

Under the Banyan Tree, Onto the Canvas: The Battala Woodcut Print as a Visual Source in Contemporary Indian Art, 1970–2026

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Abstract

The present research aims at studying the reappearance of the cultural and visual heritage of the Battala woodcuts of the 19th century, which was the centre of woodcut printing located in northern Calcutta during the 18th and 19th centuries, as an influential factor on the visual practice of Indian artists who created their artworks between 1970 and 2026. The inexpensive, hand-coloured Battala woodprints coexisted with the chapbooks and almanacks in the same economic environment and formed a competitive relationship with the Kalighat pat paintings, as they interchanged motifs within this highly competitive environment. Although not many of contemporary painters refer explicitly to the Battala woodcuts, the paper argues that the grammar of this art form, including the graphic black contour line, the flat picture plane, the caricature of urban dwellers and the devotional icon as the reproducible motif, remains as an underlying layer within the visual culture of the Bengal tradition and other subsequent figurative art forms practiced in other Indian regions.

By means of the art-historical approach based on the print history research, the visual study and the review of secondary sources, the visual layer is studied in the paper by tracing it from the collage paintings of the 1970s by Bhupen Khakhar, the drawings of Jogen Chowdhury inspired by Kalighat, the reference to bazaar oleographs used in shutter paintings by Atul Dodiya, up to the recent revival of patua traditions practised by Kalam Patua and Anwar Chitrakar. The renewed interest in Battala is evident in its appearance in exhibitions and in archival practice at Akar Prakar in the 2020s.

Keywords: Battala woodcuts, contemporary Indian art, popular print culture

Introduction

Well before photography or offset printing entered the Bengali market, a group of engravers working under and around a banyan tree in the Chitpur-Garanhata area of North Calcutta had industrialised image-making. Since the 1820s, Battala presses published cheap chapbooks with hand-coloured wood engravings, and since the 1840s, the wood engravers in Battala created single-sheet prints that challenged the famous painted prints sold in Kalighat, several miles to the south (Mukherjee, 2018) [25]. The historians of Bengali print culture describe Battala's engravers, many of whom were goldsmiths, coppersmiths, and other metalworkers who recycled jeweller's tools to do wood engraving work, as the first real industrial visual arts "school" to emerge from colonial Calcutta (The Bengal Store, n.d.; Akar Prakar, 2022) [33, 2]. Yet, compared to its more photogenic neighbour, Kalighat, Battala's legacy has been comparatively unappreciated in Indian art history (Mukherjee, 2018) [25].

The relative lack of attention makes Battala's legacy in contemporary art particularly open to interpretation. In contrast to, say, Company paintings or Bengal School Orientalism, whose legacies into modernism in India have been relatively well mapped, the legacy of Battala needs to be pieced together from fragmentary sources: an artist's personal memory of collecting "Chitpur woodcuts" as a student (Chowdhury, in Anjum, 2021) [6]; a gallery's curatorial choice to exhibit Battala prints from the nineteenth century along with contemporary printmaking (Aicon Art, n.d.); and a curator's essay on the revival of pre-print culture as a trend in contemporary Indian art (Akar Prakar, 2022) [2]. This paper gathers these scattered pieces of evidence within a single interpretive framework, viewing Battala not as an isolated stylistic influence, but as just one strand within the greater braid of Bengali bazaar visual culture - a braid that includes Kalighat pats, calendar oleographs, and cinema hoardings – and which contemporary artists have used, at times, over the past roughly fifty-five years.

The choice of 1970 as the start of the time period is deliberate, not random. It is in the early 1970s that Bhupen Khakhar, working in Baroda, started painting over and along with mass-produced calendar prints and oleographs, an act considered by art historians as marking the start of Indian pop and also the Baroda narrative-figurative movement (Tate, n.d.; Apollo Magazine, 2016) [32, 7]. The year 2026 represents the present, when auction houses and private galleries like Akar Prakar and academic institutions like Sahapedia have focused on documentation and curatorial interest in Battala - precisely at the same time when contemporary Indian artists continue to use bazaar and calendar imagery (Akar Prakar, 2022; Sahapedia, n.d.-a, n.d.-b) [2, 28, 29].

Research Questions

This investigation is framed around one main research question and three secondary research questions.

