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Application of Horatian Satire on Kalighat Paintings

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Abstract

This paper addresses the humour present in the Kalighat paintings of the nineteenth century and argues that it was not merely a form of entertainment and mockery, but was a sophisticated weapon of aesthetic and social critique. Exploring the emerging city of Calcutta, a place transforming rapidly into a colonial state, the visual language of the iconic Kalighat paintings evolved from the earlier Pattachitra tradition, into a distinctive language that responded to changing urban realities, including colonial modernity, shifting social hierarchies, religious hypocrisy and cultural mimicry. Rather than categorising these paintings solely as devotional or folk art, this paper interprets them as carefully constructed visual commentaries on the contradictions of colonial Bengal society. To explain this approach, the study analyses nineteenth century Kalighat paintings through two theoretical lenses, bringing together the Indian aesthetic concept of Hasya Rasa from Bharata Muni's Nāṭyaśāstra and the western tradition of Horatian Satire. The Indian classical theory of Rasa talks about the Hasya Rasa (the comic sentiment) which provides an indigenous understanding of comic experience through concepts such as Vibhava, Anubhava, and distinction between Śṛṅgāra Hasya and Vyaṅgya Hasya. On the other hand, Horatian Satire offers a complementary framework for understanding humour as a gentle yet corrective form of social criticism. Together, these perspectives reveal both the aesthetic mechanisms through which comic sentiment is generated and the broader social function that such laughter performs.

Through visual analysis of selected Kalighat paintings- including Shiva's Family on an outing, Cat with a prawn, English babu holding a hookah, woman beating a man with a broom and Victim of a chamber- this paper demonstrates how Kalighat artists strategically employed different modes of Hasya to achieve a distinctly Horatian satirical effect.

The paper proposes an new interpretative framework by placing the Hasya rasa and Horatian satire in dialogue, one that highlights Kalighat paintings as a culturally rooted yet universally intelligible text.

Key words: Horatian Satire, Hasya Rasa, Vibhava, Anubhava, Kalighat Paintings

Introduction

In the lively pilgrim quarter of 19th-century Calcutta, a distinctive artistic revolution was taking shape on paper. Originating around the Kalighat Kali Temple, Kalighat paintings evolved from devotional images into sharp critiques of a city undergoing rapid colonial transformation. Through wit and humour, they exposed the hypocrisies of the new elite, anxieties surrounding shifting gender roles, and the absurdities of cultural mimicry. This paper argues that humour in these paintings is not incidental but a deliberate aesthetic strategy best understood through a dialogue between the classical Indian concept of Hasya Rasa and the Western tradition of Horatian satire. The theoretical framework begins with Hasya Rasa, the comic sentiment systematized in Bharata Muni's *Natyashastra*. As one of the nine rasas, it explains how laughter is generated through determinants (Vibhava), expressed through consequents (Anubhava), and supported by transient emotional states (Vyabhichari Bhava) (Bharata, trans. Ghosh, 1951). Hasya Rasa explains the aesthetic and emotional experience of humour, while its categories, from Srinagara Hasya to Vyangya Hasya, provide a vocabulary for understanding different comic modes. The Western framework of Horatian satire, derived from the Roman poet Horace, offers a complementary perspective. Characterized by wit, irony, and gentle ridicule rather than harsh condemnation, it exposes human follies such as vanity, hypocrisy, and social climbing to encourage self-reflection and social correction (Horace, trans. Fairclough, 1926). Whereas Hasya Rasa explains the aesthetic essence of humour, Horatian satire explains its social function. By bringing these two traditions into dialogue, this paper argues that Hasya Rasa accounts for the cultural and aesthetic force of humour in Kalighat paintings, while Horatian satire provides a framework for analysing its role as a form of social critique. Through this dual approach, the study demonstrates that Kalighat paintings are not merely devotional images or folk caricatures, but sophisticated cultural texts that employ humour as both an aesthetic experience and a vehicle for social commentary.

