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History, Memory, and Art: Visual Narratives in Bengal's Cultural Heritage

Bonny Samanta[1]

Abstract

This study examines the interplay of history, memory, and art in Bengal, focusing on painting traditions from the ancient to colonial periods. Art in Bengal has functioned not only as aesthetic expression but also as a repository of collective memory and a visual document of cultural, political, and religious life. Ancient traditions such as Pata Chitra and terracotta plaques preserved folk narratives and devotional practices, while manuscript illustrations of the Pala and Sena periods reflected both Buddhist and Hindu influences. In the medieval era, Vaishnava, Shaiva, and Shakta themes coexisted with Mughal-inspired styles, producing artworks that embodied identity, devotion, and social history. Colonial Bengal introduced new genres such as Company paintings, caricature, and Battala prints, while the Bengal School of Art and famine sketches by artists like Zainul Abedin and Chittaprasad transformed painting into a tool of resistance and national consciousness. The study highlights how Bengali painting continually engaged with memory and history, offering alternative narratives that challenged dominant discourses. By situating art as both a historical document and a medium of cultural resilience, the paper argues that Bengali painting remains central to understanding the region's past, interpreting its present, and envisioning its future.

Keywords: *Bengali painting, History and memory,Patachitra, Bengal School of Art,Colonial Bengal, Cultural identity.*

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Introduction

History and memory are two essential dimensions of human civilization. History is the documented account of the past, while memory is the reconstruction of personal and collective experiences. Together, they not only preserve the past but also shape how we understand the present and imagine the future. Art serves as a bridge between these two realms. It is more than a display of form, color, or beauty; it is also a silent commentary on time, memory, and history. Across civilizations, art has carried traces of human experience—joy, pain, struggle, and resilience—making it both a historical record and a vessel of memory.

India's multifaceted culture is steeped in history and memory, encompassing religion, politics, folklore, and everyday life. Art is one of the ways to capture this long and varied past and create new meaning from it. From the canvas of a painting to temple-based sculpture, from folk art to cinema, Indian art serves as a

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carrier and interpreter of memory and history. Art is a unique language of human history, where the truth revealed in the rhythm of color and line comes alive across time. Indian art is not merely aesthetic or decorative, but is a historical document, a living monument. This continuity of painting testifies to centuries of cultural evolution, reflecting society, religion, politics, social movements, and individual experiences. Art reflects society and raises collective consciousness. Paintings have been used to portray nationalism, criticism of the economic and social stagnation of British rule, the partition of Bengal, the activities of the National Congress, religious differences, feminism, secularism, constitutional structure, language debate, the form of middle-class society, etc. Many artists around the world have created expressions centered on memory and history through their skillful works. Shankar Pillai, A. K. Narayan, Zainul Abedin, Chandi Lahiri in Bengal, Gaganendranath Tagore, Abanindranath Tagore, Chittaprasad, Revatibhushan, Amal Chakraborty, Shaila Chakraborty, etc. have contributed to highlighting the social context. This article will analyze how in Bengal, during the ancient, medieval, and colonial periods, history and memory were preserved through painting.

Objectives of the study

1. To understand the transformation and continuity of Bengali painting during ancient, medieval and colonial periods.
2. Explain how political, social, and religious memories are expressed through painting.

Methodology

The present study is based entirely on secondary sources collected from journals, academic articles, online archives, and credible websites. These materials include research essays, digital museum collections, encyclopedic references, and scholarly discussions on Bengali art and cultural history. Information from these sources has been systematically organized, compared, and interpreted to trace the transformation and continuity of Bengali painting across ancient, medieval, and colonial periods. The approach is qualitative and historical-analytical, treating artworks not only as objects of aesthetic value but also as documents of memory, identity, and socio-political history. Through a critical reading of existing literature, the study highlights how the political, religious, and cultural experiences of Bengal were visually represented and preserved in painting