- (Main Research Question): To what extent, and in what ways, has the visual lexicon of nineteenth-century Battala woodcuts provided a source for Indian artists between 1970 and 2026, either directly or indirectly via mediation?
- How does Battala's visual grammar (of bold linearity, flat space, satirical urban types, and devotional iconography) diverge from or converge with the more widely studied visual grammar of Kalighat pat in the work of contemporary artists?
- What shifts have occurred in relation to artists' engagement with this visual language over time-from ironic quotation drawn from pop culture in the 1970s to revivalism in the twenty-first century?
- What institutions and discourses have been instrumental in determining the visibility of Battala as an identifiable, rather than only an implied, reference point in contemporary art?

Methodology

For the current research, a qualitative, interpretive methodology of the art-historical kind, rather than quantitative or statistical, has been chosen because it aligns with accepted procedures in studies of popular and folk printing in the history of visual culture (Guha-Thakurta, 2006) [19]. Three approaches are employed in combination.

- Archive review and secondary source review. First of all, the primary historical context of the Battala prints is based on the literature in the field of print history, including Ashit Paul's pioneering research on nineteenth century Calcutta woodcuts, as well as modern efforts in digital humanities and museum documentation (Paul, 1983, as cited in Google Arts & Culture, n.d.; Sahapedia, n.d.-a, n.d.-b; Museum of Art & Photography, n.d.) [15, 28, 29, 26]. These sources are combined with galleries' and auction

houses' catalogues (Akar Prakar, 2022; StoryLTD, n.d.) [2, 31] to define the formal qualities, production environment, and waning of the Battala tradition by the end of the 1880s.

- Visual and biographical analysis. For every artist included in this paper, interviews published in the literature, gallery biographies, as well as critical essays were reviewed to prove the presence and nature of the bazaar print/Kalighat/Battala connection according to the artist's or critic's statements (e.g., Anjum, 2021, on Jogen Chowdhury; Tate, n.d.; Apollo Magazine, 2016, on Bhupen Khakhar; Chemould Prescott Road, n.d., on Atul Dodiya) [6, 32, 7, 11]. Artist's statements identifying Kalighat or Chitpur woodcuts as the primary source of inspiration are classified as first-order evidence; a critic's statement about a stylistic relationship between the artist's work and bazaar prints is classified as second-order evidence.
- Periodisation. In order to answer Research Question 3 (RQ3), the period of fifty-six years is divided into six decades (1970s, 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, 2010s, 2020s). Two representative works, securely dated to each decade, are selected and analysed to enable a decade-by-decade comparison of how the bazaar print/Battala-Kalighat continuum is used at each stage. Periodisation here serves only as a heuristic device for exposition, not as a claim of strict periodisation of artistic evolution every ten years.

However, a certain limitation of the methodology must be stated clearly. Since Battala prints at the time served as imitators and competitors of Kalighat pats, and since these two traditions were often treated as a continuum in the literature from the nineteenth century till our days (Mukherjee, 2018; Anantam IAS, 2026) [25, 4], most contemporary artists mentioning a source from colonial Calcutta refer to "Kalighat" rather than to "Battala." This paper takes such statements as evidence of the relationship to the general bazaar-print continuum, including Battala prints as one of its distinctive components (woodcut engraving rather than pat watercolour), but care should be taken not to misinterpret them as explicit references to Battala prints.

Literature Review

While the scholarly interest in Battala prints is relatively sparse for a subject of historical significance, this fact is recognised by several recent authors. Pritha Mukherjee (2018) [25] writes about the rare studies of Battala woodcuts available today, pointing out that whenever Battala woodcuts are examined, they tend to be dismissed as cheap versions of Kalighat pats. Ashit Paul's 1983 publication - put together after locating some Battala engravers - remains the foundational scholarly reconstruction of the tradition mentioned in all the subsequent references to Battala, including digitalisation projects such as the Google Arts & Culture exhibition organised by the Museum of Art & Photography (Google Arts & Culture, n.d.; Museum of Art & Photography, n.d.) [15, 26].

Another body of literature is devoted to Kalighat painting, which is necessary for contextual purposes even in the absence of a mention of Battala, as Kalighat and Battala shared a common market and visual repertoire. According to the Victoria and Albert Museum, curator of the largest collection of Kalighat pats, the tradition continues to be practised by rural artists from Medinipur and Birbhum - including Anwar Chitrakar (Victoria and Albert Museum, n.d.) [36]. The studies carried out in the mid-twentieth century by W. G. Archer and synthesised in later scholarship formed an interpretive framework - part indigenous and part influenced by colonial discourse - which has been adopted by all the writers that followed (COG India Art, 2026) [12].