Kalighat paintings

Kalighat paintings are among the most iconic art forms to emerge from 19th-century Bengal. They originated from the older tradition of Pattachitras—narrative cloth scrolls painted by chitrakars or patuas, illustrating stories from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and the legends of Manasa Devi. These deeply folkloric and ritualistic works were performed through pat khelano, in which the patua unrolled the scroll while singing pater gaan and using expressive gestures to bring the stories to life (Pandey, 2024). This tradition changed dramatically as many patuas migrated to colonial Calcutta. Responding to the demands of a Euro-centric market, they shifted from sequential scrolls to single-sheet paintings. The transformation was both formal and material: artists adopted mill-made paper and synthetic watercolours imported from Britain in place of hand-ground natural pigments (Pandey, 2024). To produce paintings more efficiently and with greater visual impact, they eliminated elaborate backgrounds and

emphasized bold, flat figures. Freed from exclusively mythological subjects, Kalighat artists turned to the everyday life of Calcutta, depicting its emerging social types and cultural contradictions. As Partha Mitter argues in *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850–1922*, the colonial encounter involved a complex negotiation between Western artistic ideas and indigenous cultural identities rather than simple imitation (Mitter, 1994). Within this climate of cultural tension, satire found fertile ground. Kalighat artists became perceptive observers of colonial society, directing their wit toward colonial power structures and the Westernized Bengali Babu, transforming their paintings into powerful vehicles of social commentary. This context lays the foundation for analysing how their humour emerged through the interplay of indigenous aesthetic principles and universal satirical strategies.

Shiva's Family on an Outing

The artwork *Shiva's Family on an Outing* represents a radical departure from the conventional iconography. Instead of showing Shiva, for example, as the cosmic ascetic on Mount Kailash, the painting presents him as a pudgy, tame Bengali patriarch, holding a Ganesha. Parvati is depicted as a loving mother and wife looking on. The setting does not suggest any heavenly deeds, of military or spiritual crusades, but a mundane domestic space. The damru (drum), a symbol of cosmic creation and destruction in Shiva's hands, is often reduced to a child's rattle (Jain, 1999). This deliberate recontextualization of divine figures into a relatable, familial scenario is the core source of the painting's humour and insight.



Fig.1, *Shiva Parvati and Ganesha* (c. 1880). Kalighat painting. Victoria and Albert Museum.

Through the Rasa lens, this painting reads as an aesthetic of affectionate amusement , an example of Sringara Hasya, the comic sentiment of affection and delight. The Vibhava, or cause of this rasa, is the incongruity itself: cosmic deities engaged in a mundane, earthly family outing. Deities usually depicted with fierce iconography now appear as a warm family , a father entertaining his child, a mother's attentive gaze. The Anubhava is evoked through the deities' relaxed, human-like postures; their informal demeanor and the domesticity of the scene are the visible effects that draw the viewer's smile. Through Horatian Satire, the painting offers a framework of gentle social correction. Its tone is witty, indulgent, and gentle; it does not attack faith, but cleverly smiles at the solemnity of traditional iconography. Its primary technique is recontextualization, shifting the scene from cosmic to domestic. Its target is a grand, untouchable perception of divinity, gently critiquing the emotional distance imposed by formal religious structures. Its purpose is to 'correct manners with a smile', making faith more accessible and humanized, and encouraging the viewer toward a more personal, intimate connection with the gods. One theory explains the flavour of the laughter; the other, its social impact.

Cat with a Brat

This painting depicts a cat carrying a large prawn in its mouth. At first glance, it appears to be a straightforward genre scene of an animal with its prey. However, on observing it closely, a tikka (a sign of devotion) reveals itself on the forehead of the cat. The cat has been interpreted as an allegorical representation of a Vaishnava ascetic whose outward display of piety contrasts with hidden indulgence (Jain, 1999). It is an allegory for a priest, a class expected to adhere to a strict, vegetarian diet. The prawn, a forbidden food, thus becomes a powerful symbol of indulgence and moral failure.



Fig. 2. *Cat with Prawn* . Kalighat painting. From Old Indian Arts.



