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Masum Hawlader
Assistant Professor,
Department of Fine Arts,
Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam
University, Trishal,
Mymensingh, Bangladesh

**Mohammad Fakhar Uddin
Dravid Saikot**
Assistant Professor,
Department of Fine Arts,
Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam
University, Trishal,
Mymensingh, Bangladesh

Corresponding Author:
Masum Hawlader
Assistant Professor, Dept. of
Fine Arts, Jatiya Kabi Kazi
Nazrul Islam University,
Trishal, Mymensingh,
Bangladesh

Paintings of Bengal: A quest for the real identity

Masum Hawlader and Mohammad Fakhar Uddin Dravid Saikot

Abstract

Paintings of Bengal' have broad ranges of scopes and perspectives, though historically it faced changes in its meaning in different stages. 'Paintings of Bengal' as a genre of art is more or less neglected in the institutional arena due to some reasons including - lags in the possibility of competing with the European style of painting and absence of western standards of aesthetic considerations and pre-colonial classical formulas. The difference between the actual form and appearance of paintings in Bengal can be seen through analyzing current situation compared to the actual scenario from a standard point of view. Considering the similarities and differences between the ancient and the current paintings of Bengal, the course of paintings of Bengal can be understood - where, when, how has it changed or has Bengali painting been going in such a trend since its earliest period of journey? Keeping all these facts in consideration, the write-up has its major objectives to explore the nature and trend of paintings of Bengal.

Keywords: Artist, Bengal, Bangla, folk-art, linear, paintings of Bengal, philosophy, physiology, realization, religion, rituals, Tantra

Introduction

The meaning of the term 'Bangla' or 'Bengali' is sometimes ambiguous due to different historical reasons; which are why, the meaning needs to be clarified first. Expressing similar meaning, the terms 'Bangla' or 'Banga' or 'Bangala' historically, refers to a wide area, ethnic group, similar lingual group, etc. But, here, this write-up simply means 'Bengal' or 'Bangla' as a geographical region and excludes the other historical or political titles and divisions. Rather, here, in a broader view, a naturally formed geographic territory with homogeneity is defined as 'Bangla' or 'Bengal'.

In this context, the demarcation by Niharranjan Ray can be quoted-

The Himalayas and the Himalayan states of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan in the north; the Brahmaputra river and the valley to the north-east; in the north-west it spreads from the plainland parallel to the north of Bhagirathi to *Dwarbanga*; in the east, the region spreads from the Garo-Khasia-Jaintia-Tripura-Chittagong hill tracts to the ocean south in the west, it ranges from the rocky and forest plateau of Rajmahal-Santal Pargana-Chhotanagpur-Manbhum-Dhalbhum-Keonjar-Mayurbhanj; and the Bay of Bengal to the south. Within this natural boundary, the settlements of ancient Bengal named Gaur, Pundra, Varendra, Radh, Suhm, Tamralipti, Samatat, Banga, Bangal, Harikela etc. are situated; the villages, steppes, hills of this valley are formed beside Bhagirathi-Karatoya Brahmaputra-Padma-Meghna and many more rivers. This land is the source of all activities including religion, work and entertainment. The mountains on one side, hard rocky area on two sides, and vast sea on the other side and in the middle the equilibrium of the plainland is the geographical destiny of the Bengalis (Niharranjan Ray 1418: 60-61).

These aforementioned geographical features have shaped the Bengal region in its own unique way, even being located within Indian subcontinent. In order to identify Bengali painting, we need to distinguish the tendency of painting of a large area of greater Bengal, as the paintings by the artists of this region are identified as paintings of Bengal. The question is what are the features which make paintings of Bengal distinguished from paintings of other regions? To answer this question, it's important to determine the basic aspects of painting of this region. Another issue in this regard is, the challenge of studying Bengali painting isn't an individual phenomenon; rather it's similar to other historical analysis of different aspects of life on this land.

Most historians start the discussion of this land formation and sometimes conclude that, the cultural elements here are newer because of the relatively newer land formation in this region. In reality, the history of civilization is newer compared to the history of the world, so the discussion of land formation distracts the main issue from its course. Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay mentioned that, *'The most historical relics of the Paleolithic or Stone Age of Bengal have been collected from the Susunia hills* ^[1]. According to the discoverer Sri Paresh Chandra Dashgupta, *at least a million years ago, piedmonts of the Susunia hill and in the adjoining areas, there was presence of the life of primitive mankind (Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay 1418: 9).* The journey of civilization on this land has its primitive history, therefore, the fact of claiming Bengal as a relatively newer land formation tends to question the root of 'bangalees' ^[2]. Its historically proved that, 'Bangla' or Bengal is a very ancient region or state. In geological point of view, Bangla was formed in the Pliocene period (about ten to twenty-five million years ago). Since then the people of Bengal have been residing here and we can prove that from the discovered weapons they used (Atul Sur 1986: 20).

