



From Mythology to Modernity: Evolution of Patachitra Tradition of Bengal

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Abstract- Patachitra is not merely a rural folk art. It also serves as a significant medium of cultural expression and public communication. Beyond the traditional narratives of the Puranas and the Mangal Kavyas, Patuas have expanded their themes to encompass a wide range of natural and social phenomena. By employing metaphorical representations, they establish meaningful connections between contemporary realities and traditional artistic conventions. Although these metaphors are rooted in the artists' imagination and individual perspectives, they resonate deeply with audiences and enhance the communicative power of the performances. While square format or Chauko Patachitra primarily depicts narratives drawn from the Puranas, the epics, and the Mangal Kavyas, scroll paintings or Joran pot extend beyond these conventional themes to narrate contemporary events. The visual narratives of Patuas portray not only social evils such as dowry, bride murder, and sexual violence, but also natural disasters including tsunamis, cyclones, and, more recently, the covid pandemic. Accompanied by narrative songs, these performances serve to raise public awareness and educate communities about the nature and consequences of such crises. Consequently, Patachitra has evolved beyond its identity as a traditional folk art into a dynamic performative medium that documents, interprets, and communicates both social and environmental realities.

Keywords— Patachitra; Patua, Scroll Painting, Natural Disasters

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of folklore, as it is understood in modern scholarship, emerged during the mid-nineteenth century. The term folklore was first introduced by William John Thoms in 1846 in the context of the systematic study of traditional culture. In the study of Bengal's rich cultural heritage, the Bengali term *loksaṃskṛti* has been widely accepted as the closest equivalent of folklore. The word "folk" denotes the common people or a community, whereas "lore" signifies knowledge or traditional wisdom. More precisely, however, the term folk refers to a distinct social group inhabiting a specific geographical region and bound together by shared ethnic, linguistic, occupational, and socio-economic values. Such communities are united by a common cultural consciousness, a shared way of life, and a collective tradition transmitted across generations. It is this cohesive social body that constitutes the folk. The term "lore" derived from the Old English word "lar", etymologically signifies learning, instruction, or knowledge. Accordingly, folklore may be understood as the "wisdom of the folk" or the "learning of the people," encompassing the collective knowledge, beliefs, customs, and traditions preserved and transmitted within a community.



II. EXPLORING THE HISTORY GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF PATACHITRA

The term patta or pata is derived from Sanskrit, where it originally referred to a piece of cloth or textile. In ancient India, painting on cloth was a well-established artistic practice, and the term pata initially denoted prepared cloth surfaces used for pictorial representation. Over time, however, the semantic scope of the term expanded considerably. Although cloth remained the traditional medium, contemporary Patachitra is frequently executed on paper, which has become one of the most widely used surfaces for this art form. Artists engaged in this tradition were historically known as Pattakara or Pattikara, terms that referred to members of the painter community.

In different regional dialects of Bengal, the designation Patua has acquired several vernacular variants, such as Pouta, Pota, and Peto. The practitioners themselves generally identify as members of the Chitrakar or painter community. While certain Brahmin and Kumhar or potter communities in Bangladesh also produce painted images, they are not regarded as belonging to the traditional Chitrakar lineage associated with Patachitra.

Unlike a single-panel painting, Patachitra conventionally presents a complete narrative through a sequence of visual episodes. Consequently, several scholars have observed that a Patachitra is not merely "painted" but, in a metaphorical sense, "written," since it narrates a story through a structured visual text. This understanding highlights the narrative and performative dimensions that distinguish Patachitra from other forms of folk painting.

The practitioners of Patachitra are known by different names across various regions of West Bengal, reflecting the diversity of local traditions and dialects. In the north-western districts of Bankura and Purulia, they are commonly referred to as Patidar, Poitka, or Pattikara. In parts of Birbhum and Medinipur, they are known as Chitrakar, Patkar, Pateri, or Peto, while the designation Patua is most widely used in the south-western regions of Bengal. Beyond Bengal, similar communities of itinerant painter-storytellers are identified by different names, such as Chitrakathi in Maharashtra and Chitera in Rajasthan. The tradition of narrative scroll painting is not confined to Bengal alone; examples of comparable practices can be found in several regions across India. Furthermore, analogous forms of scroll or narrative painting have been documented in countries such as China, Japan, Nepal, Tibet, and Egypt, although they are not necessarily known by the term Patachitra. The nomenclature and stylistic conventions vary according to regional and cultural contexts. Nevertheless, the Bengali tradition of Patachitra has long been recognised for its exceptional richness, diversity, and continuity, distinguishing it as one of the most developed and influential forms of narrative folk painting in South Asia.