In terms of the art-historical issue of the entry of bazaar and popular print culture of the nineteenth century into twentieth-century "high" art, the writings of Tapati Guha-Thakurta become especially important. Her

monograph titled *The Making of a New Indian Art* (1992) and a later curated exhibition and catalogue *The Aesthetics of the Popular Print* (2006) reconstruct the complex relationships of Calcutta's Westernized art world which maintained a combination of estrangement from and reliance on bazaar images, a pattern recurring in twentieth century modernists and the artists mentioned herein (Guha-Thakurta, 1992, 2006; Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, n.d.) [17, 19, 10]. However, Guha-Thakurta's research does not address Battala or the afterlife of Kalighat in art after 1970, and this is the gap the present study seeks to address.

The third literary strand covers individual contemporary artists. Tate's public scholarship on Bhupen Khakhar mentions Kalighat painting among the visual sources - along with Indian miniatures, Company painting, temple maps, Sienese painting, and Pop Art - which informed his unique visual language, and mentions his habit of collecting mass-produced secular and religious prints to create collage works (Tate, n.d.; Apollo Magazine, 2016) [32, 7]. Jogen Chowdhury's self-narration of his artistic education, recorded in an interview for *The Punch Magazine*, is unusually candid as he talks about his active collecting of "Chitpur woodcuts" and "Kalighat Pata Chitra," memories which he says directly influenced his visual language (Chowdhury, in Anjum, 2021) [6]. A critical review of Chowdhury, published by COG India Art (2026) [12], suggests that, from the Kalighat painters, he inherited the ability to condense narrative into a gesture, placing this legacy alongside Klee's, Matisse's, and Picasso's.

As for the revival of the Kalighat idiom in the twenty-first century, the existing secondary sources are mostly journalistic and curatorial, reflecting the genre's continuing marginality in institutional art history. Artist's Network's profile of Anwar Chitrakar (b. 1980) records his innovative synthesis in 2001 of Santhal pata figures of Bengal's tribal districts with Midnapore colours, and his further public commissions, including airport murals and a COVID-19 awareness campaign in Mumbai's Prince of Wales Museum (Bhattacharya, 2023, in Artists Network) [8]. In Google Arts & Culture's *Kalam Patua* exhibition (b. 1962/63), his technique of applying Kalighat style to contemporary topics becomes visible in the 2015 series inspired by the 2012 Delhi gang rape case (Google Arts & Culture, n.d.-b) [16].

Finally, there is a body of literature about the recent institutional rediscovery of Battala in the 2010s and 2020s. In its 2022 blog article dedicated to the collection of Battala prints assembled by gallery Akar Prakar based on the acquisitions by collector Reena Lath of Ashit Paul's editions, "pre-print culture" is described as "something that can be seen to be back and is now trending in the landscape of contemporary Indian art," and Natasha Eaton's theory of "sentient knowing" is invoked in support of the view that Battala engraver's practice of copying should be treated as having interpretive value (Akar Prakar, 2022) [2]. Curated by Aicon Art, the coverage of a related exhibition of Kolkata prints discusses Battala woodcuts side by side with the propagandist lithographs of Calcutta Art Studio and the avant-garde printmaking of Somnath Hore, arguing for the continuity of Bengali print culture from the bazaar to the fine-art print studio (Aicon Art, n.d.).

Summing up, the literature allows one to make three provisional conclusions which will guide the analysis below: first, Battala and Kalighat cannot be considered as independent sources due to their habitual conflation by contemporary artists and critics; second, the testimonies of engagement with the bazaar-print matrix are disproportionately concentrated among Bengal-trained or Bengal-identified artists (with the exception of Khakhar, though even he used Bengali-influenced calendar prints); and third, the explicit and named recovery of "Battala" as opposed to "Kalighat" is a recent development of the 2010s and 2020s rather than a continuous one across the whole period from 1970 to 2026.

Historical Background: What Battala Was

Before tracing its afterlife, it is necessary to establish precisely what Battala print culture consisted of. The neighbourhood took its name, most historians agree, from a banyan tree (bat) under which merchants and later booksellers gathered, though no trace of the tree or a fixed site survives (Sahapedia, n.d.-b; Google Arts & Culture, n.d.) [29, 15]. From the 1820s, Battala presses produced cheap chapbooks - panjika almanacks, Ramayana and Mahabharata digests, primers, and, as Battala's reputation for cheap and "indecent" material grew, erotica and pulp fiction (Mukherjee, 2018; Sahapedia, n.d.-b) [25, 29]. The woodcut illustrations that accompanied these texts were carved by engravers drawn from artisan castes - Kansaris, Shankharis, Swarnakars and Karmakars, or bell-metal workers, conch-shell workers, goldsmiths and blacksmiths - who adapted metalworking tools, particularly the jeweller's needle, to wood engraving, producing a distinctive hatched, ornamental line quite different from either Kalighat's fluid brush or European academic engraving (Akar Prakar, 2022; Sahapedia, n.d.-a) [2, 28].

