

Transformation from Performative Art to Demonstrative Art: A Survival strategy for *Patachitra*

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Abstract: Indian art history has been evidence to a rich storage of traditional painting and folk narrative from pre-history to present time. One of the most musical and illustrious form of folk narrative is *Patachitra* of Bengal and its adjoining states of Odhisa, Bihar and Jharkhand. While the art form and music distinctively demonstrates a local flavor of the particular state, West Bengal in particular has its own panache of *patuas* from the districts of Bankura, Purulia, Birbhum and West Midnapore. *Patachitra* which comprises of crude opaque form of folk art often defined with black outlines defining the cultural identity of *patuas*. The article deals with the method, raw materials, process of *patachitra*. It primarily focuses on the transformation of the art from performative art to demonstrative art, as a survival strategy of artisans of West Midnapore.

Keywords: *Patachitra*, culture, natural colours, art, folklore, narrative performance, transformations, survival.

Introduction

Patachitra has been considered as one of the most musical and illustrious form of folk narrative of Bengal and its adjoining states of Odhisa, Bihar and Jharkhand. While the art form and music distinctively demonstrates a local flavor of the particular state, West Bengal in particular has its own panache of *patuas* from the districts of Bankura, Purulia, Birbhum and West Midnapore. It may be rightfully considered a conjoint of various methods of communication which includes visual, oral and musical forms to narrate stories related to society, culture, religion, nature and popular folklore (Chaitanya, 1976). Through its strong visual and oral medium it preserves the documentation of the society down the ages. It is also a witness to the social transformation and tells stories of the socio-political and religious reflections and changes over the years (Sengupta, 2012).

The word *Pata* is derived from the Sanskrit word *Patta*, which means cloth. The artists who paint these scrolls are called *Patuas*. They are performance artists who not only paint but while unscrolling the *Pats* sing the *PaterGaun* to the audience. The songs originate from mythology, folklore and tribal rituals to stories based on modern Indian history and socio-cultural issues. Initially *pats* were made of natural colours, which were procured from local flora-fauna and the soil of the surrounding region (Chakrabarti, 1972).

This medium of mass communication dates back to around 16th century AD and existed as an oral form (Bajpai, 2015a). Later by last quarter of 19th century it took the form of publications. These painted scrolls were migratory saga of the *patuas*, who were wanderers in origin, often portraying paintings of deities. They travelled from state to state enjoying the patronage of several kings, landlords and nobels. Though the origin of *Patachitra* as a narrative form of folklore cannot be traced exactly, yet various oral form of record dates it back to around 10th -11th century AD in Bengal (Bajpai, 2015b). The art of scroll painting has been handed down from generation to generation in the families of *patuas* or artisans. Arguably, some 300 years ago, Raja Balaram Sen patronized the advancement of *patachitra*. The main theme, around which the *pats* were painted, comprised of stories from the three Mangal Kavyas- the *Manasa Mangal Kavya*, *Chandi Mangal Kavya* and *Dharma Mangal Kavya*, along with epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Beside these the narratives reflected the folklore, socio-political scenario of the time along with religious connotations and beliefs (Chatterji, 2009).

This narrative art form however, with the loss of legacy and royal patronage, declined from its high stature performative art of court to the common man's entertainment during festivals and rural *melas* (fair). Thus from its elaborate form of performance which included several forms of communication-visual, oral and music, *patachitra* was forced to be reduced to a descriptive form of

scroll art. This art form soon could not help sustain the livelihood of the artisans. Lack of demand resulted from the emergence of other forms of mass media and entertainment, thus folklore and narrative forms were forced to give way to radio, television, satellite and finally internet. These survival threats forced *patuas* to look for alternative diversification for this performative art form, thus finding survival strategies in a more visual form. Product diversification was their only mode of survival.

While the government and several Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) helped some clusters of *patuas*, especially in Naya village of Pingla in West Midnapore to take up trainings for design upgradation and product diversification in order to cater to the demands of the new age market: the original performative art eventually got transformed into a mere descriptive art. Eventually this scroll art got restricted into modern lifestyle products with functionality far from its original purpose of story-telling art.

Objectives

The objective of the study is to understand the present scenario and problems faced by the *patachitra* painters of West Bengal. How have the art form transformed from the narrative style to a decorative style owing to problems faced by them.

