

The *Patuas* of Medinipur and the Government in a Globalised Context

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Abstract: *This paper discusses the lot of patuas of the south-western part of West Bengal (the undivided district of Medinipur). These scroll painters or chitrakaras are professional artists (craftsmen) by caste, now in straitened conditions. Both the Central and State Governments attempt to eradicate their poverty. This paper investigates the effect of governmental action and how these artists have fared in a post-colonial era, especially in a situation of commercialized cash economy in a globalised world.*

Key Words: *Chitrakaras, Medinipur, Development, Craftsmen, Government, Globalisation*

Introduction

The Indian economy, in the pre-colonial period¹, consisted largely of isolated and self-sustaining rural communities on the one hand and on the other, towns which, although were seats of administration, had their own systems of commerce and handicraft. The ancient Bengali community of the *patuas*² or *chitrakaras* is believed to belong to the nine-caste guild (*Nabasakh*³) but became outcaste in the 12th century.

According to scholars, *pata* painting may have existed even during the pre-historical period (Mahenjodaro and Harappa, c.2500 BCE-1500 BCE). Some believe that the word *pata* may have a non-Aryan or Austro-Asiatic origin. According to *Buddhaghosha*, Gautama Buddha admired *Charanachitra*, a primitive form of *pata* painting. An interesting account of the display of *jamapatta* 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. It is said that during the Pala and the Sena eras, folk painters refused to follow the traditional method of painting (*Shastriya riti*); as a consequence they were enlisted within the group of *Nabasakh*. Brahminical exploitation forced them to take to Islam in the period of Turko-Afgan political and social expansion in Bengal. It is believed that they created *Gazipata*⁴ to aid the spread of Islam. Hence, it is easy to see why and how their art assimilated both Hindu and Islamic cultural styles. This commonalty is reflected in their ceremonial rituals related to birth, marriage, and death. Indeed, every *patua* of Medinipur or Bengal has two names, one Hindu and one Islamic.

The Patuas in the modern age

Whatever the lot of the *patuas* may have been in the past, the modern era seems to have affected them adversely. About their present condition, it has been commented that '[they] are poor and wretched having no or little cultivable land.

They live a hand to mouth existence with their low income. They have a vagrant gypsy nature and migrate from one place to another in quick succession. Females make dolls and toys, reeds and brooms during spare times, and by selling those along with glass bangles, alta (lac-dye), cheap cosmetics and fancy goods among women in markets and fairs they subsidise their family income to sustain themselves.’⁵

Ever since independence, the Government of India has tried to uplift the position of *patuas*, along with other rural artisan classes all over India, through different projects under the Ministry of Handicrafts. In this context, we may remember the contribution of Smt. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay⁶, the Founder Patron of the Crafts Council of India (1976). She was also the first President of the World Crafts Council, Asia Pacific Region, and a member of UNESCO. Smt. Chattopadhyay, the doyenne of the craft renaissance movement in India, was responsible for changing the cultural perspective of post-independence India and resurrecting its disappearing art and craft forms. The Department of Micro & Small Scale Enterprises & Textiles was also formed in West Bengal in the late 1950s. Moreover, District Industrial Centres were also formed in every district of West Bengal. But the poverty of the scroll painters of the state remains unchanged. In the early 1990s a woman scroll painter, Jharna Chitrakar, depicted their lot through a *patua sangeet* called ‘Patuader Gramer Jibon Kahini’:

Suno suno sorrbojono kori nibedon.

Potuder graamer kahini koribo bornon.

Bhagae thakile kosto ke khondate pare.

Potuaader bosot baadri sorkari khaal dhaare.

Ki dukkhe katay din tulona taar naai.

Bhebe bhebe aami kintu bhaabte paari naai.

Bhaabbo koto obiroto sunun sorrbojon.

Peter modhye onno na pay ei holo potuder jibon.

Sukh bolte pelaam na haay duksher jibon.

Oti koste din chole potuder jibon.

Potuaa ghore jonmo moder korilen bidhata.

Sukher jonno aamora ghuri ei kolikata.

Grame gonje pot dekhaai mora dukkhe jibon kaate

Sesob kothaa bolle dadago praanta kende uthe.

Ordho din paai na khete kshudhay din kaate.

(Interview with Jharna Chitrakar⁷, Hobichawk, 06.9.2012)

It is interesting to note that Gurusaday Dutta's poem 'Patua' of the late 1930s and Jharna Chitrakar's 'Patuader Gramer Jibon Kahini' describe the tragic story of poor Bengali *patuas* in a similar manner; it is obvious nothing changed for them in the period between the 1930s and the 1990s.