The history of Bengali painting is a rich and diverse cultural heritage spanning many centuries. Bengali art was well-established long before the British arrived, especially in temple art, pata paintings, coins and handicrafts. During this period, painting was closely associated with social customs, religious beliefs, folk beliefs and royal patronage. “The tradition of scroll painting in Bengal, popularly called Patachitra, derives its name from the Sanskrit word Patta, meaning cloth. Artists would prepare a cloth or paper base with layers of natural adhesives such as mud, cow dung, and gum to create a durable surface for painting. Onto these surfaces, bright natural colours were applied to narrate stories. Emerging around the 7^{th}–8^{th} centuries, this art form became a significant cultural practice in Bengal. The paintings were not created for passive viewing but functioned as narrative devices—Patua singers would travel with their scrolls, unfolding them panel by panel while singing the associated tales. In this way, Patachitra operated as both entertainment and oral-visual archive, transmitting religious myths and social stories to village audiences across generations” [1]. Patachitra are basically story-based pictures painted on long canvases, which were presented to the people by village storytellers (Patua) through songs and stories. "At one time, scroll paintings (patachitra), along with their accompanying songs, served as a principal form of entertainment during religious and social ceremonies in Bengal [1].”

“The *Kalighat pats*, first produced in 19th-century Calcutta, marked a major shift in the patua tradition. Initially centred on mythological and devotional imagery for pilgrims near the Kalighat temple, the paintings

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soon adapted to the changing urban environment. Artists began incorporating secular themes such as satirical depictions of the newly emerging middle class, colonial officials, and social reform issues. This transformation gave the Kalighat style a unique character, as it reflected not only religious devotion but also everyday urban life and its contradictions, making it an important visual record of the colonial city" [2][3].

During the reign of the kings and nawabs of ancient and medieval times, fine paintings can be seen on gold, silver and copper coins. During the Muslim rule, decorative motifs were used along with Arabic and Persian calligraphy. During the reign of the rulers of Bengal like Ballal Sen and Lakshman Sen, a very rich coinage system was developed, on which deities or religious symbols, the name of the ruler, titles and declarations of the expansion of the empire were engraved. The title 'Param Vaishnava' is engraved on the gold coins of Lakshman Sen, which expresses his religious devotion. Symbols such as deities, lotus flowers, chakras, conch shells etc. are used, which are indicative of Vaishnava and Brahminical culture. On the coins of the Sultanate period, the rulers of the state mentioned their names in Arabic and Persian, their allegiance to the Caliphate, and the year according to the Islamic calendar. Each coin had 'Al-Mu'ayyad Billah' or the representative of the Caliph. Such words established the religious legitimacy of the ruler. For example, the coin of Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah symbolizes his political power and loyalty to the Caliphate.

"The early artistic heritage of Bengal is somewhat fragmented, especially before the Pala period, yet terracotta plaques from different archaeological sites provide valuable evidence. Excavations at Mahasthan (Bogra, Bangladesh) have uncovered plaques from the Mauryan age (322–185 BCE), while Chandraketugarh yielded examples from the Śuṅga era (185–71 BCE). Additional discoveries at Mainamati and Paharpur reveal works from the post-Gupta to early Pala periods (6th–9th centuries). These terracotta panels, made in relief, depict flora, fauna, deities, and human figures in everyday settings. Though created by local artisans and considered less sophisticated than courtly art, they vividly capture aspects of folk life in Bengal and provide glimpses of the visual culture that predated more formal schools of painting" [5].However, traditional Indian art is mainly 'collaborative art' (art created in collective labor). During the Pala Sena period, religious painting expanded with the spread of Buddhist and Hindu religious practices. These painting arts were not only an aid to worship but also played an important role as a container and bearer of contemporary society, culture, religion and history. "During the Pala dynasty (8^{th}–12^{th} centuries), Bengal became a flourishing centre for Buddhist learning and art. Illustrated manuscripts from this period often portray episodes from the life of the Buddha—his birth, enlightenment, and nirvana—executed with fine line work and delicate colouring. These paintings, later known as Pala style, were used both for ritual devotion and as teaching aids in monastic settings. The subsequent Sena period (12^{th}–13^{th} centuries) saw a revival of Hindu religious imagery, where temple decorations and manuscript illustrations featured scenes from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Vaishnava traditions. Such artworks not only expressed devotional fervour but also served as visual documents reflecting royal patronage, cultural interaction, and the socio-political order of the time" [4]. Patachitra-style decoration is seen on terracotta or terracotta plates, especially in the Bishnupur, Kalna and Madanpur regions.