Viewed through Hasya Rasa, the painting evokes an aesthetic of satirical amusement. It is a prime example of Vyangya Hasya, the comic sentiment marked by sharp, mocking humour. The Alambana Vibhava is the religious hypocrisy of the pious figure, while the visual contrast between the symbols of sanctity (the tika and beads) and the indulgent act of eating a prawn becomes the source of the humour. Hasya Rasa identifies this as Vyangya Hasya: laughter arising from the exposure of hypocrisy. The humour lies in the viewer's satisfaction of "catching" the hypocrite, a theme that resonates strongly within its cultural context. Viewed as Horatian satire, the painting functions as social commentary. It recontextualizes the tika as a mask of piety and the prawn as a symbol of moral transgression. Targeting the hypocrisy of religious figures who project devotion while pursuing worldly desires, the painting uses public amusement to encourage reflection on the gap between professed belief and actual behaviour. While the preceding paintings derive their humour from the playful humanisation of divine figures and moral allegory, Kalighat artists increasingly turned their attention toward the rapidly changing social realities of colonial Calcutta. Among the most popular figures in this visual satire were Babu and Bibi, whose Westernised lifestyles became symbols of the cultural tensions produced by colonial modernity.

The Babu and The Bibi: Objects of Satire in Colonial Calcutta

The consolidation of British power in Bengal gave rise to a new social archetype-the Babu. This term referred to the Western-educated, often newly wealthy Bengali male who adopted the manners, dress, and habits of the British rulers in an attempt to gain social acceptance. As scholar Varun Kumar Roy notes, this class emerged as a "hybrid identity," a product of "colonial trade and commerce" and the introduction of English education, which created a "new prototype urbanism" (Roy, 2020). These elites were acutely aware that the British considered "European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures" (Roy, 2020). Their mimicry, however, was perceived by a large section of traditional Bengali society as a profound cultural loss and moral decay. The common folk and orthodox intelligentsia saw the Babu's rejection of native traditions as an act of capitulation, believing that by adopting Western culture, they were strengthening the roots of colonial rule. This social tension made the Babu (and his counterpart, the Westernized Bibi or mistress) a prime target for critique, and Kalighat painters, often migrants themselves observing this new urban class, seized upon them with sharp, satirical glee.

English Babu Holding a Hookah

This classic Kalighat painting depicts a Babu in a hybrid attire, often featuring elements like Western-style boots paired with a traditional dhoti. He is shown seated on colonial chair holding a hookah, his exaggerated pose imitating the popular studio portraits of the time. The entire composition centers on the stark contrast between his aspirational identity, that of a

landed, sophisticated gentleman of leisure, and his actual social reality as a salaried clerk or middleman in the colonial machinery. (Jain, 1999)



Fig. 3. *English Babu (Native Indian Clerk) Holding a Hookah* (c. 1890). Kalighat painting. Cleveland Museum of Art

Through the lens of Hasya Rasa, this painting exemplifies Vyangya Hasya, the comic sentiment of satirical, mocking amusement. The Vibhāva lies in the Babu's exaggerated performance of gentility through his hybrid attire, affected posture, and carefully constructed image of sophistication. Viewed through Horatian satire, the painting employs witty irony and juxtaposition: the hookah, a symbol of traditional aristocracy, becomes a prop in the performance of social aspiration. It targets the vices of cultural mimicry, vanity, and the new middle class's social pretensions. As Sumanta Banerjee (as cited in Roy, 2020) observes, the Babu was often ridiculed as a "pampered son" who squandered wealth on "drinking, whoring and other amusements." Rather than condemning him, the painting uses corrective humour to expose the gap between aspiration and authenticity, inviting viewers to reflect on the performative nature of colonial mimicry.