Methodology

Research methodology involves visit to Pingla in West Midnapore which allowed us to undergo a critical understanding of the issues associated with the *patachitra*, its impact on the environment and their livelihood. Insights are gained through various journals, articles and books.

Literature Review

Patachitra as a performative art involve Art, Narrative and Music.

Art Form in *Patachitra*

The Art Form in *Patachitras* comprises of crude opaque form of folk art often defined with black outlines. The sense of proportion and perspective was not considered by the *patuas*. The art form was essentially two-dimensional with simple detailing like the scales and fins of a fish (Dutta Chattapadhyay, 2010). The art form is far from being intricate like the *Ganjifa* cards or the Rajasthani Miniature paintings. The scrolls are of mainly three different types: *Jarano* (rolled); *Chaukosh* (square or rectangular) and *Kalighat* (style of *patuas* residing near Kalighat temple of Kolkata), referred in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Kalighat Style Patachitra Painted on a Window

Patuas have an inherent style of drawing ornate frames to central motifs on the *pats*. The style includes human forms, fishes in abundance, birds, snakes and other animal forms. The human figures have a monotonous looks (Figure 2a) and can be stand apart only by colour of their clothes. The uniqueness lies in the mention of the name of the *citrakar* on the scroll and also on the walls of their houses (Figure 2b).



(a)



(b)

Figure 1. (a) Monotonous Facial Expression- a common style in *patachitras*; (b) *Patachitra* on the wall of an artisan's house with his name

Traditionally dried palm leaf was used as a canvas, which eventually got replaced by stripes of cloth. However paper reinforced with thin cloth, glued on as a backing is predominantly used as a canvas now.

All colours prepared are from local and natural sources. The surrounding tress-their leaves, roots, bark, fruits and flowers were used to prepare colours along with mud, clay, soil, ash from earthen pots and soot from charcoal as well. The natural colours are prepared in broken coconut shells which double up as palette. As binder they use home-made glue and water. The glue is made from ground seeds of the wood-apple tree and water. Sometimes, the seeds of wood-apple are substituted with that of tamarind, sap from the margossa tree or egg yolk. The most commons colours prepared are mentioned in Table 1.

Table 1. Colours used for *patachitra*.

Name of Colour	Natural Source
Red	Alta or Vermillion or Terra Cotta
Blue	Local seeds called Nil Bori
Yellow	Turmeric or soil
Green	Leaves of hyacinth bean plant or wood apple
Black	Soot on earthen pots or burnt rice powder
White	White mud or conch shell powder
Grey	Soot from earthen ovens
Purple	Black berry
Brown	Limestone mixed with black catechu

With the advent of new medium of canvas, be it paper or a silk sari or even a t-shirt, the colours used vary from poster colours to acrylic colours as per end use. These chemical colours are obtained from the market and reduced preparation time of *patachitra* by eliminating colour preparation process. It also helps to produce more number of scrolls–thus commercialize the craft.

The painting is done on small strips of cotton cloth. The canvas is prepared by women. It is prepared by coating the cloth with a mixture of chalk and gum, made from tamarind seeds. This makes it ready to be drawn on with natural colours using hand-made brushes made of mongoose or squirrel hair. These days they use ready-made squirrel hair or acrylic brushes.

First, the initial lines are drawn with base colour to form the basic silhouette. Colour is then filled inside each art form or motif. The details are then filled in with black. To make the pats weather proof a coating of lacquer is given, which makes the art work glossy. This process of glazing or varnishing is quite interesting. The painting is held

over a fire place so that the back of the painting is exposed to heat. On the surface of the painting fine lacquer is applied. Usually the women folk, prepare the glue, the canvas and apply colours.

Narrative Form in *Patachitra* is an inherent part of the *patkhelano* (unfolding of the *pat*) is derived from different mythological stories and epics along with historical events and religious sources. Sometimes socio-cultural reflect is also found as a subject matter along with local folktales and beliefs (Maity, 2001). In recent times the narratives also include topics like HIV-AIDS, global warming and awareness against existing social evils. Based on these themes we can categorize the *patachitras* into various categories. During narration the artist shows almost no facial expression and delivers the narrative in a rhythmic speech with some voice modulation at places. They learn the art from the elders from a very young age as shown in Figure 3, where we documented a very young child performs the scroll narrative at Pingla. However much experimentation has not been done and not all *patuas* can sing or narrate. Some only paint the scrolls.



