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Representation of European dress in indigenous Art of Bengal

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Abstract

The earliest European nation that settled in Bengal was the Portuguese in 1518 C.E. During 1538 C.E. the Portuguese build their factories and settlements at Saptagram, Chittagong and finally Hooghly. From 1615C.E. onwards, the Dutch East India Company started trading activities in lower part of Bengal. The British, the French, the Danes, the Flemish and other formed their settlements in Bengal later.

Social exchange between the European powers and local people continued from the beginning mainly for trading. Finally after the British became administrative head of the country; their influence became widespread in all aspects of the life of local indigenous people especially artistic activities, and costumes. Representation of Europeans in different forms of local Art largely found during this period.

The impact of these foreign cultures is found in different forms of contemporary indigenous Art like Pata-paintings, wood-carvings, metal engravings, temple terracotta plaques, Provincial Mughal school of paintings, Company painting (drawn by Indian artist), Bat-tala print, Kantha (Stitched Quilts), dolls, toys metal engravings on 'Ratha', Book Illustration and other. The representation of European dress and costumes as seen through the eyes of local people of Bengal from 17th century C.E. to mid-20th century C.E.

It is often said that art mirrors the society. All forms of art consistently resemble or reflect specific aspects of the society. This is widely represented in different forms of indigenous Bengal art where contemporary society acted as a major source. This dissertation will deal on the society of colonial period in Bengal where European society and culture became the popular subject-matter of the indigenous or local art. Bengal became the colony of different European powers from the early 16th century C.E. onwards. The impact of these foreign cultures is found in different forms of contemporary indigenous art like Pata-paintings, wood-carvings, metal engravings, temple terracotta plaques, provincial Mughal school of paintings, Company painting (drawn by Indian artist), Bat-tala print, Kantha (Stitched Quilts), dolls, toys and other forms. Here I will narrow down my research on the representation of European dress and costumes only, as seen through the eyes of local people of Bengal from 17th century C.E. to mid-20th century C.E.

The earliest European nation that settled in Bengal was the Portuguese. In 1518 C.E. Portuguese trader Dom Joao de Silveira arrived at Chittagong. In 1535 C.E. Portuguese trader Diago Bebella arrived at Saptagram port in Hoogly and between 1580 C.E. a Portuguese colony was established in Saptagram. In 1538 C.E. the Portuguese were permitted to build their factories and settlements at Saptagram and Chittagong. They also built their colonies in Hooghly, coastal regions of Midnapur and in larger parts of Eastern Bengal, modern Bangladesh. Primarily the Portuguese were trader but later they concentrated more on slave trade and Piracy. From 1615 C.E. onwards, the Dutch East India Company started to spread their trading activities in lower part of Bengal. The British, the French, the Danes, the Flemish and other European powers formed their settlements in Bengal later. These European traders developed a hostile relation among themselves for their trading interest and frequent clashes occurred which created a chaotic condition in contemporary socio-political structure of Bengal. This condition enhanced due to the weakness of government authority i.e. the Mughals.

Besides political disturbances, social exchange between the European powers and local people continued from the beginning mainly in terms of trading purpose. This exchange gradually transformed into an inter-dependent relation and finally after the British became administrative head of the country; their influence became widespread in all aspects of the life of indigenous people especially in food habits, artistic activities, and costumes. Representation of Europeans in different forms of local art largely found during this period. It signifies the contemporary social attitude.

