAPPING COLONIAL PATNA THROUGH PATNA QALAM PAINTINGS: A VISUAL NARRATIVES OF POWER FROM THE 19TH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

Patna Qalam, a company painting school during the colonial period, when seen through the perspective of social hierarchies, provides a unique narrative of the nineteenth-century colonial city of trade and commerce. While these paintings nominally showed different occupations and mundane scenes, they unintentionally documented caste dynamics, which collectively came under the genre of firqa paintings. The paintings, according to Mildred Archer, were predominantly created by artists, who were Kayastha by caste. These artists frequently depicted working-class figures like sweepers, cobblers, and fruit vendors. Though scholars have usually viewed these works as simple professional documentation or studies of motion in labor, a closer examination reveals that they are representations of hereditary caste occupations. The article will further discuss a series of paintings from the Patna Qalam collection that depicts labourers engaged in the process of opium production at the Gulzarbagh Opium Factory, Patna. The series provides an insight into the intersection of caste, religion, and emerging industrial class systems. Patna Qalam paintings serve as complex social documents, reflecting the tensions between old hierarchies and colonial advancement, thus making them essential artefacts for comprehending colonial Indian society's social dynamics.

Keywords: Patna Qalam, Company School Paintings, Colonial Period, Labour representation, Firqa Paintings.

Introduction

A fascinating period of transition in Indian history, the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries are mirrored in the art of the period. During this time, the Company School genre spread throughout Colonial India, and Europeans became the new art patrons. As per Mildred Archer in *Patna Painting*, this genre of paintings was first produced in Madras in South India (Archer, 1948), which further moved to Murshidabad, Patna, Calcutta, Varanasi, Lucknow, Agra, Delhi, Punjab and to centres in western India.

The decline of the Mughal empire and other Indian states, combined with the rise of European colonial culture, collectively resulted in the decline of traditional court culture by the late eighteenth century. This had a direct impact on the traditional artists and the modes of patronage available to them. As the power structure was shifting, so was the art patronage, and the traditional court patronage failed to accommodate the native Indian artists and their ateliers. Local courts even started commissioning European artists to render the realistic portraits and landscapes, another act that challenged the native artists' survival, making them look for much greener pastures around the European settlements. All the above-mentioned centres including Patna, where the Company School flourished, were basically trade and commerce centers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By this time, the East India company had outmanoeuvred the Dutch, Portuguese and the French from most parts of India including Patna. The East India Company then expanded beyond its trading activities to emerge as a political and military power, wielding a coordinated influence across several regions. There was an influx of Europeans to India as merchants and officials or travelers and adventures.

The diversity in the costume and occupation of Indian people attracted these Europeans and they purchased and commissioned paintings that would depict these differences, which they would carry as souvenirs or send them to their friends as reference to the land and the locals. These occupation-based paintings were known as the *Firqa* paintings (will get discussed later). The urgent surge in the demand of the paintings that would capture the wide range native locals, floral and fauna, festivals etc. provided a lucrative opportunity to many native Indian artists who were struggling to manage their livelihood. Europeans, being interested in capturing the new terrain they were in, made it possible for the various subjects from the locals to be exhibited on canvas. These subjects were being presented for the first time as the only subject, as the focus of the canvas.

Stylistically Patna paintings, or the Company School paintings as whole, were a blend of both Indian miniature tradition and European realism. To document the colonial life, flora and fauna that the Europeans came across in the colonial land, traditionally trained local artists were using the primary materials like European paper and mica sheets over which they would use watercolours and gouache, to render the desired subject. As argued by Rebecca Brown, these paintings cannot just be read as Indian versus British Dichotomy, where different religion subjects were treated differently (Brown, 2003). These visuals were not only presenting a neatly packaged other to the Europeans, but was also highlighting the Others and the hierarchy of Others that already existed in the colonized society itself and how artists opted to highlight that through their art.

