

A Discourse on Patachitra Art with narratives and songs in religious and cultural Scenario of West Bengal.

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ABSTRACT: India, with its colonial history and contemporary postcolonial culture offers an elaborate arena for the interpretation of the Patachitra art form of different states- Odisha, Bihar, Jharkhand and most importantly west Bengal. Although through the rise of Edward Said's "Orientalism", it was India which first exercised literary influence on the west, similarly Indian Rural Cultures like patachitra, miniature painting, pottery and other crafts have spread on a global scale. Especially the patachitra of west Bengal with its ethnographic reflections is like to leave a permanent and positive mark on the world. In some historical narratives, miscellaneous studies are conceptualized to reveal the significance of the Patachitra art of Bengal, particularly the Patachitra of East and West Medinipur.

Keywords: Postcolonial culture, ethnographic, orientalism and Patachitra

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" Culture is a means of communication, language carries culture and culture carries , particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and places in the world."(Thiongo P-16)

The kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiongo in his canonical essay ' Decolonising the Mind: the politics of Language in African Literature (1986) precisely explains the co-existence of language, culture and communication. Culture and language are intimately connected to each other. Patachitra art form is supposed to be the byproduct of the indistinguishable relationship of language and

culture.Patachitratradition in Indian socio-cultural scenario is the most significant platform where various modes of communication have merged including visual messages, oral traditions and music. It portrays nature, society and culture with narratives of social transformation, migrations and socio-political and religious reflections through the folk songs. And their identity as Pataus belongs to one particular culture and ethnicity. In this discourse of identity formation, it is often associated with the idea of self conception and self perception. So the term cultural identity obviously refers to an individual sense of self derived from formal or informal membership in a group which transmit and inculcate knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes and ways of life.

In this perspective, it is noteworthy to mention the ideas expressed in " **Modernity An Introduction To Modern Societies**" edited by the Jamaica-born British Marxist sociologist, cultural theorist Stuart Hall who explores some questions about the cultural identity and a crisis of identities. Cultural identity is passing through some transformations. It is shifting from the individual consciousness to collective identity and social identity. The concept of collective identity was first introduced by Freud in his essay Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego(1921). Freud argues that the individual is always a part of a group. It is also important to note that when a given group is formed , no matter whether it is an ethnic group , a nation or just a crowd the individuals behave uniformly to tolerate the peculiarities of the members of the group and feel themselves to be equal. The difference between social and cultural identity could be made much easier, if the first is related to society while the second is used to refer to culture. So the artists of Patachitra art form consists of a collective identity of a specific culture in West Bengal. The 'Pataus' together form a cultural identity that is highly significant to prove

existence in the world of globalization and commercialization.

Therefore, language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experiences in history, values and aesthetics that is quite interestingly visible in the creative works of Paatachitra art form. The choice of language and the use of language is important to identify the definition in relation to the entire universe. Thiongo argues that language has dual character. It is actually a medium of communication and a carrier of culture. The Patachitra, a traditional and mythological heritage of West Bengal is a specific culture which is transmitted through language in its universality and as the language of a specific community with specific history. Every patachitra in Bengal has a song connected to it, which the artist sings during the performance of unfurling the patachitra. The language of their 'patuasangeet' is generally indigenous ethnic languages of different parts of West Bengal. The local languages of the Pataus reflects the identity of the bengali artists with their cultural heritage.

In this cultural formation, the patachitra is one of the most integral parts not only in west Bengal but also in India. The Patachitra well-known for its distinctive play of color, is a traditional folk art of Bengal that has been in existence for many centuries. It is the world's first attempt to create motion pictures. There are different ideas about the dates of ancient 'patas' but it has been indicated on the basis of historical themes connected with the patua songs. It dates back to the pre-pala period from the days of Mohenjodaro to the 9th century A.D. is also interesting to note that this patachitra folk art is still practiced in some small villages of Medinipur, Bankura, Purulia etc. Although in some Buddhist literature, there is reference of 'pata' in the 1st century A.D. The word, pata is derived from the Sanskrit word 'patta' which means a piece of cloth. Pata or pot as pronounced in Bengali means a canvas on which picture/illustration are made. The painting is called 'patuas'. Patuas don't just paint; they also sing as they display the painting to the audience.

Dating back to the 12th century, the patachitra was actually regarded iconic art/paintings of the local deities of Odisha. Puri Shree Jagannath temple is predominantly decorated with the galleries of the patachitra of Sri Jagannath. It is important to note that not only in Odisha but also in the different states of India the patachitra was emerging fluently to express the reality as well as the mythological narratives of the Hindu, Muslim, and Christian ideology. Especially the small villages in Paschim Medinipur people use

this spectacular art form with songs to express their existence and cultural identity. Patachitra of West Bengal is generally classified in different types like Durga Pot, Tribal Patachitra, Medinipur Patachitra and Kalighat Patachitra. The themes of their painting is mostly cultural, mythological, religious, folk lore and socio-political. Most significantly, the religious patachitra of West Bengal covers the narratives of Hindu epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata and it also relates the Hindu God and goddesses Radha Krishna, Chaitanya, Kali, Lord Shiba,. Most popular of this patachitra is Bengali folklore of Manasa Mangol, Chandi, Behula and Lakhinder.