By the 1860s and 1870s, Battala's wood and metal engravers had become, in the words of one recent synthesis, "the leading artisan community in Calcutta's art market," producing standalone hand-coloured single-sheet prints that increasingly borrowed and reworked popular Kalighat imagery of Hindu deities, babu satire, and urban scandal (Wikipedia, 2025) [37]. The relationship between the two schools was competitive as much as imitative: Sripantha's scholarship, as summarised by Sahapedia, records that Battala's woodcut illustrators drew inspiration from the Kalighat patuas even as their cheaper prints - a single paisa for black-and-white, two paise for hand-coloured versions, against roughly one anna for a Kalighat pat - undercut the patuas commercially (Sahapedia, n.d.-a) [28].

The Battala school's decline was as rapid as its rise. The establishment of the Calcutta Art Studio in 1878 by Annada Prasad Bagchi and colleagues, followed swiftly by the spread of cheaper and more precise lithographic and chromolithographic technology through the 1880s, made hand-carved woodcuts commercially obsolete within a generation (Akar Prakar, 2022; Sahapedia, n.d.-c) [2, 30]. Combined with Bengal's humid climate, which destroyed most of the cheap, acidic paper the prints were made on, this technological displacement means that Battala prints are now genuinely rare, surviving mainly in specialist collections such as Akar Prakar's, built from Ashit Paul's research editions, and in museum holdings such as the Museum of Art & Photography's (Akar Prakar, 2022; Museum of Art & Photography, n.d.) [2, 26]. What survives, formally, is a visual grammar recognisable across the surviving corpus: bold, uninterrupted black outline; a flattened, undifferentiated picture-ground with minimal or no landscape setting; dramatically simplified, often caricatural figuration; and a recurring iconographic repertoire mixing Hindu devotional subjects (Kali, Durga, Krishna, Rama) with secular urban satire (Nrityalal Dutta's engravings of Kali, for instance, alongside contemporary genre scenes) (The Bengal Store, n.d.; StoryLTD, n.d.) [33, 31]. It is this grammar - rather than any single iconic image - that this paper argues re-enters contemporary art practice, filtered variously through direct Kalighat contact, inherited Bengali visual memory, or gallery-mediated rediscovery.

Chronological Development: Two Works per Decade, 1970–2026

The following subsections trace the bazaar-print/Battala-Kalighat matrix across six decadal windows, each anchored by two securely dated artworks, and then add a dedicated account of studio printmakers who continued the woodcut and relief-print medium itself alongside the painters. Table 1 summarises the sequence before the discussion proceeds decade by decade.

Table 1: Chronological Development of the Battala–Kalighat Visual Matrix, 1970–2026

1970s	Bhupen Khakhar	Tiger and Stag (1970); Janata Watch Repairing (1972)	Collaged/quoted bazaar print, pop idiom
1980s	Bhupen Khakhar; Jogen Chowdhury	You Can't Please All-era watercolours (c. 1981); Place for People exhibition works (1981)	Kalighat-style watercolour; Kalighat-derived line
1990s	Atul Dodiya	The Bombay Buccaneer (1994); early shutter paintings citing Ravi Varma oleograph (late 1990s)	Bazaar oleograph as collaged citation
2000s	Anwar Chitrakar; Kalam Patua	Santhal-Kalighat synthesis series (2001); Post Office series (2000s)	Direct patua revivalism
2010s	Anwar Chitrakar; Kalam Patua	The Policeman's Bribe (2010); Nirbhaya series (2015)	Contemporary social-satire in Kalighat idiom
2020s	Akar Prakar (curatorial); Manjunath Kamath	Battala in the Collection of Akar Prakar exhibition/essay (2022); Through Narrow Passage (2024)	Archival recovery of Battala; historical-image citation
Printmakers (cross-decade)	Somnath Hore; Chittaprosad; Haren Das	Pulp-print technique developed from 1969 onward; Beggar Brother & Sister (1952) and its political-printmaking legacy; Through the Palm Trees (1973)	Technical, rather than iconographic, continuation of Battala's relief-print method
Printmakers (2010s recovery)	Paula Sengupta (curator)	The Printed Picture: Four Centuries of Indian Printmaking (2012)	Curatorial genealogy tracing bazaar print to modern printmaking