The East India officials employed the native artists to paint new subjects related to natural history, aspects of contemporary society, culture and religion, historical portrait sets of rulers or mythological sets. European responses to painting in India were complex. On the one side, it was conditioned by contemporary European aesthetics and visualities, on the other many Europeans even emerged as important collectors and patrons, taking a connoisseur interest in Indian painting. Indian painting came to be devalued as high art for its lack of single point perspective, causing the native artists to invest into European modes of rendering by adding light and shade and illusionistic realism to their artworks. Within the new art and craft dichotomies, the work of Indian painters was seen to be decorative and craft-like and admired only for its ornamental qualities. There was a paradoxical attitude to Indian painting among its European patrons, where despite the demand for painting, it was not valued, and was reduced to a 'bazaar' status.

George Forster, an English traveler and official at East India Company complained in his travel account *A Journey from Bengal to England* that, "The Hindoos of this day have a slender knowledge of the rules of proportion, and none of perspective. They are just imitators, and correct workmen; but they possess merely the glimmerings of genius (Forster, 1808)." Another civil servant of East India Company, Thomas Twining, considered that "the merit of their drawing is almost confined to a very accurate imitation of flowers and birds. I never saw a tolerable landscape or portrait of their execution. They are very unsuccessful in the art of shading, and seem to have very little knowledge of the rules of perspective" (Twining & twining, 1893). Similarly, Baden Powell, a Civil Servant posted at Punjab, and a lover of Indian handicrafts, was also aware of the Indian artist's qualities. He mentions, "In common with the inhabitants of lower India, [the artist of the Punjab] has an instinctive appreciation of colour, and is often happier in his combinations than exaggerated but it is always warm, and rich and fearless. The native artist is also patient: for weeks and months he will work at his design, painfully elaborating the most minute details; no time is considered too long, no labour too intense to secure perfection in imitation or delicacy in execution. The greatest failing in native artists is their ignorance of perspective and drawing, and it is fortunate that this want is the easiest to supply (Powell, 1872)." And in response to this Indian artist were amenable and adaptable and soon realized what their new patrons desired, and to acquire European style, these artists went through number of different channels and sources through which they got into contact of professional and amateur European artist works, tracing through the records of Dip Chand documented by William Fullerton and Shiv Lal and Shiv Dayal record by Charles D'Oyly (Archer, 1977). And this is how Europeans started supporting these artists and patronized paintings related to various flora and fauna they saw around them in this new land. They wished to record the colourful detail of this exotic world; hence they commissioned albums depicting couples of different occupations, caste etc. These paintings had an emphasis on light and shade in the European manner.

For Patna, British interests were mainly as exporters of sugar, lac, cotton, cloth, indigo, musk, opium and saltpeter, which brought a lot of Europeans to the Colonial city, many of them even settled in the city, hence, the origin of Patna School of Paintings, popularly known as Patna Qalam.

Patna Qalam Paintings: Windows into the colonial society

Patna Qalam i.e. the Patna Painting School, offers a compelling window into the social fabric of colonial Patna, particularly through its distinctive representation of labor, caste, and class hierarchies. By the 1800s, Patna was the head-quarters of one of the eleven provincial committees of the eastern territories of the Bengal Presidency, divided by the British. This attracted many artists to migrate to Patna from Murshidabad.

By painting the day-to-day life of common people and festivals or carnivals, this school maintained a record through which we can develop an understanding of the structure of society during the eighteenth century. The hybridity of influences manifested in the Patna Qalam – from imperial Mughal painting to the provincial Mughal style of Murshidabad to the ‘Company’ style emerging under the patronage of East India Company officials in Calcutta and elsewhere – reflected the hybrid society of a transitional period. Artists like Sevak Ram, Shiva Lal, Shiva Dayal Lal, Hulas Lal adapted the European style of painting, especially for single point of perspective and the lighting. Now to compare the Patna Qalam with other prominent schools under company painting, we needed to trace the history of these schools. According to Mildred Archer, Andhra in south India was the area where paintings for Europeans were first made. And the way trade attracted Europeans to Patna similarly the diamond mines of Deccan attracted European merchants and adventurers, hence both Dutch and British established their factories in the Golconda Kingdom of Masulipatam in 1605 and 1611.

In Patna Qalam couples from different castes and their profession are not painted together, as there are paintings that present commoners working for their living but they were never accompanied by their spouses. Whereas in South India there is a whole range of such couple images (Check Victoria and Albert Museum online collection).