Government initiative

In 1999, the Ministry of Rural Development of the Government of India restructured the numerous poverty alleviation programmes and introduced the new self-employment programme called *Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY)*,⁸ which is implemented through the Self Help Groups (SHGs)⁹. The SHGs have been the focal point of rural credit, self-employment programmes, and poverty alleviation in India since the early 1990s. In the process, not only both the Central and State Governments, but different NGOs too have extended their helping hands towards the *potuas* of Bengal.

These marginal artisan class people belong to different SHGs in their villages, the important among them being 'Patua Chitralya'. This SHG of ten male and female members is led by Shyamsundar Chitrakar. The names of other members are as follows: Yakud Chitrakar, Mamata Chitrakar, Prabir Chitrakar, Laila Chitrakar, Rahim Chitrakar, Madhu Chitrakar, Purna Chitrakar, Gulsan Chitrakar, Joibul Chitrakar et al. Moreover, other SHGs namely 'Jagarani', 'Ma Monosha',

‘Pirbaba’, ‘Zorano Pat’, ‘Gazibaba’ ‘Olabibi’ and ‘Najrul So-Sahayak Group’ play important roles for their economic development. It is to be noted that exclusively women Self Help Groups are also found at Naya village of Paschim Medinipur. In this context we may discuss about ‘Patua Mahila Unnayan Samity’ which was formed in 1998. The group, led by Ayesha Chitrakar, comprises of 15 woman members. They are: Swarna Chitrakar, Rani Chitrakar, Ayesha Chitrakar, Yumuna Chitrakar, Moyna Chitrakar, Radha Chitrakar, Manimala Chitrakar, Rubela Chitrakar, Guljan Chitrakar, Snehalata Chitrakar, Meena Chitrakar, Joba Chitrakar, Rukmini Chitrakar and Putul Chitrakar et al. Among them Swarna Chitrakar and Rani Chitrakar are scroll painters of national and international repute. The account of this group, financially very sound, is with the Maligram branch of Bangya Gramin Bikash Bank.

All Self Help Groups of *patuas* produce different consumer goods or household commodities with a touch of their traditional style of painting. They create bags, pen-stands, ash-trays, umbrellas, shoes, sarees, and curtains. Before the formation of such SHGs the condition of the scroll painters was quite miserable. They used to eke out a living by displaying their scroll paintings door to door mainly in the rural areas. In return they collected paddy or rice from households; but that was hardly enough for a decent living. Therefore, they had to take different occupations e.g. snake-charming, rickshaw-pulling, masonry, mat-making, agriculture labour and so

on – the reason why many *patua* establishments went out of existence. This is attested to by Sudhangshu Sekhar Roy in the article ‘*The Artisan Castes of West Bengal and their Craft*’ in *The Tribes and Castes of West Bengal* edited by Ashok Mitra.

In an important move, in 1984, the Indian government not only recognized this traditional art, but did so through a female painter. A woman *patua* artist, Gauri Chitrakar, was honoured with the President’s Award. Gauri had learned to paint after the death of her husband and began performing later at folk exhibitions and markets. *Patua* art is a multifaceted craft that is only practiced as a primary means of livelihood if the *patua* artisan manages to earn enough to live off of it. The women’s trajectories show that some, not all, have been quite successful at managing *patachitra* art and business. Swarna, Rani, and Manimala Chitrakar were the three Naya women painters who performed with *patachitras* in a few universities on the occasion of the North American premiere of the documentary *Singing Pictures*.¹⁰ In this context the role of women *patua* as *traditional* artisans has significance: after independence they could emerge as performer, painter, and seller.

In regard to sustainable development¹¹ of *patuas* not only Self Help Groups but different other activities of the Government are also important. Nowadays, the growing retail industry, fashion and luxury market, demand for green production,

and potential for e-commerce have created new opportunities for developing a vibrant craft economy. As a result, income opportunities of artisanal communities like scroll painters (*patua*), potters (*kumbhakar*), metal workers (*kansakar*), and wood carvers (*sutradhar*) have increased many-fold. So, the globalization of the craft generates more employment in this sector. The craft sector is economically important from the point of low capital investment, high rate of value addition, and high potential for export and foreign exchange earnings for the country.

‘...When the individual or society feels destabilized, unhinged, disoriented... When [people] undergo rapid industrialization, becoming a part of a globalizing world, and find strange people living in their midst and cannot rely on unspoken conventions to regulate their relations with them...they ask themselves who they are, how they are changing and what they wish to become.’¹² Visual culture is an important way to distinguish one group of people from another. It provides livelihood for its practitioners and it has been passed down for generations. In India, globalization in rural life is frequently regarded as a sort of unchanging cultural supremacy, a residual home for cultural uniqueness to assuage the anxiety produced by the idea of losing cultural heritage in globalised urban centers.