Figure 1 radha-krishna with sakhies patachitra of Midnapore.

Traditionally patuas were men who were accompanied by their women partner in several stages; but in recent times women have come forward to show their talents as patta artists. This tradition of the 'chitrakar' is believed to have been inherited from the family in the form of sketch book over the generations and cherished it as a sacred precious profession. Although earlier this heritage was a man's domain, now the women play active role in unfurling the patachitra. The women are mainly involved in the perpetuation of this beautiful art from preparation of ingredients to the performance with song. Apparently it was man who sang the song of adroit craft, then woman appeared to sing the song and lead the visual representation of the patachitra. For instance, patua artist Moyna Chitrakar of Nirbhayapur in Paschim Medinipur has done the illustration for the graphic novel, 'Sita's Ramayana' by Samhita Arni - a Bangaluru based writer.



Figure -2. It is portrayed by Moyna Chitrakar of Nirbhayapur in Pachim Medinipur.

The power of love to acquire hope and overcome different obstacles is the gist of the great epic poem Ramayana, written in Sanskrit in 300 B.C. Rama's mission to reunite with his princess, Sita, is the subject matter of the classic Ramayana and Ramapopulated by monkeys and endangered by shape-shifting demons ventures to hell and back. Told from a female perspective, this graphic novel is replete with Hindu wisdom and charms from beginning to end. Moyna Chitrakar superbly illustrates the narratives of Ramayana in the Patua scroll painting tradition. Even they are invited abroad to show their talent through some exhibitions of their creative works narrating the social, cultural and religious sides of West Bengal.



Figure -3 Chouko pat on popular folklore of Manasa Mongalkavya by Swarnachitrakar 2018.

This Patuchitradescribes a most significant and popular folklore of Bengal, Manasa Mongal Kavya Goddess Manasa, goddess of snakes is considered to be one of the most powerful goddess in Bengal. The narrative of Manasa Mongal begins with the dilemma of the merchant Chand Sadagar and ends with Chand

Sadagar appearing as an ardent devotee of Manasa Mongal although he was a worshipper of Lord Shiva. This story is vividly shown with the visual representation while performing a song or Patua Sangeet.

There are three types of Pater Gaan based on the difference of regional, cultural, religious and mythological stories. This kind of lyrical drama is composed of the Krishnilila, Gouranglila, Ramlila, Shib-Parbotiilila etc. is called Lila kahini. Panch Kalyani type is another type of music that is not based on any specific story or adaptation. It has many sense of sundry gods and goddesses. So it's called Pancha Kalyani, an amalgamation of various stories. Gopalan or Cattle farming story is another category of Patua Sangeet. It is quite obvious that the songs narrate the religious and cultural perspectives of regional people in West Bengal.

In the volume titled Art and Nationalism in Colonial India (1850-1922), Partha Mitter identifies two clear periods of art production in colonial Bengal. He places the first period within the time frame of 1850-1900 and demonstrates it by the introduction and absorption of Renaissance naturalism in India. Then between the years 1900-1922 there appeared the counterpoint during which a cultural nationalism emerged with orientalist groups in Bengal. Surprisingly the impact of European art tradition in India created a wave of reaction in the Indian world of artistic expression with Bengal school of painting as led by Abanindranath Tagore. Most amazingly apart from this western impact of arts, the Patuchitra emerged as a unique creation of a distinctly Bengal identity through art. Between 1929-1940 at the verge of the nationalist movement in Bengal Gurusaday Dutt in British India gathered sundry folk artifacts across the rural regions of Bengal including the Patuchitra, a cloth based indigenous art form and a living tradition. These collective items of artifacts are stored at Gurusaday Museum in Calcutta.

It is interesting to note that before British colonialism and before Islamic Invasion, the rural cultures of India like 'patuas' and other numerous art forms were practiced in the villages of Bengal and this practice of patuas had remained relatively unchanged for centuries. Traditionally Patuas worked by travelling from village to village with painters of epic stories engraved on scrolls. In each village they would sing songs narrating the stories on canvas while showing their talents and creating a dynamic oral tradition. The subjects of their painting were predominantly religious in nature and both Hindu and Muslim tales were depicted- most importantly the famous parts of Ramayana and the lives of popular Islamic saints. At this period, their

objective was not to sell their work. Instead they earned their bread from the donations for their performances.