• The 1970s: Bhupen Khakhar and the Pop Recovery of Bazaar Print

Bhupen Khakhar's *Tiger and Stag* (1970) is a useful opening image precisely because its most-cited source is not a fine-art precedent but a firecracker wrapper: Khakhar took the composition of the two animals directly from cheap commercial packaging he collected, a habit of scavenging "mass-produced secular and religious prints... seen all over India" that Apollo Magazine's retrospective essay identifies as fundamental to his early practice (Apollo Magazine, 2016) [7]. Tate's curatorial account groups Kalighat painting explicitly among the sources - alongside Indian miniatures, Company painting, temple maps and Sienese painting - that fed Khakhar's hybrid visual language during this period (Tate, n.d.) [32]. Khakhar's slightly later *Janata Watch Repairing* (1972), part of his celebrated "trade paintings" series depicting Baroda's barbers, tailors and watch-menders on canvases sized like shop signboards, extends this logic: critics have noted that these works share "similar themes and linear spatial compositions as Company paintings and Kalighat pats," fused with the flat colour blocks of international Pop art (Impart Encyclopedia of Art, 2022) [21]. What distinguishes the 1970s moment, in other words, is quotation without reverence - bazaar and Kalighat-adjacent imagery treated as raw visual material equal in status to a Western art-historical reference, collaged into a self-consciously anti-hierarchical practice (Apollo Magazine, 2016) [7].

- **The 1980s: Consolidation in the 'Place for People' Generation**

Place for People, the pivotal 1981 exhibition where Khakhar, Jogen Chowdhury, Gulammohammed Sheikh, Sudhir Patwardhan, Vivan Sundaram, and Nalini Malani became part of the institution of Indian modernist art in Delhi and Bombay, is usually discussed in the context of survey literature as the moment when Indian post-modernist figurative painting, combining miniature paintings and other popular artforms like calendars and folk art, received institutional legitimation (Unacademy, 2022) [34]. In a recent 2021 interview, Jogen Chowdhury's own account of his development places this institutional legitimation in a biographical perspective by remembering the woodcuttings from Chitpur and Kalighat Pata Chitra collected during his days as a student in Calcutta, experiences that would result in a developed style characterized by critics as being "an inheritance from the Kalighat painters... [that] could compress narrative intensity into gestural brevity" (Chowdhury, in Anjum, 2021; COG India Art, 2026) [6, 12]. By this time, Khakhar created large-scale Kalighat-style watercolours - an evolution that would eventually culminate in artworks such as Ram Bhakt Hanuman (1998), indicating a move away from ironic collage work of the 1970s toward a consistent engagement with the bazaar-Kalighat style.

- **The 1990s: Atul Dodiya and the Oleograph as Historical Citation**

The most significant work by Atul Dodiya, *The Bombay Buccaneer* (1994), represents a shift from photorealism towards a satirical image-citational mode which will define Dodiya's artistic style through a re-interpretation of a Bollywood film poster in the context of his self-portrait in the spirit of James Bond (Astaguru, n.d.) [9]. In his famous metal roller shutter paintings which he started creating in reaction to the closure of shops and shutter in response to the Bombay riots of the early 1990s, Dodiya started incorporating citations of Raja Ravi Varma's chromolithographic oleographs as well as artworks by Mondrian, Duchamp and Jasper Johns, using the 19th century bazaar print within the framework of an art historical collage (Chemould Prescott Road, n.d.) [11]. While Ravi Varma's oleographs are not Battala woodcuts but rather a successor to these prints and the very lithographic technique which replaced Battala's woodcuts in the 1880s, the use of the citation of these oleographs represents a third way of engaging with bazaar imagery, neither as raw material nor as a stylistic legacy but as a historical afterthought (Chemould Prescott Road, n.d.) [11].

- **The 2000s: Direct Patua Revivalism**

The decade of the 2000s marks the shift from mediated quotation to direct practice-continuation. While Anwar Chitrakar (born 1980), although part of the patua lineage, works in Kalighat rather than the narrowly-defined Battala mode, created in 2001 a hybrid composition combining Santhal tribal pata motifs from several Bengal regions with the Midnapore color scheme. This composition, as Artists Network states, was an example of "a completely different style of pata painting depicting the birth saga of the Santhals in a contemporary format," thus bringing about renewed public attention to pata painting of Kalighat origin (Artists Network, 2023) [8]. Another artist from the same decade is Kalam Patua, a postmaster from rural West Bengal and self-educated representative of the Kalighat art, who developed the Post Office series, using the satire mode of the nineteenth century for the description of his own profession and incorporating his personal story into the Kalighat tradition of gently humorous depiction of reality (Google Arts & Culture, n.d.-b) [16]. In contrast to the artists working in the 1970s–1990s who were formally-trained fine artists who cited bazaar sources outside the tradition, Chitrakar and Patua are representatives of the tradition itself, further developing it - a distinct methodological category of "influence" which can be called revivalism.