In the post-colonial era, the roles of both central & state Governments and NGOs for the economic uplift of the *patuas* are important. In the remote past the *patuas* served the rolled up paintings (scroll) for theatrical performances and not

for objects of commercial sale. Singing and painting were the hereditary caste occupations of *patuas*, a part of Bengali rural oral culture. 'Functioning as both entertainers and educators, they wandered from village to village during festive times of the year seeking out patrons to support their crafts.' When craftsmen like the *patuas* entered into a cash economy, they began gradually to incorporate new themes and motifs of a social nature into their largely mythological repertoires, adding journalism to their multi-talented skill set. After the 1970s they began to collaborate prominently with various outside agencies to propagate particular messages associated with modernity and development.

The first *potua* workshops were held at Naya in 1986 and 1991. During this period, the Handicrafts Board of West Bengal attempted to infuse new life into what was perceived by urban elites to be a dying tradition of folk art. 'According to one observer, women, who previously had no formal role in the performance tradition, attended and welcomed the opportunity to learn the trade of their husbands and fathers.'¹³ In 1992, the NGO, Crafts Council of West Bengal, organised a one-month workshop in Kolkata to train impoverished artisans in new techniques, with a view to revitalizing their tradition. As a result, a number of new forms of the tradition emerged, such as painting non-narrative motifs and patterns on pots, lampshades, t-shirts, and other alternative materials for commercial purposes.

In September 2013, a partnership agreement was made by the Government of West Bengal in the Department of Micro and Small Scale Enterprises & Textiles (DMSSE&T) with UNESCO, New Delhi, to develop 10 rural craft hubs in the state, covering 3000 families traditionally skilled in craft traditions like *Sitalpati*, *Madurkathi*, Terracotta, *Patachitra*, *Dokra*, wooden masks, wooden dolls, *Chhau* masks, clay dolls and *Kantha* embroidery. The key components of this soft intervention are capacity-building of handicraft artists, providing direct market linkage access and creating exchange-collaboration opportunities with State, National and International artists/art lovers. Capacity-building of handicraft artists' communities will strengthen their technical, business and life skills. National and international market linkage will help to achieve growth and sustainability of business. Exchange and collaboration will help in developing exposure leading to innovations.

The Government of West Bengal has set up 'Rural Craft Hubs'¹⁴ at Naya, Pingla, for the development of *patuas* of Medinipur. Such intervention may help in several ways:

- a) Promotion will help the artisans (like *patuas*) to get 'identity' and evolve as destinations.

- b) Rural festivals will create local ‘recognition’, attract outsiders to the place, develop new partnerships including media, and will also benefit the larger communities around the craft villages.
- c) The aim is to create increased awareness on the handicraft hubs in the global market.

The Government of West Bengal has taken some promotional programmes for development and survival of craft heritage of Bengal. The Directorate of Micro and Small Scale Enterprises¹⁵ is the main promotional body and works as a facility-provider for the development of this sector. The District Industry Centres (DICs), located at all districts, render the promotional services for development of Handicrafts at district, block, and village levels. For the benefit of the handicraft artisans the Government has taken initiatives for issuance of ‘Artisan Photo Identity Card’, ‘Artisan Credit Card’ and the health card, ‘Rajiv Gandhi Shilpi Swastha Bima Yojona’. Those facilities are availed by a large number of *patuas* of both the districts of Purba & Paschim Medinipur.

The Government has taken many development projects besides the formation of SHGs. The District Industries Centre issue Identity Cards for the *patuas*. The Department of Micro & Small Scale Enterprises & Textiles of the Government of West Bengal has also organised Skill Development programmes of six months duration for the artisans and given stipend amounting to Rs.750 to every