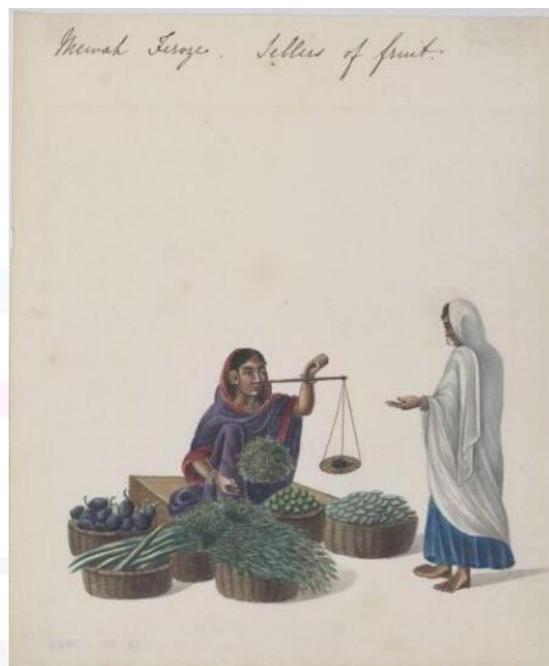


Figure 1 Vegetable seller, 19th century, Artist Unknown, Patna, V&A collection

Patna Qalam reached out to the local public, making them the new subject for the paintings. The new patrons of art, i.e., East India Company officials and native bureaucrats, were more interested in capturing the locals, the occupations these native people were engaged in, their flora and fauna, etc. This school of painting was based on the idea of demand and supply, i.e., while analysing the paintings of Patna Kalam, we encounter various subjects and themes, and even the quality of the paintings varies. The artwork from Patna Kalam enabled European settlers in India to send back descriptive visuals of Indian lands and peoples to their own countries. As it is said, Europeans were not only interested in the economic and strategic importance of the colony but were also interested in traditional exoticism (Said 1978). Since paintings of the Patna Qalam focused mainly on the life of the common people, its major themes included the routine chores and occupations, landscape and buildings, religious themes, fairs and festivals, flowers, birds and animals, etc. In addition to paper and mica, these paintings were also done on ivory. In many ways, the Patna Qalam may be seen as a popular art. The painters who migrated to Patna in search of work and patronage, settled in the old part of the city and established their ateliers there. Most of these artists belonged to the Kayastha caste, among whom some important names include Sewak Ram, Shiv Lal, Shiv Dayal Lal, Hulas Lal, Jairam Das, Iswari Prasad and others.

There are certain features of the Patna Qalam that are distinct from other styles of painting during this period. With its focus on the everyday life of the common people, the Patna school adopted a more realistic approach. It was not ornamental, hence decorated margins were avoided. Figures were given more attention as compared to background. The facial features of these painted figures are also very distinct with pointed noses, heavy eyebrows, lean and gaunt faces, sunken and deep-set, staring eyes and big moustaches. There was no direct court-patronage to these painters, and it involved mostly individual work unlike the more collective effort of Mughal court painting. Artists of this school developed a new technique of shading solid colors. The technique of painting under Patna Qalam was known as “Kajli Seahi”; i.e. the painting here was done directly over the medium without using pencil to delineate the contours of the picture.



Figure 2 Mehtaranees or sweeper woman, 19th century, Artist Unknown, Patna, V&A (Left), Patna Museum (right)

Patna Qalam artists skilfully used visual techniques, especially figure proportion and perspective manipulation, to encode social commentary within their works. Patna paintings depicted local crowds, festivals, and the working class of the society, including sweepers, vegetable sellers, toymakers, and others. As mentioned above, earlier scholars have analyzed these paintings as documentation of the society, this paper argues that in the process of depicting people of different professions, the artists were knowingly\unknowingly also depicting the caste system, as many of these professions are associated with specific castes, which even included the so-called "untouchable" communities.