Temple Terracotta Plaque: From 17th century C.E. onwards, local rulers of lower Bengal (Howrah, Hoogly, Midnapur districts) came into close contact with the European traders for political and economic reasons. These interactive relation inflorescences on their culture, food-habit, art and even in costume vice-versa. This type of European influence can be seen in terracotta plaques of Bengal temples profusely. In a terracotta plaque of *Samsundar Jiu* temple of the Mallick family at Jhikhira in Howrah district, dated 1691 C.E., depiction of contemporary Portuguese dress is found (Plate 1). Here both Indian and European dresses are carved side by side and they are mostly of soldiers. Though this temple was built by the local native merchant and the artisans were native Indian, they depicted the Portuguese dress-code in details. In this plaque the infantry soldiers of the Portuguese side are wearing 'doublet' - a snug-fitting buttoned jacket that is shaped and fitted to the man's body. It is up to waist length and used to wear over the shirt or drawers. This dress was widely worn by the Western Europeans in the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries C.E. Originally it was a mere stitched and quilted lining ("doubling"). They are also carved as wearing 'tudor bonnet' round cap on their head. It is a traditional soft round cap with a tassel hanging from the cord encircling the hat, widely used from 1485 to 1603 C.E. during the Tudor dynasty in England. In the lower part of the body the Portuguese soldiers are carved as wearing knee length 'breeches' with decorated pleat on the pantaloons. This type of dress was fashionable in those days. Here all details of the dress are depicted in minute details and in realistic way. This realistic art differs from the European realism in Art. Here the subjects are European,

but the artisans and the patrons are Indian. So, the way of depicting their feelings through art is much different. The stylization of carving of these terracotta plaques is Folk in nature, which is mostly common in all temple terracotta plaques of later period. This type of plaques is found throughout the lower part of Bengal where the Europeans settled.



(Plate 1)



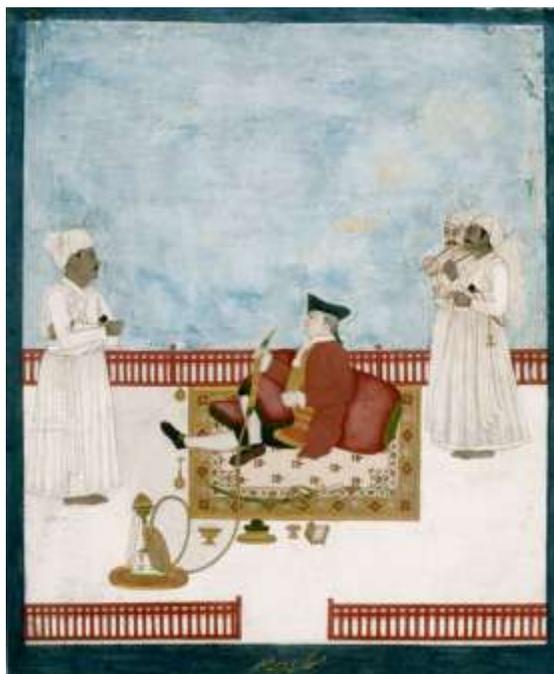
(Plate 2)

After the Battle of Plassey in 1757C.E. the British became the administrative head of the country and thus the impact of European influences have been increased throughout Bengal which can be found in different forms of art like European dresses are largely carved in temple terracotta plaques and other forms of Art. During this colonial period, the British

officers were sent to the district headquarters as Commercial Residents, Indigo Planters and other official purposes where they came in close contact with the local people. As a result varied influences are found on food habits, dress codes, manners and other ways of life between the Europeans and the Indians that are reflected in the terracotta plaques of Bengal temples. In the terracotta plaques of *Dewan Ji Siva deul* of 19th century C.E. and *Chandranath Siva* temple of 1847 C.E., at Hetampur of Birbhum district, contemporary upper-class female dress of the British is elaborately carved (Plate 2). Here an upper-class British Lady is carved as wearing a tea gown. This dress is generally worn by women at home for informal events and became popular around mid-19th century C.E. It is characterized by light fabrics and unstructured lines that are elaborately carved. The sleeves are decorated with pleats and its length is up to elbow. Here all the stylizations are of classical European. This type of pure European stylization in temple terracotta plaques is rare in the terracotta plaques of other parts of Bengal. In temple terracotta plaques of this temple only all stylizations are of classical European where as in the terracotta plaques of other places the influence of British and other European dresses is found in abundance but they are more Indian in nature. In temple terracotta plaques of *Siva deul*, built by the Maharani of Burdwan at Bipartikuri, Birbhum District, dated in the 19th century C.E., the British costume are found but they became more Indian in nature.

