



PATACHITRA TRADITIONS IN BENGAL – EVOLVING TRENDS : AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract

The main approach of this article is to explore how the Indian historic cultural tradition has been consisted in Pata paintings and lyrical folk melody of Patas. For this reason a detailed review has been done on the ethnic geographical location of the Patuas starting from Indus valley civilization to the colonial era including the period of Buddhism and Jainism and then also the current position of the Patuas in Bengal. Here an initiative has been taken to present the oral tradition of our history through Pata and folk songs of Pata in this research paper. The geographical location of this research work is mainly confined in Patua society of West Bengal. The Bengal Patachitra is a visual and oral art tradition practised by the Patuas of West Bengal. Pictorial narrative songs and dramatization are the main features of this folk culture which is one of the most important factors of our historiography. Folk songs of the Pata is the most significant element of oral history. The main two types of these traditional Patas are chauka Pata and Jarano Pata. *Patuas*, historically executed by means of venturing out from village to village with scroll artwork of epic testimonies depicted on scrolls. As bards of Bengal, they paint the scroll on myths, epics, folks, social and modern-day problems. Scroll painting is an ancient method of story telling. Patua art has also been called the ‘singing scrolls’. *Patachitra* artists are not only painters are also lyricists, singers, performers and true artists. The narratives and images by the Patua artists continue to be based on the themes inspired by the sacred Hindu and Muslim texts from history and myth. Today, the scrolls may also reflect social issues, such as literacy, health and environment.

Key words: Patas, Patuas, Scroll-paintings, Pictorial narrative songs, Oral history

INTRODUCTION

Indian folk artists for long been engaged with the practice of the *Patachitra*; it is an innovation par excellence without any technological sophistication. The *Patachitra* has been considered as a film strip defined via rhythmic narration and stands as a sworn statement for the genesis of cinema way back in 5th century BC. The Patuas, also known as chitrakars, are a native group of Bengalis specializing in the production of narrative scrolls (Pat) and the performance of songs to accompany their unrolling. Traditionally, patua artists would travel from village to village trading their performances of singing and sharing their visual scroll presentations for money or in-kind food and lodging. Present day, they travel to various art and craft markets in the larger city centers.

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Bengal’s scroll-narration is known as vintage form of audio-visual presentation, accomplished by means of the *Patuas*. The Scroll-Performers, on the grounds that time immemorial, utilize their inborn visual vocabulary aptitudes to attach, train and entertain the majority inside the rural Republic of India and further with rural Bengal vicinity mass. They may sing songs; narrate the memories on the scroll, whereas unfurling their scroll at an equivalent time, growing a dynamic oral-lifestyle evolved by way of visible artwork.. Pata is folk-art because it is produced by such people of villages who do not have any so called ‘academic’ training. They inherit their skill from their ancestors. The father trains up his sons and the mother to her daughters. The story telling artist makes *Patachitra* or scroll painting crossed a long history with its traditional communicative value.

The creative people are adept at battling against any social odds and have the creative power to raise above all odds and produce their creative works. The creative people just know to convey messages and to fight against social issues or evil things happening in the society. Individuals assume that those messages are a social reminder, and it is well enough to convey awareness to any religion and society.

Scroll narrative painting tradition of rural Bengal is made by the *Patuas* caste, conversely a branch of the *Chitrakar* caste. They opt to depict and narrate scrolls on mythological, local folklore, folk narratives and modern activities. They carried painted scroll artwork from village to village. These days the *Chitrakars* or *Patuas* painters of Naya, Pingla in Medinipur are the best ones concerned with *Pata* making.