Different branches of the human species have developed different civilizations around the world. For example, the Bhimbetka Cave in Central India is home of one million years old inhabitants. The challenge of the ancient theory of human evolution is, it says all the people of the world were scattered from one place, so civilizations are also judged on that basis. Recent studies have shown that humankind has spread out differently around the world and different races have created mixed ethnic groups.

Scientists also agree that about 70,000 years ago, Sapiens from East Africa spread into the Arabian Peninsula, and from there they quickly overran the entire Eurasian landmass...when Sapiens reached the Middle East and Europe, they encountered the Neanderthals... Similarly, when Sapiens reached East Asia, they interbred with the local Erectus, so the Chinese and Koreans are a mixture of Sapiens and Erectus. (Yuval Noah Harari 2019: 16)

Although the exact date of human settlement in the Bengal region has not been ascertained yet, skepticism about its antiquity might be biased from some aspects. There is also a confusion regarding the 'name' of this land, like when did the name Bangla or Bengal take place, where did it originate, which areas were parts this region, what was the volume of land of Bengal, who expanded the empire etc issues are in the discussion which distract the main issue from its course. To avoid such confusion, from the very beginning, the term 'Bangla' or Bengali is used here as the geographical territory of greater Bengal and the paintings by the artists of this territory is defined as the paintings of Bengal.

From the chronicles of Usha Aniruddha, we learn that even in the age of Mahabharata, what is now call portrait or portrait was quite popular, otherwise how did Usha recognize Aradhya, who was seen in a dream in the portrait of Aniruddha!..We also read about Rama and Sita's pictorial philosophy in Ramayana ^[3]. In the Buddhist era, the practice of landscape drawing or sceneries, or drawing in portraits, has reduced, rather religion-based paintings started to take place. From there, the philosophy of painting came into

place, which we find in Vinaya Pitaka ^[4], where there is a reference of a gallery. The seventeenth-century Tibetan historian Taranath in his history of Indian Buddhism, mentioned that the tradition of fine arts in India is very ancient, even earlier than Lord Buddha (Ashoka Mitra 2008: 54).

Thus, there is no doubt that the culture of painting in this region is quite ancient and the natural elements of this region must be in consideration while studying the nature and structure of paintings of Bengal. The next question is whether the paintings presented by the historians as paintings of Bengal are really paintings of Bengal or not! Or folk arts are meant as Bengali painting? Is the form of Bengali painting are formed only based on folk art? To be mentioned here, paintings should not be confined to such a monolithic structure. As Gurusadaya Dutt said:

The learned Bengalis ignore that, the Bengali art of paintings has inspired not only India but the entire of Asia in ancient times. Learned Bengalis today are oppressed by the misconception of their own lack of resources in the world of arts, pitifully standing in the caves of Ajanta, in the courtyards of Mughal and Rajput palaces and in the gates of colorful markets of China, Japan and France. (Gurusaday Dutta 2008: 181)

Gurusadaya Dutt's realization is worthwhile, greater Bengal is a vast region consisting of present-day Bangladesh and portion of India. Art, literature, and the practice of mindfulness have also been widespread in this region, and almost all regions of India are associated with Bengal in many ways. The merchants and traders of this region have conducted their business all over the world. Sawdagar ^[5] is one of the most influential characters in Bengali folklore. Since ancient era, fertile soil and availability of water has made agriculture spread in the Bengal region and the way of life has been relatively comfortable here. In the leisure of agriculture, Bengalis had the opportunities of mindfulness or spiritual practices. At the same time, Bengalis were the producers of a mostly desired and worldwide renowned cloth – 'muslin'. Moreover, the people of this region had the skill to make copper-cassava-wood-terracotta housework and beauty products. The major exports were sugar, ginger, cotton, spices, honey and other agricultural and relevant industrial products. As a result, business men had to travel abroad for trading in different parts of the region and outside. Waterways were the main means of communication, and Bangla was surrounded by numerous rivers; so, the communication system was relatively advanced. In this way, all his best resources of both production and culture were spread all in different cities, towns and ports of India, Asia and Europe.