Provincial Mughal Miniature – Murshidabad School : After the death of Aurangzeb, the last important Mughal Emperor of India, in 1707 C.E., the political and economic structure of the mighty Mughal Empire started to collapse rapidly. In this situation the court painters of the Mughals started to migrate and settled down in different provincial courts throughout India. In Eastern India they settled in Murshidabad and Patna, two main provincial courts where Mughal miniature school flourished. Primarily Murshidabad had a court painting where portraiture painting was mainly practised. Though the Murshidabad school of miniature painting was started around 1720s under the patronization of Nawab Murshid Quli Khan (1700 – 1727 C.E.) it flourished under the patronization of Nawab Alivardi Khan (1740 – 1751 C.E.). The chief characteristic features of this school of Miniature painting is style-stiff stylized figures, ornamental details and a very bright palette like other Indian Miniature paintings but here the subjects became more European in nature. It is observed that the European infiltration in the miniature painting of Murshidabad school has been increased after The Battle of Plassey, 1757 C.E., where the British became the administrative head of the province by defeating the Nawab of Bengal. As Murshidabad was the capital of Bengal, British High-class officials and civilians used to visit, reside and work most actively in Murshidabad from mid eighteenth century C.E. and their activity became an important subject matter in Murshidabad school of Miniature Paintings, patronized by the Nawab of Bengal. Dip Chand was the chief court painter of Murshidabad whose miniature Paintings are mainly found. In one of his painting entitled “William Fullerton of Rosemount, 1760-1763”, (collection of Victoria & Albert Museum, London) representation of the contemporary political scenario is vividly described (Plate 3). Here the

composition and the colour palate are just like Mughal miniature but subject matter is European in nature. Here William Fullerton



(Plate 3)

is painted as seated in the centre of the composition. In the upper part he is wearing *Justacorps* (Justacorps is a long, knee-length coat worn by men in the latter half of the 17th century and throughout the 18th century), originated in France but introduced into England as a component of a three-piece ensemble. It consists of breeches and a long vest or waistcoat, highly embroidered. Breeches was an item of clothing covering the body from the waist down, with separate coverings for each leg, usually stopping just below the knee. A vest or waistcoat used to wear over the breeches. It is open-breasted, front-open, typically have many buttons and buttonholes lining on both sides of the entire length of the opening. The sleeves are tightly fitted, and have deep cuffs. Many buttons are also arranged on the shoulders and in the lower part of the sleeves. The coat is highly embroidered. This embroidery has been depicted in minute details which is one of the main characters of miniature paintings. The official of this painting also wears a 'continental' hat and 'shoe buckles' which became fashion during those days. Shoe buckles are a fashion accessory used to be attached with shoe for decoration. This decorative 'buckles' were made of various materials including brass, steel, silver or silver gilt. Here the stylization of British dress is directly influenced by the contemporary British dress but presented in an Indian way; whereas, the dress of the native workers is much different and depicted in more native way. This painting is an ideal example of western reflection on colonial Indian Miniature Painting as well as contemporary British dress in the eyes of native people.

Another painting 'A military officer of the East India Company surveying the River' 1767 C.E. (collection of Victoria & Albert Museum, London) is also an important painting to be mentioned in this connection. (Plate 4)



(Plate 4)

Subject of this painting is totally European and the stylization is also much different from the previous example. Here the colour is opaque like the miniature painting but applied in a western way. Light, shade and colour perspective of this painting are European in nature but the detailing of subjects is more like local miniature style. Here the British Official is wearing long coat known as *Justacorps*, short hat and knee-length shocks which are the fine example of that day's fashion. Here the buttons are extended to the waist area allowing extra room for the extension of a full shirt. The pockets are functionally located at hip level. The cuffs became slender and no longer folded back like the previous example. This *Justacorps* is frontally open and the lower end is highly embroidered. These changes in *Justacorps* design took place during the middle half of 18th century C.E., which is attested in this painting. Along with the *Justacorps*, the official also wore white '*breeches*' made of linen and a '*continental*' cocked hat which was fashionable in those days. The native artisans not only adopted the European stylization and techniques in their work of art, but also expressed their own feelings on European cultural heritage and dress. Thus in 17th & 18th century painting of Bengal and Bihar, a new stylization was born which is native in nature but more European in subject matter and patronized by the provincial rulers where contemporary British costume were depicted in a unique way.