Literature Review: The Source of *Patua* Art Tradition

In ancient India, the word '*Chitra*' denotes 'painted picture', chiseled or carved images on walls, wood or stone surface. The original meaning of Pat was a piece of cloth. Patta was originally an Austro-Asiatic word which entered into old Sanskrit, rather than an Indo-European word. The words *Patua* and *Patidar* have been derived from the word pat (painted Portrait), the former finishing with the Bengali suffix '*ua*', and the latter with the Persian suffix '*dar*', that means holder. According to scholars, Pata painting may have existed even during the pre historical period (Mahenjodaro and Harappa). Some believe that the word Pata may have a non-Aryan or Austro-Asiatic origin. According to Buddhaghosha, Gautama Buddha admired Charanchitra, a primitive form of Pata painting. An interesting account of the display of Jam patta is to be found in Banabhatta's *Harshacharita*. Patanjali's *Mahabhasya*, Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, the Buddhist text *Aryamanjushreemulakalpa*, and many other texts mention *Patua* songs. *Patuas* techniques of displaying *patas*, as vividly described inside the *Harshacharita*, stays unchanged even nowadays.

Change of their religion observed again, with the advent of the Buddhist society they embraced Buddhism. Presumably, then that became the golden duration of them. As a result, they love this artwork practice; they are galvanized by excellent customers. To convey ahead their way of life and to undertake additional support and encouragement, they were no reluctant to exchange their religion and faith as properly.

Patachitra of Bengal is a style of fusion with motions and narration. It's also clear during the advent of Brahmanism they embraced Hinduism, again at some point of the advancement of Buddhism they embraced Buddhism, all over again at some stage in the invading of Bakhtiyar-Khilji and Mughals they embraced Islam.

Buddhist and Pre- Buddhist period

The scroll paintings or Jarano *patas* were spread over Tibet, Java, Berlin in the Buddhist period. Reference of Yam pata can be found in Banabhattas writing of 7th century A.D. After that mythological *patas* got maximum priority during Hindu period. Behula pata, chandi pata, etc were created at this phase. Then *patas* of Gaji and pir came into existence in the Islamic age. So we can see that with the changes of ruling classes the nature of the pata gharana also being transformed. In the later period social *patas*, *Patas* on Independence, *Patas* of Vidyasagar, Rabindranath Tagore etc had been created. Although the pata paintings got special acknowledgement during Buddhist-Jain period these existed since long ago. The emergence of jarano *patas* was very primitive. History of jarano *patas* is specially associated with the history of kheroal linguistic group which belongs to pre –Buddha period. In Buddhist age, Pata became such a popular mass medium through which one can easily penetrate into common peoples life. Naturally the Jataka tales of khuddak Nikay published through the pata paintings. Buddhist monks gave special importance on this mass medium. A magnificent impact of three jarano *patas* can be seen on the three layers of the upper portion of the entrance way of Sanchi stupa.

Patas of pre-colonial and post-colonial period

The ups and downs of the patua society and pata paintings continued from Yam Pata of the tribal ethnic group beyond the Buddhist period. Before the colonial period Islam and Vaishnava religion influenced the trend of pata paintings. The changing conditions of the tribal society put an impact on the Pata culture and also on the social culture of Bengal as well as India. After the death of Aurangzeb when the Mughal rule in Bengal loosened to some extent then Murshidkuli Khan became the nawabab of Bengal. The relationship between the zamindar and the subjects in other words the rural economy changed due to the transformation of revenue system. The economic trouble of the common people of Bengal reached at its maximum height. At last the downfall of Siraj and the new trade policy of East India company became responsible for losing the land of Bengal economic system. Then first and second world war, Indian freedom struggle, group politics, famine of Bengal, August Revolution, partition, Independence –patuas accustomed with all these situations and created songs of awakening through patas. Besides this Patuas have made patas and written many songs on Babu culture of Calcutta. Social history of 18th and 19th centuries have got its artistic form in Kalighat Pata, the exploitation of the British have been mentioned in Saheb Pata, the description of disastrous flood in 1978 have been visualized in Bana Pata. In this respect we can say that all this history have been written by the subaltern Patuas.