The ancient pats mostly were painted on palm leaves, though pre-19th century patuas created their own scrolls in the process connecting strips of paper end to end to achieve the length of the scroll taking up to a week to finish. Gradually the patachitra in the late 19th century began to move in the cities. So we can say that, patachitra, a primary example of Indian rural culture especially rural folk art has as much to do with the individual talent and vision of the artist especially the women artists with honors and respect. We need to make out that patachitra is both the living work of modern day artists and also a way of serving historical precedent. Development of Patachitra in the Post-Colonial Bengal: After the British colonial power, the Bengali patuas in the 19th century Calcutta set in motion with evolving relationship between folk culture and Indian nationalism. The patachitra's fight for survival and its existence as a symbol of Indian rural culture was a major issue to brood over seriously. Although there was the British socioeconomic influence on India, patachitra gradually settled around Kolkata kalighat temple. Instead of travelling from village to village, they displayed their patuas at kalighat. With the modernization of our civilization the oral element of pats diminished, for without scrolls singer had little need for their oral tradition

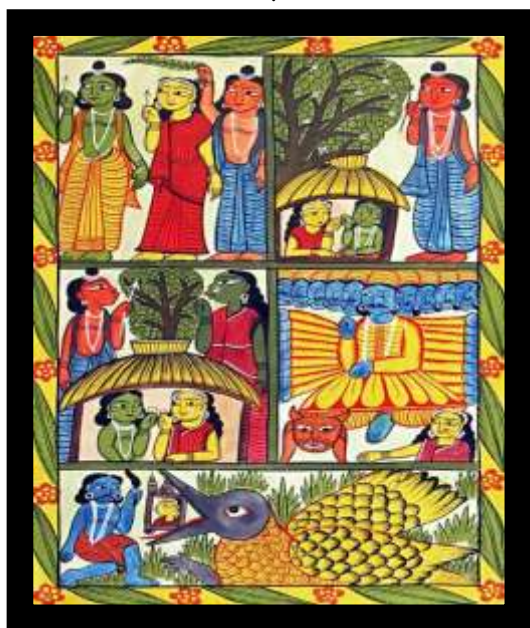


Figure-4 stories of Ramayana (kalighat painting- water color on paper) .

The folk traditions and morals of the rural immigrants now clashed with the increasing influence of European life style on the rich residents of the city. Its subtle influence put in place an artistic hierarchy in the minds of educated Bengali with English art at top distracting them from the work of their countrymen. During the post- independent phase, in the transformation of the patachitra, those who felt the fear of losing Indian Culture due to British colonial power would soon use folk art as a tool for elite nationalistic self-determination, setting in the motion of culture of patronage that would support the folk art into 21st century. In post-modern society the t-shirts and umbrellas are printed with the style of patuas artist paintings.



Figure-5 Tribal patachitra Bengal from joy roychoudhury's web log.

This patachitra is inspired by the aboriginal life and culture in West Bengal. Tribal people also moved forward to show their talent of artistic representations with their tribal culture and religion. Aboriginal life was once upon a time highly marginalized in the society but later on they appeared to be independent and powerful community that is economically, socially and culturally enriched. In various consumerist market the patachitra on indigenous culture and community is in high demand showing the existential survival of this artifacts in West Bengal.

At the beginning the 'patuas' make brilliant use of eco-friendly colors by collecting them from leaves, fruits, flowers, plants, trees and other natural elements. As example, they extract saffron from lotkon leaves, blue from Aparajita flowers, brown from segun tree etc.

Another different and dynamic style that falls under the title of patachitra , is the work of the

jadupatuas from the santal tribe, the largest tribal community in India. Jadu pats generally depicted the tribal origin stories as well as scenes from marriage ceremony to different festivals. Jadu painters lack the vibrant color of other patuas. Yet they are incredibly important to the spiritual life of their community beyond the story tellers. On some festive occasions, they displays the paintings of sundry recurring topics of Ramayana and Mahabharata and even the paintings of the very current issues like 26/11 in Mumbai and Covid-19 pandemics. Etc.



Figure -6 It is done by Swarna Chitrakar of Pachim Medinipur about Covid19.

Side by side they begin to represent the patachitra on the theme of 9/11 in USA.



Figure-3 Swarna Chitrakar's Patachitra on 9/11.

Chitrakars of West Bengal covers a lots of social issues like Tsunami, child marriage, HIV/AIDS, trafficking of children, Covid-19, 9/11

attacks through their patachitra and self-composed patuasangeet.

So it is an ancient form of artistic expression that portrays 'narrative art' in the form of paintings. This cultural tradition of singing Bengal patachitra is astonishingly now cherished and people find a renewed interest in this motion picture of Patachitra in West Bengal.

There are only few scope of how patuas are making a way to revitalize themselves through art in 21st century. By re-learning their own past they are emerging tradition and use it as an inspiration to fuel their art for future. As globalization in India progress, the balance between reflection on the past and questioning the future will be crucial in keeping folk art alive. But this folk art intimately connected with the cultural heritage of a community. It is also about the health and economic solvency of rural Indian artisans in the age of neo-colonialism. But now a days the artistic Patuas painting have become popular across social boundaries and to everyone from poor to the British elite. Western cultures purchased them as the way of possessing the authenticity of the East and in particular as Orientalist painting. Thus, this paper is trying to exhibit the development of rural culture particularly patachitra folk art with its emerging scenario in India. A sincere endeavor is made by the government of India to protect the cultural values of this kind of arts form. It is also important to note that the Ministry of Rural Development, a branch of the government of India is entrusted with the objectives of speeding up the socio-economic development of rural India by akshata Mokashi.

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