There is no doubt that, the Bengalis went to Crete for trade and the Cretans came to Bangladesh and settled there. The settlement of Bengali merchants in that area is also mentioned later in the book *'Periplus'* Gray, by an Egyptian sailor. Valerius Flacus also wrote in his book *'Argonautica'* that the Bengali heroes of the Ganges-Radhes regions were on the shores of the Black Sea in 1500 BC. Following this, Virgil also wrote in his poem 'Georgicus' that 'I will write in golden letters' about the heroism of the Bengali heroes of Ganga-Radha (Dr. Atul Sur 196: 59-60).

So, there is little chance of looking into Bengali painting as a completely different or isolated event from other parts of

¹ Hills in West Bengal, Present day India

² Inhabitants of Bangla/Bengal region

³ One of the major Sanskrit epics of ancient Indian history

⁴ Buddhist scripture

⁵ Merchants or businessman

India. Analysis of the religions and philosophy of Bengal shows that Bengal has pioneered in its expansion all over Indian regions. *Lokayata* or Charbaka^[6], which flourished in ancient India and Bengal, was the pre-Brahmanical⁷ philosophy of the region. As a result, the main opponents of the Vedas^[8] were also the followers of Charbaka, which basically represents realism. It can be seen that the impression of this realism is quite clear in the Bengali arts or paintings. The phenomenon of spiritualism through removing reality is a matter of much later history. *Tantra*⁹ was the primitive religion of Bengal. The mental or spiritual structure of the Bengali people cannot be understood beyond the beliefs of the system. Bengal mental structure ignores the world outside the physiological knowledge or *Tantra-sadhana*^[10] or materialism. Considering the physique as the center, all the performances art are conducted (See Figure 1) and that results as observed - human bodies in the paintings of Bengal region.

Revealing the meaning of Tantra sadhana, Panchkari Bandyopadhyay said, it's a realization through which it's possible to know- how the secret or total energy of the body is related to all the secret forces of nature, how it is closely related or how it is possible to have a close relationship or how this can be acquired. The root of this rituals is *dehatatta* or physiology. (Panchkari Bandyopadhyay 1322: 462).

Considering physiology as the center of rituals has long history in Bengal and the process had different changes while understanding the mysteries of human body. While drawing, the first thing came into mind is human body and its mystery. *Tantra* or such rituals observed the whole nature in the human body and did not seek any unnatural consciousness outside the natural body. It's actually the care of nature through realizing human body (Jatin Sarkar 2010: 18).

People here have been feeling the relation of mind of natural matters through their bodies and as a result they can possess more concentration in their activities. *Tantra* has a meaning - son or child and that is why a major meaning of the process is reproduction while another meaning is - loom. So, the practical meaning is related to both agro-based production and human reproduction. As women were involved in agriculture, weaving in earlier ages, and the history of ancient Bengal is therefore also matriarchal. This events of agricultural production and human reproduction indicates *tantra*. Various methods of practicing tantra are found in many parts of India. *There is an illusionary idea about tantra among all classes of people, which needs to be clarified; agriculture, animal husbandry, weaving, chemistry, medicine, surgery, etc., all the technical knowledge are the basic elements of Tantra* (Narendranath Bhattacharya 2009: 42). These are closely associated with the popular art of Bengal and along with the spread of Tantra, Yoga^[11] & Samkhya^[12], painting has also spread to different states of India. It should be mentioned, distinctive

feature of *Tantric* painting is also present with glory in this field. Therefore, there is a logical basis for the idea that the spread of art and painting should be in similar ways. In this context, Ahmed Sharif mentioned:



Fig 1: Ajanta mural

No one nowadays denies that, Samkhya and Yoga - these two scriptures and methods are the primitive non-Aryan philosophy and religion. There is no way to say for sure whether this scripture originated in from the Austric or Kirat people in the remote areas of Bengal. It is certain that its all-Indian as well as Asian spread happened in the post-Aryan era. It seems that in the pre-Aryan period, Samkhya philosophy and Yoga spread all over India. This is probably the reason why we also see Yogi-Shiva idols in Mohenjo-Daro. Yoga was developed into the form of Buddhist Tantra, Brahmanical Tantra, Natha Pantha, Buddhist Sahajia^[13], Vaishnava Sahajia [Radha-Krishna symbol adopted instead of Shiva-Uma at this stage]... Ajibhika, Jinn, Brahmachari, Bhikkhu, Sannyasi, Sant, Fakir have also continued monasticism by adopting these practices (Ahmad Sharif 2007: 69).