Woman Beating a Man with a Broom

This dynamic Kalighat painting depicts a dramatic scene- a wife wielding a broom, a lowly domestic object, to beat her cowering husband. The Babu is portrayed in a state of complete helplessness and submission. The woman's expression is fierce and determined, as notes by Jyotinder Jain, the woman's gaze is directed outward towards the viewer, giving the image an unmistakably didactic character (Jain, 1999). This direct engagement invites us to witness the Babu's shame. This image is a sharp commentary on the consequences of the Babu lifestyle. Jain explains that many members of Calcutta's emerging Babu class squandered their wealth on lavish entertainment, prostitutes, expensive clothing, and other displays of status, eventually leading to financial ruin. As their fortune declined, they became objects of ridicule within their own households and were sometimes depicted as being humiliated or even beaten by their wives (Jain, 1999). This painting visualizes that social downfall, transforming the domestic interior into a stage on which the collapse of Babu's masculine authority is publicly exposed.



Fig. 4. *Woman Beating a Man with a Broom* (19th century). Kalighat painting. From Jain (1999, p. 144)



Fig. 5. *Victim of a Charmer* (19th century). Kalighat painting. From Jain (1999, p. 171).

Through the lens of Hasya Rasa, this painting exemplifies Vyangya Hasya, a robust form of satirical amusement. The Vibhāva lies in the stark role reversal, where the once self-important Babu becomes the object of ridicule within his own household. The Anubhāva is expressed through the woman's forceful beating, inviting viewers to experience comic justice as the arrogant Babu is publicly humiliated. Viewed through Horatian satire, the painting employs mockery, exaggeration, and the inversion of social norms to critique the vanity, hypocrisy, and



moral failure of the Bengali Babu class. It reveals how the Babu's public pursuit of vice and status ultimately undermines his domestic authority. While Hasya Rasa explains the cathartic, mocking laughter generated by the role reversal, Horatian satire reveals how this humour functions as a corrective critique of the new urban elite.

Victim of Charmer

This remarkable Kalighat painting features a woman holding a flower to the snout of a strange sheep-like creature that is partly human. Jyotinder Jain challenges the common interpretation of the creature as merely a "sheepish lover". He argues that the image reflects a contemporary folk belief that women possessed the power to transform men into animals. The painting captures the moment of this magical transformation, where the lady is in the act of changing the man back using the flower as the magical symbol (Jain, 1999). The painting, then, presents a moment of change, an ordinary event with the possibility of magic at play, commenting on gender power relations.

Viewed through Hasya Rasa, this painting exemplifies Vyangya Hasya, the comic sentiment of sharp, mocking amusement. The Vibhāva lies in the fantastical transformation of the man into a sheep-like creature through female enchantment, exposing male gullibility and the loss of self-control through a striking visual metaphor. The humour arises from the absurd image of a man reduced to a beast by his own desires. Viewed as Horatian satire, the painting extends into social and psychological critique. Through the metaphor of magical transformation, it targets male gullibility, vanity, and the dangers of unchecked desire, while also reflecting contemporary anxieties surrounding female agency as both alluring and unsettling.

Together, the two frameworks reveal the painting's dual function: Hasya Rasa explains the aesthetic experience of mocking laughter (Vyangya Hasya), while Horatian satire reveals its broader social purpose of exposing human folly and critiquing changing gender dynamics.

Bridging the theories and Conclusion

Across these paintings, Kalighat humour operates simultaneously as aesthetic pleasure and social criticism - two dimensions best understood as complementary rather than competing. Hasya Rasa explains the aesthetic experience: how laughter emerges through culturally specific devices -role reversal, folk belief, symbolic incongruity, the humanisation of the divine. Horatian satire explains the social function of these same devices: how they become a vehicle for moral reflection and gentle correction. Whether depicting the domestication of divine figures, the hypocrisy of religious authority, the performative identity of the Bengali Babu, or the inversion of domestic hierarchy, Kalighat artists consistently used laughter to observe and question their society ; critique that stays accessible and playful rather than harsh.

Read together, the two frameworks show that Kalighat painters transformed familiar imagery into a sophisticated mode of visual criticism, in which aesthetic pleasure and ethical reflection coexist -a laughter of recognition that invites viewers to enjoy the comic image while reflecting on the enduring complexities of human behaviour.

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