Patas and Patuas of colonial period

The agricultural economy of Bengal started to decline due to the Industrial Revolution and colonial rule. Printing press, Newspaper, Radio, Cinema have emerged as mass medium of amusement and education in place of patas. Colonial culture gave birth to a declining culture. Patuas had started to protest against new babu –bibi culture, their luxurious lifestyles and hypocrisy through their paintings. Kalighat Pata was the proof of this attempt.

Classification of the Pata can be made on the basis of their character or subjects, such as :

1. Religious : a) Hindu-pauranic pata(Krishna-pata, Rama-pata) b) Musalmani Pata(stories of pirs and gazis) c) Christani pata (story of Jesus and Mother Mary) d) Buddhist pata
2. Laukik : a) Patas with folk gods and goddesses, folk legendary themes, b) contemporary affairs and themes with local interest etc.
3. Secular : a) pata with legendary themes other than religious matters b) socio-political affairs c) contemporary events, social protests etc are also included in this group of pata.
4. Magico or Tribal : a) Chakshudan Pat, b) Jadu or Duany pata, c) Yama Pat
5. Kalighat Pata or Bazar Painting which are described here as chaukosh pata.

Tribal Pat

The Magico or tribal Pata are very much popular among the santals, Bhumijs, kherias and the group of tribal people all over Bengal and in the Chotonagpur belt. In such a pata the tribal patua gives us an idea of rebirth. In some of their patas Marang Buru gives the punishment to a man, often his death, if he commits inexcusable sin. Scroll painting about rebirth is also popular among the Buddhists of Tibet.

a. Chakshudan Pat

Chakshudan Pat is a ritualistic art practice of the Santhals inhabiting the regions of Bengal and Jharkhand. The paintings are commissioned after someone dies. The patua will at the onset characteristically depicts the deceased without eyeballs to denote that the body is devoid of a spirit, and without sight would be unable to navigate in the afterlife. It is when the family pays the artist that he renders the eyeballs on the painted figure, ritualistically lending the person sight. Traditionally, on hearing of a death in the Santhal community, the artist approached the mourning family to present them with already drawn figures- man and woman, young and old, of varying age. Often the family will offer daily items as an offering to the painter, to draw the eyes on a selected figure. These exchanged objects are often shown in the painting. Given the cultural significance of this ritual, the painter is viewed as a quasi magician in the community- ushering the passage of the dead from the mortal world to the afterlife. Chakshudan Pat is generally of square in size and not more than 40-50C.M. It may be big or small too.

b. Yama Pat

Yama was the subject matter of scroll paintings from the very beginning of time to the medieval time. The paintings depict the after-death judgement by Yama, the god of death, sufferings in hell, and the rewards of heaven. The paintings related to hell are usually horrid and abominable. The yama pat paintings are mostly used as tools of moral education rather than as object of arts. The style of these paintings is usually crude and vulgar. Yama Patas illustrate how Yama, the God of Death in Hindu mythology, segregates people into heaven or hell, for life after death, by assessing their acts in human life. Some Yama Patas evocatively even present tortures in hell carried about by the grim-looking attendants of Yama. Showing the punishments given by Yama as terrifying scenes, they aim to make people spend a virtuous life on earth and move away from any vices.

Secular Pata

Secular Pata like Vidyasagar, Jai Bangla. In the secular pata, sub-class can also be had as a) pata of the pre-Independent days and b) pata of the post-independent time.

1. Legendary and court cases – Love affairs of the physician and the patient, Elokeshi
2. Political change – Rationing system, Vidyasagar pata
3. Moral – Dowry system, Widow remarriage, Family planning.