Traditionally, Bengali Patachitra may be classified into two principal categories: single-panel paintings or Chauko Pat and multi-panel narrative scrolls, commonly known as Jorano Pat or scroll paintings. While the former generally depicts a single episode or image, the latter presents a sequential visual narrative unfolding across multiple painted panels.

The narrative scroll occupies a distinctive position within the performative tradition of Bengal. Based on these elongated scrolls, Patuas compose narrative songs and perform them in conjunction with the gradual unfolding of the painted panels. In districts such as Birbhum, Bardhaman, and Murshidabad, scrolls traditionally range from approximately eight to twenty-five cubits in length and are divided into a series of pictorial frames illustrating successive episodes of a story. Travelling from village to village, the Patuas display each panel sequentially while singing the corresponding verses, thereby integrating visual representation with oral narration and musical performance.



Each scroll is mounted on bamboo rods at both ends, allowing it to be rolled and unrolled with ease during performance. The scroll is gradually unfurled from one end as the narrative progresses and rolled back after the performance, reinforcing the intimate relationship between the visual sequence and the oral rendition. This performative mode of presentation distinguishes Jorano Pat from conventional painting and establishes it as a dynamic form of narrative performance rather than a static work of visual art.

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Changing Themes in Patachitra

The thematic repertoire of Bengali Patachitra is remarkably diverse and may be broadly classified into several categories. One important category comprises ritual and magical scrolls, including Chokkhudan Pat (the Scroll of Bestowing Sight) and Yama Pat, which are associated with ritual beliefs concerning death, the afterlife, and spiritual transformation. A second category encompasses scrolls based on the lives and miracles of religious figures and saints, such as Gazi Pat and Satya Pir Pat, reflecting the syncretic religious traditions of Bengal. Another major group consists of mythological Patachitra, illustrating narratives from the Ramayana, Ram Lila, Krishna Lila, the Mahabharata, and other Hindu mythological traditions. Historical events also constitute an important thematic category. These scrolls depict wars, rebellions, and other significant historical episodes, thereby preserving collective memories through visual narration. Alongside these are scrolls portraying contemporary events, demonstrating the ability of Patuas to respond creatively to changing social realities.

The thematic corpus further includes biographical scrolls dedicated to the lives and achievements of eminent personalities, political scrolls designed for public mobilisation and political communication, as well as socially engaged Patachitra addressing issues such as social reform, public awareness, health, and education. In addition, urban influences and the impact of foreign cultures are reflected in a number of modern Patachitra, illustrating the tradition's continued evolution in response to wider socio-cultural transformations.

The foregoing discussion makes it evident that Bengali Patachitra has never been confined to a single thematic domain. Rather, it embodies a profound sense of social responsibility, reflecting the dynamic relationship between artistic practice and the lived realities of society. Whether responding to social issues or natural calamities, Patuas have consistently incorporated contemporary events into their visual narratives, demonstrating the adaptability and continuing relevance of the tradition. From historical episodes to present-day crises, Patachitra has served as a visual archive of collective experience. Major events such as India's Independence in 1947, significant political developments, the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, changes in government, floods, earthquakes, tsunamis, famines, and devastating cyclones—including Aila, Phailin, and Amphan—as well as the global covid pandemic, have all found



expression within the narrative repertoire of modern Patachitra. By documenting these events through painting and performance, Patuas have transformed contemporary history into a shared cultural memory. The recurrent representation of disasters in Patachitra demonstrates that this tradition functions not merely as a medium of artistic expression but also as a vehicle for social commentary, public awareness, and cultural resilience. It is within this broader context that the present study examines the ways in which natural disasters and other contemporary crises have been interpreted, represented, and communicated through the visual and performative language of Bengali Patachitra.