participant in the programme. Moreover, many handicrafts fairs are organised both at the national and state levels, at New Delhi, Chandigarh, Bengaluru, Garbi etc. Zohoran Chitrakar and Rahim Chitrakar of Naya, Pingla, participated in the Garbi Fair, 2014 and their business amounted to Rs.50000 (according to K. D. Banerjee, an employee of The Department of Micro Small & Medium Enterprises & Textiles (DMSME) of the Government of West Bengal. In West Bengal, many Handicrafts fairs are organised by the Department of Micro and Small Scale Enterprises & Textiles (DMSME) of the Govt. of West Bengal at Kolkata, Burdwan, Purba Medinipur and Paschim Medinipur. Kolkata and Burdwan fairs are running successfully for 32 and 13 years respectively. It is learnt from the aforesaid department that 130 and 42 *patuas* participate in Kolkata and Burdwan fairs respectively. The number of *patuas* of the district of Purba Medinipur who participated in the West Bengal State Handicrafts Fair in 2011 and 2014 were 75 and 125 respectively. For this purpose the second class train fare, bus fare and Rs.75 as Daily Allowance were given to each participant *patua* from the state exchequer of West Bengal. In case of participation in fairs outside West Bengal the rate of D.A. is Rs.100. The Government of India too has taken different development programmes for artisans. It organized a design development programme and as a result, *patuas* of Medinipur could spread their artistic activities of different types of commercial products like t-shirts, sarees, salwar-

kurtas, shoes, paper-weights, curtains, table-covers, pen-stands, tea-tables, umbrellas, ashtrays, bags, and wall mats. 'Not surprisingly, in the context of competition that has developed slowly since the introduction of capitalism in rural Bengal during the colonial period, the number of people painting on demand has increased dramatically.'¹⁶ NGOs, like Banglanatak.com, continue working with *patuas* to disseminate schemes that are not always as well-conceived as they should be.

Pata-painting in Medinipur has a long and rich history; yet the advent of commercialisation of scroll-based products emerged only in the last 15 to 20 years. Earlier, Manimala Chitrakar and others of Naya, Paschim Medinipur, were daily labourers. The endeavour to educate the unskilled *patuas* by the Crafts Council of India, NGOs like Banglanatak-dot-com, and the State Government through different workshops is still on. Moreover, the formation of Self Help Groups and the participation of female *patuas* in large numbers have given momentum to the whole of the process. Their participation in the fair at Pingla as well as other national and international fairs and enhancement of the list of commodities they make have given an impetus to *pata* painting of Bengal. In this context, the Design Development Programmes for the artisans organised by both the Handicrafts Commissioner of the Government of India and Micro & Small Scale Industries of West Bengal are very significant. As a result a number of household commodities

e.g. bags, pen-stands, ashtrays, umbrellas, shoes, sarees and curtains are now included in the list of things that their creative style of *pata* painting produces. It seems that sustainable development has finally been achieved in the *patua* settlements of Medinipur. The famous settlement of *patuas*, Naya, of Paschim Medinipur, has got the status of a Heritage Village. The number of *patuas* of Medinipur participating in different workshops, craft fairs, and awareness campaigns is very significantly large.

Patuas today

The ordinary *patuas* of Naya earn approximately Rs.1500 through the Self Help Groups. Those who have no idea about the style and technique of scroll painting and lived hand-to-mouth in other professions, e.g. daily labour, richshaw-pulling, idol-making, and snake-charming have returned to their hereditary profession. The list of the *patuas* of the District Industries Centres of the districts of Purba Medinipur and Paschim Medinipur is very large.

Globalization has resulted in the simple rustic the lives of rural people being changed on account of the influx of advanced technology, commercial entertainment, fusion cultures, and mobile capital. It affects traditional arts and crafts which are produced by rural artisans like the *patuas*, *kumbhakar*s (idol makers), *sutradhar*s (wood carvers) and so on. ‘The *Patuas* faced enormous

problems and failed to compete. Illiteracy made them even more vulnerable exhausting their artistic spirit...the *Patuas* have lived a life of poverty, negligence and deprivation for decades after independence...The art of making *Patachitra* also lacked any specific thrust or policy support from the State Government. Gradually with the passage of time during the 1970s this folk art emerged as a unique unparalleled art form of Bengal to boast of among a new rank of educated audience of urbanity.¹⁷

Conclusion

There is, however, darkness behind an apparent dazzling light. It is very alarming that the concept of globalisation and commercialisation de-constructed uniform folk elements around the world. The *patuas* of Medinipur are no exception. Traditional scroll painting appears demoralised. The length of scroll has diminished, proper panel works of a particular story of a scroll has vanished, musical narratives are not sung in proper way, traditional and proper colour combinations are not found in many cases, vegetable dyes are not used, the ‘workshop products’ or the newly ‘educated’ *patuas* have no proper idea of their glorious hereditary achievements. Urban customers who emerged in the post-colonial period are bored in this type of commercialisation of scroll painting and subsequent decrease in the quality of the products. In this context, the following comment is significant: ‘The artisans are an important section of our society. By

providing us beautifully crafted products, they enhance our aesthetic life. Besides they are significant contributors to our national economy. Our handicrafts have carved out a special niche in both developed and developing countries.’¹⁸