Sahib pat

In our freedom struggle the role of the Patuas of Medinipur was very significant. On the backdrop of freedom movement the patuas had made sahib pat or Engrej pata. The folk songs of sahib pata were actually a description of the outrage of sahebs through speech. In this narration we can also notice the mention of these people who are famous for their good deeds for country and its citizens. Now a few changes can be identified in the speech of Sahib Patas. In spite of this Dukhushyam Chitrakar is still painting the Saheb Patas and can narrate the folk songs of patas very efficiently. Among all the Scroll paintings of our country, the most complicated is the sahib pat. Researchers have interpreted them in various ways. Some call them “Dacoit’s Pat” while others, pats of the santhal Revolution.

Kalighat Pat

Kalighat painting is a school of modern art that originated in 19th century Calcutta, India, which was then the capital of British India. Made on mostly cloth or paper scrolls, *Kalighat* paintings are so named due to the thriving settlement of the *patuas* or cloth-painters around the temples of *Kali* at *Kalighat* in Kolkatta. The theme of these paintings were mostly mythological characters that later evolved to civil life in Calcutta along with other secular and contemporary themes. The brushwork on these paintings are deemed by experts as deft, seamless, flowing and one of the smoothest art forms in India.

In the Kalighat Pata we can get a clear picture of hypocrisy of Mohanto from Tarakeshwar and the killing incident of Elokeshi. But in most of the Kalighat Patas, except for one or two, there are no mention of any song. Different aspects of the 18th and 19th centuries had been portrayed in the Kalighat Pata. The temple of Kalighat was established in 1798. After that a huge number of people started to visit this place for worship. Therefore the Patuas also started to make the idols of various Gods and Goddess keeping in mind the needs of the pilgrims. On one hand the decline of Muslim rule and on the other hand the beginning of British administration – in this scenario the Kalighat Pata was originated. Besides the religious Pata, mythological pata etc the satirical pata also got importance. W.G.Archer had mentioned the painting style of Kalighat as “by-product of the British connection” in his book Bazar paintings of Calcutta which had created a controversy. The Patuas of Kalighat were not the neutral viewers of contemporary history of social life. Satirical attitude of the Kalighat Pata is the proof of this. The paintings of “Cat” and “Gosai” by the Patuas of Kalighat are the symbol of debased vaishnava Tantrik. We can find the clear presence of the reality of contemporary society in every social pata of Kalighat.

Recently in an interview Shyamsundar Chitrakar has told that some of the Patuas of Medinipur went to kalighat and started to paint the Patas and they completely shifted there in later times. This information has also been referred in W.C.Archer’s “Bazar Paintings of Calcutta.” A special trend had been created revolving around the Kalighat Pata from which we can get many information of our social history. Besides this in which century kalighat pata had been painted then a fondness for music could be clearly visualised in the patas of the Kalighat Patuas. Now the endangered Kalighat Gharana has been revived again by Kalam Patua.

Nationalist Movement –Patua songs

The role of Patuas in strengthening freedom movement, in emergence of nationalism was very significant. We can trace the history of freedom struggle of Tamluk in the folk songs of Patas. A book named 'Pata chitra-Giti' was published from Tamralipta Swadhinata sangram Itihas committee in 1986. The Patuas had planned to make 100 patas on the background of Nationalist movement by dividing it in 10 palagans. These lyrical narrative songs were as below :

1. Khudiram and Bengal partition Movement (1900-1906)
2. Beginning of revolution and Non-cooperation Movement (1909-1920)
3. From Non-cooperation to Civil Disobedience (1921-1930)
4. Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-31)
5. Armoury Raid (1931)
6. Movement for exemption of Tax
7. Individual Satagraha
8. Attack on Thanas and tale of the Martyrs
9. National Government in Tamluk (1942-44)
10. Gandhiji at Mahishadal (1945)