Figure 3. A child artist narrating a *pat*

Music Form in *Patachitra* comes after the *pats* are ready. It comprises of mainly a song which is sung and sometimes accompanied by a harmonium, a flute or a *dugdugi* (a local percussion kind of instrument) (Bhattacharya, 2005). They have a unique and personal touch as the songs are composed based on respective *pats*. It primarily comprises of three elemental parts, which are consistent with ‘tripad’ or the three beats in Indian Classical Music: the story or as they call *kahini*, the glorification or the *mahatmya*, and the self-introduction or *bhanita*.

Threats Faced by *Patachitra*

The *patachitra* won the patronage of not only Kings and *Zamindars* but also caught the fancy of the British Rulers. It was considered a form of folk entertainment that appeals to both the visual and auditory senses. It was a complete form by its own comprising of painting, story and song.

However it faced fierce competition as other forms of entertainment took to the main stream and with the advent of other folk musical forms. Further threats came from the rapid growth in technology which affected both art and entertainment in urban and rural areas alike. The advent of radio and later television were factors that forced *patachitra* as a performative art to decline. As the demand of it as a performative art reduced, the artisans were forced to divert and diversify into other areas for survival. From the detailed research of Frank J. Korom in his work *Village of Painters: Narrative Scrolls from West Bengal*, we get ample insight into their lives and their craftsmanship and determination in continuing an ancient folkart against all intimidating odds (Korom, 2006).

Survival Strategy: Transformation to Descriptive Art Form

The commercialization of crafts through mass production and product diversities appears to be the most effective solution for declining crafts to survive. *Patachitra* artisans were not exception. With the changing outlook of the modern generation of *chitrakars*, the art is losing its value as a musical narrative form of entertainment (Chatterji, 2009). The new artisans prefer to paint them on lifestyle products and garment which have better functions and therefore marketability than mere *patkelano* which allowed meager earnings (Bayen, 2013; Sengupta, 2012).

Aided by various trainings organized by Ministry of Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises (MSME) and Office of Development Commissioner (Handicrafts) and NGOs like *banglanatok.com*, *patuas* of Naya village in Pingla, West Midnapore in particular have adopted diversification as a survival strategy (Jefferson, 2014). Their present product range comprises of pats which can be frames as wall hangings, mirrors with *patachiras* frames, flower vase, pen stand, t-shirts, saris, cushion cover, bags and even costume jewellery. They have also adopted acrylic paint for painting on fabric-which however delivers an unacceptable stiffness.

To keep abreast with modern market demands many artisans are supplying products to various e-commerce sites. We documented some interesting lifestyle objects as shown in Figure 4, which they developed, post-training received from *banglanatok.com*. However though this has considerably improved their economic status, the tradition of the performative art of *patachitra*, in the process, unknowingly got transformed into a descriptive art form or rather more visual. The song and narrative slowly lost its glory.



Figure 4. Diversified use of *patachitra* for Survival Conclusion

There is no denying that the art form has undergone transformation from its inherent form. *Patachitra* as a traditional form of folk art has suffered noticeable decline until some NGOs decided to hold hands and uplift them. Training imparted new approach towards design and use of colours, while technological upgradation helped them diverse into new products with better marketability. Recently only a handful of *patus* still practice the traditional form of the performative art while most have limited themselves as mere *chitrakar*. The uniqueness of *patachitra* lies in its bold use of colour and lines. The signature style however is being preserved despite diversification of end use and medium. As a descriptive art, *patachitra* still continue to be a popular craft in its 'visual form' with a promising international market in a niche segment. To enhance its acceptability as an environment friendly product, the raw materials need to be eco-friendly-to appeal to the global eco-lifestyle trend.

The performative form of *patachitra* can also be revived if the narrative story tells and songs are adopted into new media. The performance may be converted into videos or made into animated movies which can be a mode of story-telling for children. This will further help the generation next to know about the mythology and religious stories and have an awareness of our socio-culture development over hundreds of years. The *pat-stories* can be combined with songs and music that appeal to the next generation and sold as films in DVD form or popularize them through websites like You-Tube.

Therefore for its survival, instead of adopting extreme product diversifications, as is being practiced now, the attempt should be towards a different yet appropriate prototype that suits its original form of multi-communication methods of visual art, story-telling and song.

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