The occupation-based paintings i.e. the *Firqa* paintings, representing various kinds of working class is one popular theme. And even if one simply calls *Firqa* as occupation-based paintings, in India, occupation earlier was mostly associated with their birth, i.e. their caste. Hence, the artists, who as per Mildred Archer were Kayastha by caste, were not merely documenting the professions, but were also encoding visual cues about the deep-rooted social hierarchy prevalent in colonial Patna. Along with caste, even religion and the hierarchy around it is highlighted.

Despite the communal harmony depicted in some Patna paintings, the larger visual narrative highlights some differences, also for caste, these artists were highlighting the single subject figures, engaged in their respective jobs, whereas for religion one can find visuals that would have two or more figures and the hierarchy will be established in one visual frame. This caste and religion-based hierarchy, along with other social disparities, is not an old concept and even in contemporary times, factories, universities etc. despite hiring people from diverse backgrounds, still get trapped into the already existing social disparities, the caste-based social structure remained deeply entrenched, about which even Amitab Ghosh mentions in *Sea of Poppies*.

The Patna artists skilfully encoded social commentary within their paintings while meeting European demands for paintings that would archive the new terrain Europeans were exploring and establishing in. The visually encoded message that artists were delivering was not challenged by Europeans as social commentary but as they did not understand the realistic rendering of the subject. Next section will discuss these visual codes in detail.

***Gulzarbagh* Opium Factory painting series: A Case Study**

Delving deeper into the deliberate disproportional representation of human figures in the paintings of the *Gulzarbagh* Opium Factory Series, from the Victoria and Albert Museum, further strengthen the argument that when we look at a visual, there is more to what we see or are led to believe. The visual codes in many of the paintings represent the social hierarchy, which was either present in the society or the artist chose to highlight. In some of the paintings of the series, like the Labourers in the opium production space are represented in different sizes, which has nothing to do with perspective. The artists associated with this series i.e. Shiv Lal and Shiv Dayal Lal, were both aware of the fact that their new patron i.e. the Europeans were very particular about getting perspective right, hence making figures disproportionate had a purpose (Archer, 1948).

The *Gulzarbagh* Opium production painting series that Figure 3 is part of, presents a complex interplay of caste system, religious communities and the economic classes, reflecting on the power relations in colonial society. Sir Charles D'Oyly became an opium agent in Patna in 1818. He had a great influence on the local artists; he showed them British illustrated books and drawings and suggested subjects for them to draw. Two of the most important artists under him were Shiva Lal and Shiva Dayal Lal, they were relatives who used to run flourishing shops selling their paintings as well as that of their relations and caste men. Shiva Lal's works were highly inspired by British watercolours whereas Shiva Dayal had more of an indigenous style using brighter colors. These two are the artists who painted the whole series. Shiva Lal painted most of the paintings of the collection.

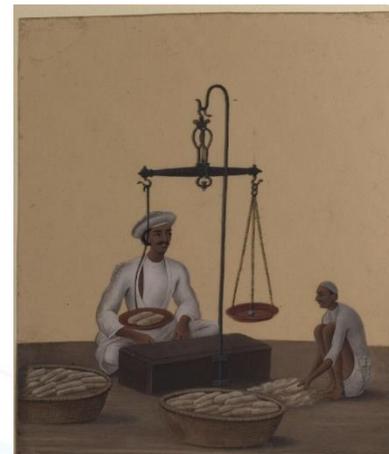


Figure 3 Weighing of the opium, ca. 1857, Artist Shiva Lal, Patna, V&A Collection

Conclusion

Issues of labor, race and class that were part of the social fabric of the colonial city, were hence being visually negotiated in the paintings of Patna Qalam. The paintings of Patna Qalam suggest a sophisticated visual language addressing social stratification.

Hence, Patna Qalam, as a historical document, has played an important role in documenting the colonial city. The local artists both resisted and adapted the change trying to find a greener pasture in the transitional period. These paintings might appear very simple and archival material but with a detailed study it reflects on the power relations, colonial gaze and artistic response to the changing social fabric. Through a visual analysis of the Patna Qalam paintings, the paper presents how the native artists strategically utilized their artistic techniques to comment on the prevailing social hierarchies, and registered their agency over the art they were producing.

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