The expansion of Samkhya-yoga and Tantra in ancient Bengal and other region of Asia is a very significant indicator of the journey and likewise the importance of painting and sculpture here in this ground is more or less confirmed. Because painting had a direct role in the interpretation and analysis of Tantra and in the construction of Tantric temples. Throughout India we see an abundance of Tantric sculptures and idols. There are examples of paintings used as a method of performing Tantra and Yoga. It should be mentioned here, lack of direct and perfect examples of painting seems because of limitations of medium but it's established that, artists prepare the draft version of sculptures first. So, there are chances of doing so even by an expert artist. Initially, following the path shown by colonial researchers, it was thought that there was no direct or special relationship between sculpture and painting of Indian regions. The construction techniques of painting and sculpture are completely different from each other. Alice Bonner, a Swedish artist and expert has analyzed 23 important sculptures from different parts of India and shows

⁶ Ancient school of Indian materialism; also known as Lokayat

⁷ Social system based on the rituals and social pre-eminence of the priestly caste of Hindu society

⁸ Religious texts originated in ancient India

⁹ Systematic broadly applicable text, theory, system, method, instrument, technique or practice

¹⁰ Rituals/religious practices

¹¹ Physical, mental, and spiritual practices or disciplines which originated in ancient India

¹² One of the Hindu philosophical schools

¹³ Unorthodox religious cult

in her 'Principles of Composition in Hindu Sculptures' that there is an inherent relationship between sculpture and painting in this region. So here the question is, if it can be logically assumed that the sketches were made as preliminary version for the sake of sculpture? Even if we don't find the sketches or such compositions, but at least we can sense that it was possible. In that sense, it is not always obligatory to appear directly in the evidence of painting rather the appearance of the sculpture is the proof. More than that, there is also the presence of literary evidences. Rethinking the European concept of authenticity of Bengali painting, might find such presence everywhere in the arena of art.

Moreover, the birth and spread of the Buddhist, Jain¹⁴ and Ajivika¹⁵ religion was predominant in Bengal and its adjoining areas. Even, the origin of the basic Tantric tendency of the Bengalis is also found in the Bengali region; as the essence of Tantra is 'whatever exists in the body, have existence in the universe'. The art, philosophy and literature of the Tantric Bengalis are not separated from one another, rather an overall holistic view of life is the main theme of Tantra. Bengali painting is therefore body-centered, the method of understanding other things keeping the body at the center is a very basic tendency of Bengalis. It is seen in paintings of Bengal that, the human body has always been painted with more importance than other accompanying matters. Accessories are usually illustrated as the ecological essentials of the depicted human body. (See Figure 2)

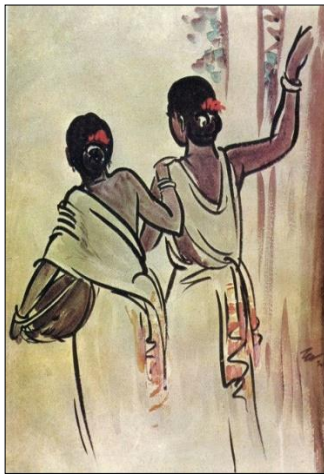


Fig 2: Artist: Zainul Abedin

Even though paintings of Bengalis are body-centered, the body is not 'all in all' of art. The people of Bengal see the soul or consciousness as an elementary quality of the body. The tendency to consider soul as spiritualism is tendency of outside historians in particular, to see Bengal and India wrapped up in a spiritual twist and thus to identify it as backward or irrational. The main reason for this tendency might be the ignorance about the religious and philosophical way of life of Bengal people. Later, when Bengali historians began to follow foreign writers, the idea of spiritualism became permanent into their minds. Contrary to the rationalist mindset of Europe, the propaganda of Indian spirituality or irrationality is nothing more than an attempt to confuse and a plan to strengthen the rule over the people

of the region and adequate details of such happenings are found in history. The history and scriptures of ancient rationalism in the Bengal region still bear witness to the logical-rational thinking of people here. The basic principles of logic here are: Kathabhasthu¹⁶, Charaka¹⁷ and Nyayasutra¹⁸ where there are extensive examples of critical commentary in these areas. Though, in the oldest Tantric beliefs, there could be nothing more important than the human body as the subject of thought with spirituality, but the issues are largely supported by the then scientific knowledge and practices. Later, Tantra and science flowed in different streams for various practical (mainly political and socio-economic) reasons. To sum up, as the body is the temple of soul, the Bengali artists illustrated the human body with utmost importance. It cannot be said that, this tendency wasn't noticed even in the mind of further Bengali artists. Because we can identify the same influence in the artwork of renowned artists of present-day Bangladesh, like in the most eminent paintings of famine by Shilpacharya¹⁹ Zainul Abedin, mainly portrayed human bodies as noticed. (See Figure 3).