Medieval Bengali painting is an expression of religious sentiment on the one hand, and an important carrier of cultural memory on the other. "The emergence of a new culture in Hossain Shahi Bengal (1494-1538) influenced by Chaitanya Dev (1485-1533) of Nabadwip, inspired by this, gave rise to a unique Bengali painting style in Bishnupur and other places until the early stages of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" [4]. During this period, mainly manuscript illustrations, pata chitra and religious decorations developed in the form of paintings. These patterns of painting are not only decorative but also invaluable documents of Bengali identity, religious consciousness and sense of history. "Paintings related to Chaitanya Dev such as the 'Eredar Sankirtan'painting or Chaitanya Sankirtan are considered as wonderful examples of the seventeenth century.Dinesh Chandra Sen and Haridas Das have given their opinion on their antiquity. In

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manuscripts from the 16th to 19th centuries, scenes from Vaishnava philosophy such as the Ten Avatars, Krishna Leela, Chaitanya Leela, Ramayana and Mahabharata are found in abundance. Numerous Pata paintings have been found in regions such as Bankura, Bishnupur, Medinipur, Birbhum, Howrah, Hooghly and Cooch Behar. The influence of Odisha, Rajput and Jain painting is noticeable in the painting style. The mixture of this exotic style with the folk imagination of Bengal gave birth to a special visual language. Although comparatively less, Shakta-Tantric and Shaiva paintings are found.For example: the many hand-painted Kali paintings from Murshidabad, the Shiva-Nandi paintings from Medinipur" [5]. "By the 17th and 18th centuries, Bengal came under strong Mughal influence, which left its mark on local painting traditions. The Murshidabad School, especially under the reign of Nawab Alivardi Khan (1740–1750), emerged as a distinctive regional style. Borrowing from the Mughal miniature idiom, these paintings depicted themes such as courtly life, music, literature, battles, and hunting scenes, while also incorporating local cultural motifs. Though primarily intended for aristocratic patrons, the works inadvertently became a record of Nawabi Bengal—its clothing, jewellery, architecture, and social practices—thus serving as valuable historical evidence alongside their artistic merit" [4][9]. We find an unparalleled record of Nawabi culture, social customs, urbanization and socialist life. Painting also extended beyond manuscripts. Objects such as coins, metal vessels, ornaments, and weapons often bore finely executed images or inscriptions. Sena-period coins typically featured deities and religious motifs—lotus, chakra, conch—reflecting Vaishnava and Brahminical traditions. By contrast, coins of the Sultanate and later rulers commonly carried Arabic and Persian legends rendered in the Perso-Arabic script, recording rulers' names, titles, and claims of legitimacy. These objects functioned as political and religious documents, offering historians valuable evidence of medieval Bengal's rulers, cultural affiliations, and social life. Such artifacts remain indispensable sources for archaeological and historical research.

"With the arrival of the East India Company, a new genre known as "Company Painting" developed during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Indian artists began producing works tailored to European patrons, focusing on natural history, topography, and ethnographic scenes. Characterised by watercolour techniques, linear perspective, and naturalistic detail, these paintings often documented plants, animals, monuments, and customs. Although they reflected colonial interests rather than indigenous imagination, they remain crucial historical records of how India was perceived, catalogued, and represented during the colonial encounter" [7][8].

Bengal School of Art and "Bharat Mata": A Cultural Response to Colonial Rule

The Bengal School of Art developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a conscious effort to resist the dominance of European academic realism and to recover an indigenous cultural identity. Led by Abanindranath Tagore, this movement drew inspiration from Mughal and Rajput miniatures, the Ajanta cave murals, and Japanese wash techniques, blending them into a uniquely Indian visual idiom. The central aim was not merely aesthetic but cultural—art was envisioned as a repository of India's spiritual heritage and historical memory at a time of political subjugation.