Endnotes:

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1. The period of time before colonization of region of territory
2. Scroll Painters. They make different types of patas. These types are: (1) the *lorano* or *latai pata* i.e. a scroll or rolled up paintings on a single continuous theme arranged vertically in rectangular panels or cages and gradually unfolded, (2) *arelatai pata* i.e. another scroll painting in oblong size which is generally smaller in both the height and breadth and (3) the *chawkosh* i.e. square sized or rectangular paintings.
3. The nine caste-guilds are: a) The Sutradharas, b) The Karmakaras, c) The Tantubayas, d) The Kumbhakararas, e) The Kangsakararas, f) The Swarnakararas, g) The Sankhakararas, h) The Chitrakararas, i) The Malakararas. (see Roy, 1953)
4. Pata on Gazipir-Gazipatas are very popular among Santhals, Bhumis & Bedias of the districts of undivided Midnapore, Purulia & Bankura. It is also in vogue among the Muslims of Kumilla, Faridpur & Barisaal in Bangladesh. Many supernatural incidents of two muslim pirs ‘Satyapir’ & ‘Kalugazi’ have been depicted in Gazipat.

5. *Indigenous People In India*, Midya Dipak Kumar(ed.), Article: *The Indigenous Art form of the Patuas of West Bengal* written by Atul Chandra Bhowmick, Delhi, 2012, P-59.
6. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay (3rd April, 1903 – 29th October, 1988) was an Indian social reformer and freedom fighter. She is most remembered for her contribution to the Indian independence movement; for being the driving force behind the renaissance of Indian handicrafts, handlooms, and theatre in independent India and for upliftment of the socio-economic standard of Indian women by pioneering the co-operative movement. In 1974, she was awarded the Sangeet Natak Academy Fellowship the highest honour conferred by the Sangeet Natak Academy, India's National Academy of Music, Dance & Drama.
7. Wife of 'Pataguru' (teacher) the Late Niranjana Chitrakar, famous scroll painter of Hobichawk, Purba Medinipur.
8. Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY) is a programme launched by the Government of India with a view to providing sustainable income to poor people living in rural areas of the country. The scheme was launched on April 1, 1999. It aims at providing self-employment to villagers through the establishment of self-help groups.
9. Self-help groups are started by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that generally have broad anti-poverty agendas. Self-help groups are seen as instruments for goals including empowering women, developing leadership abilities among poor people, increasing school enrollments, and improving nutrition and the use of birth control. One another goal of the SHG's is the stop exploitation of the women from financial crisis. Many self-help groups, especially in India, under NABARD's 'SHG Bank Linkage' program, borrow from banks once they have accumulated a base of their own capital and have established a track record of regular repayments.
10. Inês Ponte, 'Cosmopolitan impressions From a Contemporary Bengali Patachitra Painting Museum Collection in Portugal'
<http://www.rechercheisidore.fr/search/resource/?uri=10670/1.7ypj09>
11. Sustainable development promotes the idea that social, environmental, and economic progress are all attainable within the limits of our earth's natural resources. Sustainable

development approaches everything in the world as being connected through space, time and quality of life.

12. Parekh, Bhikhu. "Defining India's Identity" *India International Centre Quarterly* 33 (2006): 1-15
13. Korom Frank J. 'Civil Ritual, NGOs, and Rural Mobilization in Medinipur District, West Bengal' *Asian Ethnology*, Volume 70, Number 2- 2011 P-181
14. Department of MSME&T, Government of West Bengal has partnered with UNESCO to unleash the potential of craft sector of the state in terms of employment, enterprises, export and growth. Under this initiative community led and managed Rural Craft Hubs are being developed in ten locations across the state. The project initiated in 2013 targets revitalization of traditional crafts of Bengal as vibrant economic sector thereby ensuring socio-economic inclusion of rural poor by 2016 in tandem with the principles of fair trade.
15. Its Office is at 9th floor of New Secretariat Building, 1 K.S. Roy Road, Kolkata-700001. Its handicraft wing under Joint Director (CDP) is functioning from 4th floor office at 2, Church Lane, Kolkata-700001.
16. Ibid12,P-191
17. Chatterjee Suvapriya, The University of Burdwan, *Crossing the Threshold: Women Patuas of Bengal in Transition*, Chitralkha International Magazine on Art and Design, (ISSN 2231-4822) Vol.3, No. 1, 2013. Available at www.chitralkha.com/v3/n1/03_Women_Patuas_of_Bengal.pdf
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2. <http://www.midnapore.in/festival/pomaya/pot-maya-naya-pingla.html>