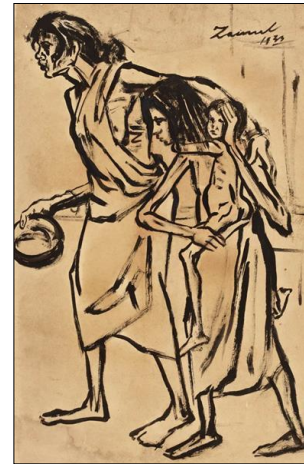


Fig 3: Artist: Zainul Abedin

Most of his other paintings are also dominated by the human body. Moreover, artist Kamrul Hasan, artist SM Sultan and even contemporary world-famous artist Shahabuddin Ahmed; those who hold Bangla as their root, they cherish Bengali paintings from their heart and soul and the synchronization of body and soul in illustration is one of the core features of Bengali painting. (Figure 4)



Fig 4: Artist: Kamrul Hasan

¹⁴ Ancient Indian religion

¹⁵ School of Indian philosophy

¹⁶ A Buddhist scripture translated as 'Points of Controversy'

¹⁷ Foundational Sanskrit text from ancient Indian region

¹⁸ Foundational Sanskrit text covering a wide range of topics, including 'the science of debate' or 'the science of discussion'

¹⁹ Title of honor, meaning – 'Great Teacher of the Arts'

The ancient style of Bengali painting shows the 'body muscle of the figure, almost round face, slightly swollen cheeks, large expressive eyes; Various ornaments; beautiful clothes on the body, the folds of the garment are marked in the thin line. the figures standing or sitting in various poses; bodies are articulated in rhythmic lines. In many cases, indication of nude figures under transparent clothing.' (Bhatindranath Mukherjee 1999 :22). Such various postures of the human body are being portrayed. (See Figure 5)



Fig 5: Artist: S M Sultan

We also find Sahabuddin Ahmed, a famous artist who directly participated in the liberation war of Bangladesh, as a follower of the same genre of painting. His colorful presentation of human physique proves that the philosophy of Bengal artists which concentrates and articulates humanism, never left the canvas of the artists of this region. (See Figure 6).



Fig 6: Artist: Shabuddin Ahmed

Even if the passionate artists of paintings of Bengal are trained with European style or philosophy, he or she cannot ignore his or her own Bengal spirit. The course of the ancient history of physiological realization though faced challenges in its evolution but is still present in art. In many ways the artists have been prioritizing the physique based lining which results as linear painting of figures. (See figure 7). Such samples of paintings can be found in various ancient and medieval paintings. As found in the description of Niharranjan Ray:

Acharya Kumara Swamy mentions about one of the three line-based imagery of middle-age visible in the three copperplate, in his book 'Portfolio of Indian Art'. Approximately it's from eleventh century. The second is engraved on the context of the Sundarbans-Pattoli region of King Dombanpal. The third is carved on the Pattoli, found

in the village of Mehar in Chittagong district. The last two are dated to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and both are now preserved in the gallery. In both cases, there is a rapid transformation of the sharp line, and a lively flow in that transformation; the continuous motion is also noticed. However, it is quite understandable that, wherever the artist has got even the slightest opportunity, he has found satisfaction by creating a flow of line and curve. Apart from that, even in the insignificant subject matter, there is a vitality and an plenty of linearity even if it is incompatible with the subject. However, this line plan does not seem to stem from any deep realization or motivation. Probably due to this unusual and inconsistent abundance and vitality, the half-shaped or three-quarters depicted facial line embroidered from the sides or into the pointed nostrils or angular chin, sharp arched eyebrows seem matured. It seems that the artist has almost become oblivious to the plenty of sharp lines, because where there is no meaningful representation of color, expressing through the lines as the only means of expressing harmony with the subject is the option for the artist. Such a desire and efforts are evident in inconstant and protracted lines and curves. Even the face of the idol is drawn as line-based illustration and wherever there is any scope, artists sharpened the lines, there has been great inconstancy and repetition in the lines (Niharranjan Ray 1418: 72).



Fig 7: Ajanta mural

The nature of the movement of the line and the variety of motions have given a distinct feature to the style of paintings of Bengal and detail discussion regarding the rules-regulations of painting are found in the ancient scripts of this region. It is evident from these discussions that painting was not just a traditional matter here, rather it was more an institutional or likewise practice. Despite, at present, this practice is being considered as a traditional genre and its institutional status is being ignored. The way through which such a rich genre of art is being concealed in the folds of folk art, can be called a plotted phenomenon in Bengali spirit. As a conclusion, paintings of Bengal can be identified as linearly materialistic physiology based art and if this style of painting is accepted only as a folk art, then some of its essential qualities are lost which keeps paintings of Bengal away from its real meaningful role in the world of arts.

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