Parallel Lives

Charting the History of Popular Prints of the Bengal and Bombay Presidencies

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Archive series

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Poona Native Arts L.
MEDAL FOR CHROMO-LITHOGRAPHIC AND

CHITRA SHALA PRESS POONA

Calcutta International Exhibition awards,
CERTIFICATE FOR CHROMO-LITHOGRAPHIC PRINTING.

An exploration of popular visual culture pertaining to the Indian colonial period draws our attention to a body of cheap standardized mass-produced pictures that formed an important part of the visual regime. By the late nineteenth century, with the advent of new printing techniques such as lithography, chromolithography and oleography, we find a rapid outpouring of such genres of picture productions from small printing presses strewn across the country, with important centres in Pune and Bombay in the western part of India, which spread across the northern and central part and then to Calcutta in the eastern region. The popular art markets in Bombay, Pune and Calcutta were now invaded with the new kinds of mass-produced 'realistic' pictures with its glossy colour and texture. Any attempt to map the story of print-making and presses in colonial India has to take stock of such a parallel history of mechanical reproduction of pictures from the 1870s, with each region having their own unique trend of print-making and bearing distinct styles, theme and iconographies. The development of new print technologies thus allowed for a national circulation and travel of motifs and images across regions. The cities of Calcutta, Bombay and Pune became the main depots of print production. These cross-regional markets of popular prints introduced an array of standardized, marketable, pan-Indian iconographies that became hallmarks of the mass visual culture of the time. It is important to highlight the regional variations of such genre of popular pictures in order to have a holistic approach to the understanding of such an exciting visual field.

Some of the perceptive writings in this field have come from scholars such as Christopher Pinney and Kajri Jain who have succeeded in unearthing the different histories and trajectories of the corpus of popular pictures and different presses. In his book, *Photos of the Gods: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India,* Pinney attempts to write not a 'history' of art but a history 'made' by art. This book, he says, is "rather a study of how pictures were an integral element of history in the making"[1]. Here the author tries to make the case for visual culture as one of the main realms for the thinking out the contours of politics and religion in modern India. Pinney elaborates on the visuals which began to emerge from the 1870s and existed both as a continuum and disjunction from earlier image practices in India.

Figure 1 : Portrait of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Lithograph, c.1880, Calcutta Art Studio, Sanjeet Chowdhury Collection, Visual archive of Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta.

Regional histories: the Calcutta Art Studio and the Poona Chitrashala Steam Press

The story of the proliferating world of popular pictures of late nineteenth century Calcutta begins with the emergence of the genre of the *bazaar* art of Kalighat paintings and Battala wood engravings. However, with the city's changing printing technology and with the introduction of new printing techniques like lithography,

chromolithography and oleography, this corpus of bazaar pictures now faced rapid extinction. By the 1870s, the art market in Calcutta was invaded with new kinds of standardized mass produced pictures which ultimately drove the Kalighat and Battala pictures out of the market. Perhaps the defining moment in the history of print-making and presses of the Bengal and Bombay Presidencies arrived with the setting up of lithographic presses such as the Calcutta Art Studio on Bowbazaar Street in 1878 and the Poona Chitrashala Steam Press in the same year.

As one delves into the parallel histories of these presses, what emerges is the development of two distinct public domains produced by the different political ambience and histories of the twin cities.[2] As argued by Pinney, Calcutta, as a colonial city with a distinct political and urban culture, witnessed the emergence of a noticeable, different kind of visual practice and iconography that stood out from the devotional and political imageries produced by presses in Bombay and Pune. The popular art market of Calcutta was from the late 1870s flooded with the hand-coloured lithographic prints produced by the Calcutta Art Studio. This lithographic press was founded by one of the first ex-students of the Calcutta School of Art, Annadaprasad Bagchi, along with four other art school products, namely Nabakumar Biswas, Krishnachandra Pal and Jogendranath Mukhopadhyay.[3] Not surprisingly, the art school background of these artists gave them an edge over other artisan-run presses as they were well-equipped with sophisticated techniques, and were able to adapt to the Western styles of representation and pictorial conventions.[4] In an advertisement that came out in the *Bengalee* of 1879, the studio seems to have undertaken a wide range of work such as "Portrait painting, landscape painting, oil painting, water painting, all kinds of decoration and lithographic works…Hindoo Mythological and Historical pictures and also Stage Scenes and Prosceniums".[5] The majority of the Calcutta Art Studio prints drew directly from the artists'

familiarity with European neoclassical and allegorical paintings. That the mytho-pictures produced by the Calcutta Art Studio created a new order within the popular art market is an established fact. They proved to be the most distinctive and marketable products of the studio and were extremely popular among the new Bengali 'Bhadralok'. Catering to the taste and preferences of the new 'Bhadralok', the genre of mythological paintings now bore titles in three languages, namely, English, Bengali and Hindi. Though the mytho-pictures did carry a sense of crude composition, loud colours and dumpy figures, the improved techniques and a realistic Western style provided for a three-dimensional quality and a touch of volume and perspective to them. Moreover, a careful reading of the Calcutta Art Studio prints provides us with a clear picture of the process of 'Europeanization' and 'domestication' of the divinities in this popular visual realm.

The genre of prints - with all the naturalistic refinement of the photographic style, shading and tonal gradations, where the Western conventions of life-study and perspective were the strongest - was the lithographic portraits of European and Bengali famous personalities produced by the art studio. The lithographic technique ensured the softer tonal values and effect of photo-illusionism in such prints. Some of the finest examples of life-study produced by the lithographic press were that of the author Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and the nationalist leader Surendranath Banerjee (Figure 1 and Figure 2). What were also offered by the Calcutta Art Studio were the litho-prints of British personae such as Prince Albert (Figure 3) and the

Marchioness of Lansdowne. These lithographs were produced around the year 1880. With its softer tonal gradations and Western conventions of life-study, these sepia-toned litho-prints carry a strong resemblance to the photographic portrait.

A shift in focus from the Calcutta Art Studio to that of the Poona Chitrashala Steam Press provides us with a range of popular pictures comprising of both devotional and political iconographies. A study of the images coming out of the Poona Chitrashala Steam Press displays certain overlaps as well as marked distinction from their Bengal counterpart. The Calcutta Art Studio images reflected the political aspirations of Moderate nationalist politics of Bengal and came up with litho-prints of nationalist leaders