- **The 2010s: Contemporary Social Satire in Historical Form**

This is shown, for example, by Anwar Chitrakar's *The Policeman's Bribe* (2010), now part of the Victoria and Albert Museum's collection. Here, the Kalighat style of bold, concise lines and bright colours is used in the depiction of a contemporary genre scene of corruption, thus fulfilling the museum's description of the practice as the depiction of "secular themes and current events in a fundamentally 19th-century visual language" (Victoria and Albert Museum, n.d.) [36]. Kalam Patua's *Nirbhaya* series (2015) applies the same language in making explicitly political statements, reacting to the case of the 2012 rape in Delhi through painting, as described in the Google Arts & Culture's curatorial essay: an attempt to both honor Nirbhaya and represent the horrific cruelty of her perpetrators in Kalighat tradition's common image of a tree representing a woman (Google Arts & Culture, n.d.-b) [16]. Thus, the art of the 2010s completes the development which had been started in the 2000s: not only is the bazaar style no longer considered a historical artefact, but is rather seen as an alive idiom that can effectively deal with modern subjects, even such that have little to do with satire of 19th-century life.

- **The 2020s: Archival Recovery and the Naming of Battala**

Battala emerged as an autonomous phenomenon in the 2020s, in contrast to how Kalighat was discussed and bazaar art categorised in previous decades of gallery and curatorial discourse. The 2022 blog post from Akar Prakar regarding its Battala holdings, which include thirteen sets of the research editions compiled by artist Ashit Paul acquired by gallery director Reena Lath, makes the point clearly: "Pre-print culture can be seen to be back and is now trending in the landscape of contemporary Indian art," and cites the concept of "sentient knowing" developed by Natasha Eaton in arguing for the interpretive importance of the traditional engravers' mimicry and replication for today's artists (Akar Prakar, 2022) [2]. In a 2017 show at Aicon Art, traditional Battala prints were paired with the innovative twentieth-century prints of Somnath Hore, an artist who invented paper-pulp printing processes, seen as a modern abstraction of the considerably older practice of printing in Bengal (Aicon Art, n.d.). Painters working with historical or archival images, such as Manjunath Kamath, whose 2024 show *Through Narrow Passage* is cited as referring to "historical and classical images using contemporary methods," exist in this same world of archival recovery, even without explicit Battala attribution in sources consulted (Gallery Espace, n.d.; Jaipur Centre for Art, n.d.) [14, 23]. Collectively, the decade of the 2020s sees less change in visual grammar and more in the discursive framework: what had been an unnoticed inheritance is now consciously historicized, exhibited, and sold as "Battala."

- **Printmakers: Carrying the Woodcut Medium Itself Forward**

The painters mentioned in Sections 6.1-6.6 have adopted the Battala/Kalighat visual idiom through oil, watercolour, or mixed media. There is another equally significant lineage of those associated with printmaking itself - relief, intaglio, and experimental methods - thus relating themselves not just to Battala's visual idiom but also to its process. This is recorded in studies on the history of modern Indian printmaking, although rarely in conjunction with Battala as discussed in this study (DailyArt Magazine, 2023; COG India Art, 2026) [13, 12].

It all started in Santiniketan, where in 1921, Nandalal Bose introduced printmaking at Kala Bhavana and returned from a 1924 trip to China and Japan, bringing back Chinese rubbings and Japanese colour woodcuts, which would allow the students to become familiar with international print language as well as with woodcut tradition (KNN India, 2014) [24]. Somnath Hore (1921-2006) graduated from the Government College of Art and Craft in Calcutta and was a member of the Communist Party of India and used woodcut and linocut since the 1940s for recording the famine in Bengal in 1943 and the Tebhaga

Peasant movement – see his woodcut Tebhaga Movement: At the Night Meeting (1955) (DailyArt Magazine, 2023) [13]. After serving as head of the printmaking department at Delhi Polytechnic in 1969, he joined Kala Bhavana's graphics department, where, in the 1970s, he developed his distinctive technique of white-on-white pulp prints. Paula Sengupta's survey exhibition, *The Printed Picture: Four Centuries of Indian Printmaking*, held at Delhi Art Gallery in 2012 [20] positioned Hore's work as the culmination of the same Bengali print tradition that had begun with colonial bazaar print (Sengupta, 2012, cited in Prajapati, 2017) [27]. His contemporary Chittaprosad Bhattacharya (1915-1978) pursued the same path as Hore, employing stark linocuts, like *Beggar Brother & Sister* (1952) to bring the same reformist documentary spirit to fine art print; art historians understand it as an extension of Battala/Kalighat's original role of producing images for mass distribution in an explicitly political context (DailyArt Magazine, 2023) [13].