The first seven songs were written by Sushilkumar Dhara. Last three songs were Gopinandan Goswami's creation. These were written on the basis of folk songs of the Patuas. One more instance can be mentioned here the pamphlet named ' French Revolution in Patua song' by Jill Parvin and Suhrid Bhowmik . The main subject matter of this pamphlet is Pata and Patua songs created on the completion of 10 years of French Revolution of 1789. They have portrayed Louis 16th as a autocratic oppressive ruler. The pata song Bharatvager Itikotha has narrated the movements of the Indian citizens against the oppression of the British. In this way history has become alive in the oral speech through many forms and conversion.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To reconstruct the social history through the analysis of Patua culture.
- To investigate the authentic mode of the tradition of folk song through the survey of Patua songs.
- To reevaluate the history of our folk art through the analysis of Pata paintings.
- To find out the stream of our oral history through Patua culture.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Our Patua Culture is comprised of Pata and Patuas. From Pre-Buddhist period through colonial period this culture still remains today. The trends of our oral history, our social history are deeply rooted in this Patua Culture. From undivided Midnapur to Birbhum, Bankura, Purulia districts the Patuas have kept their art alive till now. Our folk painting and folksong have been blended with this art. Therefore, the aim is to find out the direction of reconstructing our social history through this trend of Patua culture and to establish the structure of social history of Bengal in a new form through new explorations. So the problem which is to be investigated in this study is Analysis of Pat and Patua Culture In Constructing Social History and determining the orientation of Cohesive thinking.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- In how many types the pata paintings can be divided?
- How to explore the essence of communal harmony through pata songs?
- What are the contributions of patuas to the history of painting?
- What is the condition of religious turmoil among the patuas?
- What is the present condition of the patuas during this corona pandemic situation?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

History is not merely a collection of some nostalgic thoughts, history provides us precious way of living. The real form, traditions and transformations of our culture enrich our socio-cultural environment. It is possible to trace the exact form of the soul of Bengalis as well as India by following the heritage of the patua culture starting from Pre-Buddhist period till now. The history that we will get from our integrated culture, our culture of harmony and various oral traditions, has profound significance which can not be denied.

Patas on Corona virus :

The coronavirus is depicted as a big monster with a gaping mouth or a large round head of a beast with muscular arms terrifying a fearful crowd for various patachitra (traditional scroll) artists from the little town of Naya in West Bengal, India. The scrolls depict the pandemic, while accompanying songs written by the artists describe the story in words, in this example, explaining COVID-19, its consequences, and how to protect oneself from the sickness. They

also express their anguish and sorrow over the virus's death of close ones. As they sing, the artists unroll the multi-panel scrolls.

Alekjan Chitrakar, of 'Habichak Nankarchak loksikha silpo Patua' and Fuljan Chitrakar told that they have received some government and NGO's help. They have made a lot of asks, t-shirts, kurtas, umbrellas etc. along with patas during pandemic and marketed it. Through these steps they have tried to combat with the intense competition of current market and make a stable place of their own in this new normal. The patuas are also selling the products in a reasonable price which are affordable to common people.

Conclusion

From the pre-Buddhist period till now the Patuas have sustained their own artistic identity through ups and downs. Different ruling classes have tried to use these Patua groups to fulfill their own needs but the Patuas have become successful to retain their distinct personalities. They never compromise with any unfairness. They have made a great impact on Indian art and culture. They produced enormous patas during Buddhist-Jain-Brahmana-Islamic-British every phase of our history and still they are continuing their art works. In case of establishing peace and communal harmony in the society, the instance of Patua class is very significant. In spite of all the Patuas are still suffering from poverty. Patuas dolls are found at Chaitanyapur, Akubpur, Kesabbar. In the aspect of birth and death, marriage muslim principles are followed by the patuas. Bana bibi, or pir songs are sung in family functions. The art style of pats made by this patuas of midnapur, as well as their songs are deeply connected with our traditional history. Now many researchers and scholars are pursuing their research work on patuas both inside and outside of our country. The result of these research works are being published as books. But the social and cultural conditions of these Patuas have not improved yet though sometimes a few government or private attempts bring a ray of hope. Above all it can be said that the Patuas who are nurturing our history since a prolonged past must deserve to get a prosperous livelihood and this plan should be implemented right away.

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