One of the most iconic works from this school is Abanindranath Tagore's Bharat Mata (1905). The painting depicts the nation as a four-armed woman, but unlike a conventional goddess, she is presented in saffron robes with a book symbolizing learning, sheaves of grain representing sustenance, cloth denoting the Swadeshi handloom movement, and a rosary conveying spirituality. In this image, Abanindranath transformed the political ideal of the motherland into a sacred figure that resonated with both religious symbolism and nationalist sentiment.

Through such works, the Bengal School challenged colonial cultural hegemony by presenting Indian art as rooted in its own traditions rather than as an imitation of Europe. While not overtly political, its artists—

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Abanindranath, Nandalal Bose, and their contemporaries—created a cultural foundation for nationalism. Their paintings became a space where memory, myth, and history converged, expressing an alternative vision of India that looked to its past to imagine a liberated future.

Colonial Bengal also witnessed the rise of political caricature and popular prints as powerful visual media. British journals such as Punch frequently mocked Indian society, which in turn encouraged Bengali artists to develop their own satirical responses. From the 1870s, caricatures began appearing in newspapers like Amrit Bazar Patrika, openly critiquing both colonial rule and social contradictions within Bengal. In 1874, the weekly magazine Vasantaka went further, publishing an image of the British administrator Sir Stuart Hogg as the Varaha (boar) incarnation of Vishnu—an audacious example of how religious symbolism was employed to challenge imperial authority. At the same time, the introduction of lithography in the 1860s made printing cheaper and more accessible, enabling wider circulation of such works. Parallel to caricature, the Battala presses of North Calcutta produced inexpensive woodcut prints depicting gods, demons, mythological stories, and moral lessons. Though often dismissed by the educated elite as crude or vulgar, these images were immensely popular among the masses, providing entertainment, moral instruction, and religious devotion. Together, caricatures and Battala prints not only reflect the visual culture of 19th-century Bengal but also shaped collective memory by giving voice to popular imagination and dissent [12][14][27].

In Bengali literature and journalism, cartoons have been established as a unique aspect of resistance, protest and progress. At present, this art medium is one of the most important tools for democratic practice and expression. The founder and exponent of Bengali cartoons is Gaganendranath Tagore. Among Gaganendranath Tagore's notable cartoons are Jatasura, Vidyaar Karkhana, Khal Brahmin, Mohun Bagan Club, Rabindranath's foreign trip, Biswabidyaloye agni sangjog, Sankar Bangali, Sarbange Ashrupat, Shanti jal, Atibhakti, Flying spinning wheel, Puchchha paribartan, Rupantar, H.E. old Bengal, Prachanda Mamata, Prachyo Pashchatyo, Biswabidyaloyer jolojog, Briddhosyo taruni bharja, Nuisance of a wife, Indian Ink etc. The purpose of the cartoons was to portray the reality of the society of that time through pictures. They satirized religious bigotry, British appeasement of Bengali Babu society, weak education system, patriotism, dowry system, polygamy, position of women, political inconsistency, religious hypocrisy, duplicity, etc. After Gaganendranath, artists like Sukumar Roy and Prafulla Chandra Lahiri repeatedly portrayed the real social picture with the brush and made people aware.

The famine of 1943 in Bengal, one of the darkest chapters in colonial history, became a central subject in the work of Zainul Abedin. At a time when official reports and government documents largely reduced the catastrophe to statistics, Abedin's sketches offered a profoundly human record of suffering. Using stark black ink and paper, he portrayed emaciated figures, starving mothers holding lifeless children, and skeletal bodies wandering in search of food. The simplicity of line and absence of embellishment gave these works an almost brutal directness, forcing the viewer to confront the human cost of colonial negligence. Unlike the sanitized narratives of the administration, Abedin's drawings preserved the memory of those who were silenced by history. In this sense, his famine sketches not only stand as artistic achievements but also function as alternative historical documents—visual testimonies of trauma, marginalization, and resilience that continue to shape collective memory in Bengal [16][20].