Dutch Bengal and Company School of Painting: The colonial rule had a deep-rooted impact on Bengal, especially in Calcutta through the demarcation of so called ‘high art’ patronized by the high society and the exclusive category of artist class. From 1780C.E. onwards several European artists came here for documentation and official purposes. With them characters of western art like oil painting, colour and linear perspectives were introduced to the local artists who became deeply influenced by these techniques. The artisan community became a mixed community of native painter, draughtsman and print makers according to the market demands. Here the works of provincial Mughal miniature painters of Patna, Murshidabad and others are differed from the works of Calcutta artisans. This type of painting was produced under the direct supervision of East India Company Officials for their daily needs, came to be known as ‘Company School of Paintings’. Another type of painting was developed under the direct supervision of Dutch and French East India Company in Chinsurah and Chandannagore respectively where they produced iconographic representation of Hindu gods and goddesses. These paintings are realistic in nature. Here the dresses are Indian but their stylizations are of totally classical European academic nature. The draperies are transparent or semi-transparent that floated in wind like European paintings. These traditional gouache (one type of opaque water colour painting) artists were trained to use aquarelles, engravings and lithograph, the techniques of western painting thoroughly that are reflected in their paintings (Plate 5). This hybrid style of paintings is called ‘Dutch Bengal’ or ‘French Bengal’ paintings.



(Plate 5)

Early Bengal Oil Painting. Courtesy Akar Prakar Gallery, Kolkata.

Kalighat Pata painting: Bengal folk art in the form of *Pata* painting has an age-old rural tradition where stylization emerges from the inner feeling of the artist only, does not guided by any existing dictum. This stylization differs from the Mughal and other classical forms of art. In Bengal the main centres of *Pata*-paintings are Bankura, Birbhum, Nadia, Midnapur and Nadia District of lower Bengal. *Patuas* are mainly scrolled painting depicting various Hindu mythologies and religious stories. In old Calcutta, these *Patua* class (artisan who draw *Pata* painting) settled near 'Chitteswari' and 'Kalighat' temple. The *Pata* painting style developed near Kalighat temple is known as Kalighatpainting. Perhaps Kalighat painting is the first school of *Pata* painting in India that is truly modern in both style and subject. It was a popular art in 19th century Bengal. Kalighat painting is familiar with its bold outlines, vibrant colours and strong lines. Its transparent water colour technique and visual rhythm has a direct similarity with Company School of Paintings. Beside these, in this *pata* painting, the *patuas* changed the size of *pata* from scroll to rectangular format. High market demand and low-cost production was the main reason for developing this new style. The *patuas* used to draw this painting with bold and free lines. For the first time in Bengal folk art the concept of perspective has introduced by the *patuas* in Kalighat painting. By using light and shed the artist achieved to draw perspective in the motifs. This technique is largely followed in respect of dress where as they ignored the total perspective in their whole composition. This may be due to their ignorance of European perspective or otherwise, they continued their age-old visual languages of Bengal *Pata* in their work of art. However, the fact is that they attempted to use perspective in their folk painting at the influence of European art.

Besides the religious painting many secular subjects were widely drawn. These secular paintings are fine example of contemporary social condition of the area as well as of the country and the representation of European dress and culture in the eyes of native Indians. The painting 'English on an Elephant Shooting Tiger' has a beautiful documentation of that day's High-class British costume (Plate 6). Here the English hunter is wearing a long coat tightly fitted in the upper side. The coat has no collar only the cravat is painted. Along with the long coat the hunter wore white '*Pantaloons*', probably made of satin or silk, tight-fitted and ending at or just above the ankles. The black coloured short '*Wellington hat*' on head was of high fashion in those days. The *Patuas* drew these paintings with bold and free lines, a typical character of Kalighat *Patuas*. These paintings are an amalgamation of European academic influences and Indian folk-art traditions in a single space to create a unique imagery of visual language in Kalighat *Pata*.