Among artists working in woodcut in the 1970s, through his *Through the Palm Trees* (1973), Haren Das shows how the medium moves into a gentler pastoral mode, revealing the Bengali woodcut tradition capable of different paths, including Das' lyricism in addition to activism of Hore's and Chittaprosad's (DailyArt Magazine, 2023) [13]. Krishna Reddy who studied under Stanley William Hayter in Paris introduced a third direction with development of multi-color viscosity intaglio printing - see his *Clown Dissolving* - thus pushing Indian printmaking toward abstraction while Hore's colleagues in Santiniketan, like Sanat Kar, Lalu Prasad Shaw, Pulak Dutta, Nirmalendu Das, Ajit Seal, and Salil Sahani expanded graphics department's palette of colour woodcut and intaglio printing techniques in 1970s and 1980s (KNN India, 2014; COG India Art, 2026) [24, 12].

Yet another strand runs through Zarina Hashmi (1937-2020), who used woodcut innovatively in the 1970s and 1980s for producing maps and geometrical forms inspired by the traumatic experience of Partition displacement. Although her use of relief printmaking differs from Hore's and Chittaprosad's mainly in its abstract frame, it still follows the same technical tradition of carved blocks (Artincept, 2025) [5]. By the 2010s, this printmaking lineage itself turned into the object of institutional and curatorial retrieval. Through her 2012 exhibition Sengupta traced Indian printmaking "from its inception as a tool of the colonial enterprise... and the entry of the Indian bazaar print in the hands of the artisan as well as the art school-trained artist" through Hore, Krishna Reddy, Jyoti Bhatt and other contemporary Indian printmakers and positioned Battala woodcut engravers as direct technical ancestors rather than mere iconographic cousins of Indian printmakers (Sengupta, 2012, cited in DAGWorld, n.d.) [20]. In the same vein, Akar Prakar's exhibition on Bengal printmaking, mentioned in Section 6.6, performs the same act of technical genealogy, putting Battala woodcuts, Calcutta Art Studio lithographs, and Hore's paper-pulp experiments in one historical continuity of Bengal printmaking (Akar Prakar, n.d.-a; Aicon Art, n.d.) [3, 1].

Incorporation of this printmaking lineage, along with the painters considered above, allows us to refine Research Question 2 (RQ2). While painters like Khakhar, Chowdhury, and Dodiya inherited Battala/Kalighat primarily as an idiom to be either quoted or absorbed into an alternative media, printmakers Hore, Chittaprosad, Das, Reddy, and Kar inherited the woodcut and relief print processes themselves. This makes their relationship to Battala more technologically direct and, in terms of content, less evident since their interests – famine, political struggle, abstraction, and Partition – sharply differ from Battala's original idiom of deities and babu satire.

Critical Analysis

Three interpretive claims emerge from the chronological survey above. The first concerns periodisation itself. The shift from Khakhar's 1970s pop-collage mode, through Chowdhury's absorbed stylistic inheritance and Dodiya's postmodern historical citation, to Chitrakar and Patua's direct twenty-first-century revivalism, does not describe a simple linear "return" to origins. Rather, it describes a widening of who gets to claim the bazaar-print inheritance and on what terms. In the 1970s and 1980s, engagement with Kalighat/Battala imagery was almost exclusively the prerogative of metropolitan, art-school-trained painters exhibiting in Delhi, Bombay and international biennales - a pattern consistent with Guha-Thakurta's (1992) [17] broader argument that Bengal's westernising art establishment has always depended on, while distancing itself from, bazaar visual culture. By the 2000s and 2010s, by contrast, the patua descendants themselves - Chitrakar, Patua - gained gallery representation and museum acquisition (the V&A's purchase of Chitrakar's work is telling here), suggesting a genuine, if partial, redistribution of art-world recognition toward the tradition's own inheritors rather than only its metropolitan interpreters (Victoria and Albert Museum, n.d.; Google Arts & Culture, n.d.-b) [36, 16].