Alongside Zainul Abedin, another artist who responded directly to the famine was Chittaprasad Bhattacharya, closely associated with leftist and communist movements of the time. His illustrated booklet Hungry Bengal (1943) offered an unflinching visual record of famine-stricken villages, portraying skeletal children, grieving mothers, and bodies abandoned in the streets. Unlike Abedin, who relied on stark ink sketches, Chittaprasad used woodcut and lithographic techniques, which allowed for mass reproduction and

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circulation. This gave his work an explicitly political edge, transforming art into a tool of protest and resistance. British authorities, alarmed by the political impact of Hungry Bengal, confiscated and destroyed many copies, though a few survived. Beyond the booklet, Chittaprasad contributed famine-related illustrations and cartoons to the journal People's War, where he critiqued colonial policies, social inequality, and the indifference of the ruling elite. His work remains significant not only as artistic testimony but also as a visual manifesto of dissent, embodying how art could function simultaneously as historical documentation and political activism [17]. He strongly depicted the cronyism and laxity of the leaders in the period after the August Movement of 1942. The struggle, suffering, hardship and sacrifice of the farmers who agitated during the Tebhaga Movement (1946-47) and the Telangana Farmers' Revolt (1946-48) are reflected in his paintings. The Naval Revolt of 1947 was one of his paintings due to which the organized anger and rebellion were clearly revealed. "Artist Somnath Hor has depicted the Bengal famine and Tebhaga Movement using linocut, woodcut, and abstract painting styles. His wound series is mainly full of abstraction. He employed colors to convey the reflection of psychological. "The wounds depicted in his prints represent not only physical suffering but also the symbolic manifestation of state brutality. His work conveys not only hunger but also anger and resistance [19]."

When the nationalist movement took a larger form in India in the early 20th century, it was not limited to political struggle only but also reflected in literature, music and painting. In protest against the colonial one-sided and power-centric perspective, the Indian artist community took up the task of creating an alternative history. In this context, the Kala Bhavan of Santiniketan and the Indian Society of Oriental Art played an important role. Artists like Rabindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, Abanindranath Tagore and others took history not only as memory, but also as the main tool for building politics and culture or identity. Rabindranath believed that history is not just a document, but also creates a path for the future of memory. Although his painting often shows abstraction and self-portraiture, he inspired artists to think about history and culture in his philosophy of education. As head of Kala Bhavan (1922–51), Nandalal Bose guided Indian painting with a strong nationalist vision, creating works that reflected both mythology and the anti-British movement. The Dandi March and the Haripura Congress Poster (1938) expressed mass consciousness through his art. The organization formed in 1907 under the leadership of Abanindranath Tagore gave birth to a new Indian artistic language through Mughal miniatures, Rajasthani folk art and Japanese wash painting instead of European influences. Their paintings combine history, religion, mythology and folk consciousness to create a union of nationalist consciousness and memory. The artists have depicted grief, protest and pain in the events such as the Partition of Bengal, the Jallianwala Bagh incident, the partition of the country, etc. with the stroke of their brush.

Conclusion

The history of Bengali painting reveals how art has consistently functioned as both a historical record and a vessel of memory. From ancient manuscripts, coins, and temple decorations to medieval miniatures and colonial-era paintings, each phase reflects the cultural, political, and religious life of Bengal. These artworks are not merely aesthetic expressions but documents that preserve identity, social realities, and resistance.

During the colonial period, artists transformed painting into a space of protest, nationalism, and cultural regeneration. Movements such as the Bengal School, along with famine sketches, caricatures, and popular prints, created alternative histories that challenged colonial narratives and voiced collective memory.

In this way, Bengali painting stands as more than artistic tradition—it is a dialogue between history and memory. Through its symbols, emotions, and stories of resistance, it continues to help us understand the past, interpret the present, and imagine the future.

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