(Plate 6)

Bat-tala wood cut print: The *Bat-tala* woodcuts also became a popular art form of Calcutta besides Kalighat *Patras* in ‘Black Town’ of 19th century Calcutta. High demand and low-cost production of printing art objects were the reason behind the flourishing of these two types of semi folk art activity in Calcutta. The art of the Black Town was created to full-fill the demand of the semi-educated people throughout Bengal Province. Many printing presses were established here to fulfil the demand of this new technique in North Kolkata. It soon became a blooming trade for print production. Primarily religious texts and illustrations were printed in these presses. Later, low class literature based on Hindu mythology, narrative fantasy, educational literature, historical and legendary romance and even popular current affairs were printed for semi-literate people. These were printed in a very low cost on cheap paper for ever-growing public demand. These illustrated books are known as *Bat-tala* books or Bat-tala prints. The local skilled traditional carpenter, *Patuas*, metal engraver, *swarnakars* (gold-smith) and *kamar* (black-smith) community shifted to this new occupation rapidly. Most of them were skilled artisan class for generation. They learnt the technique of woodcut from European printmakers who have settled in India at that time. Several studio set-ups were established. They learnt and developed the technical know-how from the Europeans but their stylization remained folk in nature like ‘*Patras*’ of Bengal. Soon many secular subjects were illustrated. With the arrival of European art in India, the Indian artist introduced three-dimension effect in their indigenous art for the first time. They composed visuals with perspective. Volumes of individual motifs are introduced in their art. They also carefully represented the ornamentation of the cloth with its volume

which is new in Indian art. Representation of European community and their dresses became favourite subject among the artisans. In a print entitled ‘European Couple Sitting on Chair’ is one of the finest examples of European costumes in this form (Plate 7). This is the picture of a European couple sitting with liquor bottle and glass in the hands of the gentleman and a violin in the hands of the lady. Here the seated lady is wearing highly embroidered evening gown, having very wide necklines and short puffed and frilled sleeves reaching to wrist from a dropped shoulder was one of the gorgeous gowns of that time. Lower part of the gown is widened and highly embroidered. The male figure is wearing ‘coatee’ – a type of tight fittings uniform coat which is waist length at the front and had short tails behind. This coat is open-breasted, having highly embroidered lining at the entire length of the opening and at beginning of the sleeves. Full-length trousers and pointed shoes are drawn as wearing in lower part. This coat was popular among the European armies and high officials at the end of the 18th century C.E. which indicates the representation of entertaining lifestyle of contemporary European army officers in Calcutta in the eyes of native artisans.



(Plate 7)

Primarily these *Bat-tala* prints were book illustration but by 1920's or early 1930's, large single-sheet wood engravings and woodcuts were introduced on various social and religious subjects for the demand in market.

Kantha, Toy, Dolls, Wood Carving, Metal Engraving and other minor art: Different types of indigenous, rural and folk art flourished in Bengal besides market oriented urban art. Among them wooden toys, terracotta dolls, *Kantha* (stitched quilts), wood carvings, metal engravings are important. Decoration of wooden *Chandimandapa* with highly curved pillars, brackets and doors are widely found throughout Bengal built at the patronization of local landholders known as *Zamindars*. European figures are also found in some of the *Chandimandapas*. Both these art forms were developed and patronized by the same society in the same period. In a wooden bracket of *Chandimandapa* of Mustafi family at Sripur, Hooghly district, dated 1707 C.E. an European soldier is carved as standing with a gun in

hand (Plate 8). Here the soldier is carved as wearing a short, tight fitted, open – breasted coat without any collar. A ‘*cravat*’ or neck cloth is shown as hanging around the neck. This is a strip of linen or muslin, worn round the neck and loosely knotted under the chin. Full-bottom wig and large cocked hat is carved on the head. Lower part of the body is covered with breeches and ‘*Hessian boots*’. This boot has low heel, semi-pointed toe, generally used by mounted troops.