Second, the persistent conflation of Battala and Kalighat in both artist testimony and critical writing deserves more scrutiny than it typically receives. This paper has followed the sources in treating the two as parts of a single bazaar continuum, but it is worth stressing what is lost in that conflation. Battala's woodcut technique - hatched, needle-incised, printed in flat black-and-white before hand-colouring - produces a categorically different mark than Kalighat's fluid ink-and-watercolour brushwork, and Mukherjee's (2018) [25] critique of scholarship that reduces Battala to "cheap copies" of Kalighat applies with equal force to much of the contemporary-art literature surveyed here, which routinely credits "Kalighat" for a visual sensibility - bold black contour above all - that Battala's engravers arguably did as much to establish and disseminate at a mass, popular scale. Jogen Chowdhury's testimony is the partial exception: his explicit naming of "Chitpur woodcuts" alongside Kalighat Pata Chitra as childhood sources (Anjum, 2021) [6] is one of the few places in the record where Battala's woodcut tradition, rather than Kalighat's painted one, is credited by a major contemporary artist in the artist's own words.

Third, the 2020s' explicit archival naming of Battala - most visibly in Akar Prakar's curatorial writing - should be read critically as much as celebratively. Reena Lath's own words, quoted in the gallery's blog, are candid about the mechanism: "Unfortunately, we came to know/see our artworks through foreign collectors" (Akar Prakar, 2022) [2], an admission that situates the current Battala revival within a familiar postcolonial circuit in which a national visual heritage is recovered, valued, and canonised partly through the intermediary structures of Western collecting and international exhibition culture, the same circuit Guha-Thakurta (2004) [18] has traced for institutions of art more broadly in colonial and postcolonial India. The invocation of Natasha Eaton's "sentient knowing" to dignify the historical engravers' practice of "miming the original" (Akar Prakar, 2022) [2] is a sophisticated act of critical reframing, but it also performs a kind of retrospective legitimation that the engravers themselves, working anonymously for a paisa a print in the 1860s, never received in their own lifetimes.

A final, more speculative observation concerns what remains untheorised in the literature: the relationship between Battala's original economic logic - cheap, fast, disposable images for a semi-literate urban public - and its current status as rare, expensive, archivally protected collector's material. The very qualities that made Battala prints ephemeral (cheap acidic paper, humid storage, mass production for immediate consumption) are precisely what now make surviving examples scarce and valuable (Akar Prakar, 2022; Sahapedia, n.d.-a) [2, 28]. Contemporary artists engaging this material, whether directly (Chitrakar, Patua)

or by absorbed inheritance (Chowdhury, Khakhar), are thus working with a source whose original social function - cheap, disposable, popular - stands in pointed tension with the elite gallery, museum, and auction contexts in which their own resulting artworks circulate. This tension is not resolved anywhere in the literature reviewed for this study and represents a productive direction for further research.

Conclusion

According to the above arguments, Battala woodcut prints, which have rarely been referred to as such in the testimony of artists before the 2020s, represent part of a broader bazaar-print visual vocabulary-aligned with Kalighat pat paintings-that has constituted an intermittent yet consistent inspiration for Indian artists throughout the period between 1970 and 2026. In particular, the early collage paintings of Bhupen Khakhar established a visual mode of ironic pop quotation; Jogen Chowdhury has included Chitpur woodcut prints and Kalighat pats in his sophisticated graphic style; Atul Dodiya has reframed the bazaar oleographs through his postmodern collages as purposeful historical quotation; and since the 2000s, patua artists like Anwar Chitrakar and Kalam Patua have taken the tradition forward as a living and socially engaged medium instead of just a historical quotation. Apart from the above painters, there exists a separate line of professional printmakers-Somnath Hore, Chittaprosad, Haren Das, Krishna Reddy, and their fellow artists of Santiniketan-who took the art of Battala woodcuts and relief prints into fine arts despite the divergence of subject matter from devotional and satirical topics of the bazaar prints. Only now, significantly owing to gallery and archival projects like Akar Prakar, the "Battala" has started to emerge as a discrete visual marker, different from Kalighat. This overall picture does not suggest simple continuity or revival; instead, it represents a visual legacy reclaimed, reinterpreted, and repurposed by successive generations of artists and critics in response to the needs of their time-from anti-hierarchical pop irony in 1970 to archival connoisseurship in 2026.

To expand on the research conducted here, future study could make three further inquiries that go beyond the scope of this paper: (1) a detailed comparison of surviving Battala woodblocks with the marks made by contemporary printmakers who claim to descend from the tradition; (2) oral history interviews with currently practicing patua-lineage artists regarding their own understanding of Battala/Kalighat distinction; and (3) a systematic study of the way collectors in India and abroad have valued the Battala prints in the last decade.⁷

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