III. A PATACHITRA ON COVID PANDEMIC

The outbreak of the covid pandemic marked a significant turning point in the thematic evolution of contemporary Bengali Patachitra. While the tradition has long been associated with mythological narratives, religious legends, and historical episodes, the unprecedented global health crisis prompted Patuas to engage directly with contemporary realities. Among the artists who responded most effectively to this crisis was Swarna Chitrakar who's covid Patachitra demonstrates the remarkable adaptability of the tradition in addressing urgent social concerns. In her scrolls, the coronavirus is frequently represented through symbolic visual imagery rather than scientific realism. The virus often assumes the form of a monstrous or demonic figure, drawing upon familiar visual metaphors from Bengali folk traditions. Such imagery enables rural audiences to perceive the invisible threat in culturally intelligible terms, thereby transforming an abstract medical phenomenon into a tangible moral and social danger. The narrative extends beyond the representation of the virus itself. It incorporates visual and verbal messages promoting preventive measures, including wearing face masks, maintaining physical distancing, washing hands regularly, and observing quarantine protocols. These public health guidelines are integrated into the traditional format of Patachitra through sequential painted panels accompanied by Pater Gan (scroll songs), making complex health information accessible to audiences with diverse educational backgrounds. A notable aspect of the artists Patachitra is its emphasis on humanitarian values. The accompanying songs express deep concern for economically vulnerable communities affected by the lockdown, particularly daily wage earners and marginalised families facing food insecurity. Rather than presenting the pandemic solely as a medical emergency, the scroll frames it as a broader social and humanitarian crisis requiring compassion, collective responsibility, and mutual assistance. The performative dimension of the scroll significantly enhances its communicative power. As each painted panel is gradually unfolded, the corresponding verses are sung, creating a synthesis of visual art, oral narration, and musical performance. This integrated mode of presentation transforms Patachitra into an effective medium of public communication, capable of disseminating health awareness while simultaneously offering emotional reassurance and ethical guidance. Thus Swarna Chitrakar's covid patachitra thus illustrates how a centuries-old folk tradition can respond creatively to contemporary global challenges. By combining indigenous artistic conventions with modern public health messages, the artist redefines Patachitra as a living and evolving performative practice that not only preserves cultural heritage but also actively participates in social education, humanitarian advocacy, and community resilience during times of crisis.

IV. ANALYSING THE TRANSITION FROM MYTHOLOGY TO MODERNITY

Broadly speaking, Bengali Patachitra may be understood through two principal visual formats: the Chauko Pat (single-panel painting) and the Jorano Pat (narrative scroll painting). The majority of Chauko Pat traditionally depicts episodes derived from Hindu mythology, Mangal Kavya literature, and the legends of Muslim saints and pirs. In contrast, the narrative scroll (Jorano Pat) is inherently explanatory in nature, unfolding a story through a sequential arrangement of painted panels accompanied by oral performance. Consequently, this form has proved particularly effective in communicating not only



mythological narratives but also social issues, historical events, and natural disasters. Natural calamities such as floods, tsunamis, cyclones, and other environmental crises have repeatedly appeared as important themes in contemporary narrative scrolls. These events are not merely documented as historical incidents; rather, they are interpreted through the symbolic language of Bengali folk imagination. In representing both social injustice and natural disasters, Patuas frequently employ mythological and supernatural metaphors that render complex realities more accessible to popular audiences. A notable example is the widespread use of Yama Pat, in which Yama, the Hindu god of death, presides over the moral judgement and punishment of wrongdoers. Within these scrolls, perpetrators of social crimes including dowry-related violence, bride murder, and sexual assault—are often depicted undergoing severe punishments in the afterlife. Such visual representations reflect not only traditional religious beliefs but also the ethical and social position adopted by the Patuas, who use their art to condemn injustice and reinforce moral values within society. This tendency is also evident in the work of Swarna Chitrakar. The inclusion of such contemporary events illustrates the capacity of Patachitra to function as a dynamic medium of social commentary, adapting traditional visual conventions to address issues of justice, violence, and collective public consciousness.

V. CONCLUSION

In this sense, the role of Patachitra and the Patuas closely resembles that of the traditional bard, who communicates collective experiences through a synthesis of visual imagery, music, symbolism, and narrative performance. By integrating painting with oral storytelling and song, the Patuas have elevated Patachitra beyond the status of a conventional folk-art form, transforming it into a comprehensive medium of cultural expression and public communication. Although its origins are deeply rooted in religious and mythological traditions, the thematic scope of Patachitra has expanded considerably over time. Contemporary Patachitra engages not only with sacred narratives but also with a wide range of social concerns, political developments, environmental issues, and natural disasters. In doing so, it has evolved into a living cultural practice that documents, interprets, and critiques the realities of the society in which it is produced. The ideals articulated through Patachitra are not confined to the experiences of a particular occupational or social group, such as peasants or labourers; rather, they address the collective concerns of society as a whole. Just as natural disasters transcend boundaries of class, caste, religion, ethnicity, and region, the messages conveyed through Patachitra possess a similarly universal relevance. Its visual narratives and performative presentations communicate values of social responsibility, resilience, empathy, and collective consciousness that resonate across diverse communities. Consequently, Patachitra should not be understood merely as a rural folk tradition or a repository of cultural heritage. Instead, it represents a dynamic and evolving performative medium whose appeal extends beyond geographical, social, and cultural boundaries. Through its unique combination of image, music, and oral narration, Patachitra continues to engage audiences across generations, reaffirming its enduring significance within both local communities and the broader discourse of contemporary visual and performative culture.

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