(Plate 8)

Representation of European figures and styles are also found in the form of metal engravings, on brass ‘*Ratha*’. The ‘*Rathas*’ are decorated with various figurative panels. These panels are engraved on low relief. In figurative panel of the brass ‘*Ratha*’ at Ukhra in Burdwan (west) district dated in the 19th century C.E. the finest example of European costume in British Academic way can be seen (Plate 9). Here all the Hindu gods and goddesses are shown as wearing Indian dress like ‘*Sari*’ or ‘*Dhuti*’, but the folds and pleats of the drapery are engraved in European style – transparent in nature, floating in the air. Here all the perspectives and applications of light and shade are engraved realistically. This stylization has a similarity with contemporary Dutch Bengal paintings.



(Plate 9)

Several types of toys and dolls of the colonial period of Bengal are found where European influences are prominently featured in this local art form. A wooden female doll from Comilla, present Bangladesh, now in the collection of Gurusaday Museum, Kolkata, dated in the 19th century C.E., is one of the finest examples of this form (Plate 10). Here the European lady is wearing pointed shoe and long 'evening gown', having wide neckline, opened up-to the shoulder. The folds and pleats of the sleeves are curved in realistic manner. It is popularly known as *Rani Putul*



(Plate 10)

The *Nakshi Kantha* (Stitched Quilt) is the popular form of stitched art developed and patronized by the women only. *Nakshi Kantha* generally consists of a wide variety of beautiful patterns and motifs in line and colour drawn with the needle. The *Nakshi Kantha*, therefore, represent the highest perfection of Bengal's ornamental needlework. They are generally prepared for personal use to cover something. Coloured designs are created with coloured thread so that the whole *Kantha* presents an elaborately illuminated look with decorative patterns. Often figures, trees, animals and human beings are part of this decoration. These figurative *Nakshi Kanchas* mostly tell us stories that are based on contemporary social issues, everyday life, women life, folk tales, narrative moral stories and natural world. Figures are stitched in various activities representing every aspect of rural life within the artist's own experience. These stories are represented in this medium through the

eyes of the household ladies only. Most of the time informations were based on hearsay as household ladies were not allowed to interact with the outer world. Another important aspect of this art of *Nakshi Kanthas* is that not a single design had to be copied from other *kantha* and each and every *kantha* always had to carry its own unique design. This phenomenon is not common in other folk arts. This form of art never made for market; it always made for personal use of the artist and her family members. As a result, *Nakshi Kantha* carries the intimate feelings of the female artist, her understanding of the contemporary exterior world which is forbidden to her. In a section of gorgeously stitched '*Sujni Kantha*' presented by Manada Sundari, now in the collection of Gurusaday Museum at Kolkata, dated in the 19th century C.E., depiction of European infantry and their dress is found in details (Plate 11). Here the soldiers are shown as wearing tight-fitted military dress, full length trousers, hat and pointed shoes.



(Plate 11)

Commencement of Western Art Education: With the establishment of Govt. School of Art & Craft in 1864 C.E. British academic way of art teaching was introduced in Bengal. The study includes drawings, paintings, design, lithography, wood carving, engraving etc. Primary objective for this institute was to train Indian artists to maintain the supply of growing demand of British administrative work and the demand of new industry established in India. As a result, a group of local artists evolved who were trained in European stylization (unlike other artisans of Bengal) and started to work professionally. In an illustrated book drawn by Priyo Nath Das in 1869 C.E. local farmers are shown as wearing European dress. Such type of European influence in dress, home decoration and other objects are found in many contemporary popular story book illustrations. In a book illustration entitled '*Tin Bondhu*', a novel by Phanibhushan Chattopadhyay, published by P.M Bagchi & Co. in 1916 C.E., unique example of European academic influence is found (Plate 12). This woodcut print is an illustrative part of an Indian story but aesthetically it is similar to contemporary British book illustrations. Dresses of the figures are purely European in nature and the stylization of this work is a perfect example of British academic manner.



(Plate 12)

Abanindranath Tagore, the founder of Bengal School of Art, himself painted Krishna-lila series in 1895-1897 C.E. in British academic style. This series is more akin to European miniature than to the Rajput and Mughal Painting. In this series ample representation of European dress was found. Later under the influence of E.B. Havel and Abanindranath Tagore the students of this school were able to overcome this hangover of British supremacy in art. Contemporary nationalized movement was one of the driving forces behind this transformation. Sister Nivedita patronized this nationalized movement in Bengal art.

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