

“Village of Painters”: a Visit to Naya, Pingla

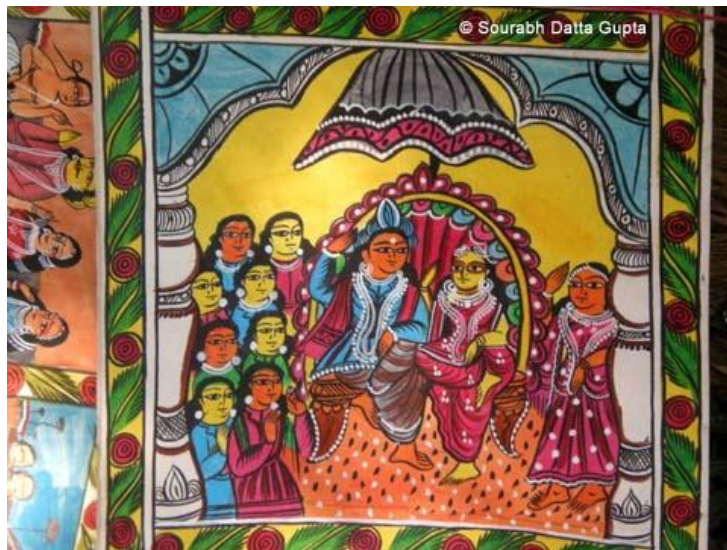
Sourabh Datta Gupta
Independent Researcher

Introduction

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/illustrations are made. The artists are popularly known as *Patuas*; but they are also known as in more respectable term *Chitrakars*, which literally means picture-makers. It is interesting to note that the term has been



adopted as a surname also a caste title. The term ‘Patua’ and ‘Chitrakar’ are used interchangeably, though the artists generally use ‘Chitrakar’ as their surname. Traditionally, patuas were men, who were assisted by their womenfolk in several stages; but in recent times women have come forward to lay their claim as pata artists. For instance, Patua artist Moyna Chitrakar, of Nirbhaypur village in Paschim Midnapore has done the illustration for the graphic novel *Sita's Ramayana* by Samhita Arni, a Bengaluru-based writer.ⁱ



Babal tree, white from Ghusum Mati etc. They like to use bright colours on the pata by applying bold brush strokes for sending their aesthetic appeal effectively.

For their themes the patuas depended traditionally on the Palas from Ramayana, Manasa-Mangala, Behula-Lakhindar etc. One such pata by Jamuna Chitrakar depicts the stories circulated in oral and written form involving the conflict between goddess Manasa and Chand Sadagar.ⁱⁱ But later on modern themes were also incorporated and assimilated into their tradition. It is reported that during the Mughal rule, some of the artists embraced Islam and began new tradition in storytelling. Thus the potuas of Bengal played a major role in popularizing the epics, myths and legends in their own way, thereby educating the mass indirectly.



I had the good fortune to meet Frank J. Korom, who teaches at Boston University and he speaks good Bengali; he has written a book called “Village of Painters”, about an accomplished group of artists who live in Naya, Midnapore. This book respectfully documents their lives and pays a fitting tribute to their work who against formidable odds, continue to practice an ancient vocation.

A Little History

Though many folk art forms – which are our intangible heritage, are dying with the emergence of electronic media, there is one art form which was dying even few years back, has made a remarkable comeback. One such art form is Patachitra. Frank J. Korom has done a monumental work *Village of painters: Narrative Scrolls from West Bengal*, which respectfully documents their lives and pays a fitting tribute to their work who against formidable odds, continue to practice an ancient vocation.ⁱⁱⁱ The Patuas of West Bengal are specializing in the production of painted narrative scrolls (Patachitra) of cloth and the performance of songs to accompany their unrolling - that are comparable to movies –with a series of framed images that form



narratives as diverse as ancient Hindu myths and current events. Not only do these inspired individuals paint their scrolls, they also compose a song for each story they illustrate. In short they are a unique tribe of folk artistes who are painters, lyricists, singers and performers rolled into one. "Traditionally, the unique role of the Patuas," as Scott Rothstein says "was as part teacher, part entertainer."^{iv} These artisans have been plying their trade in this region of India at least since the 13th century and possibly earlier.^v According to another source, "Patachitra has been mentioned in Puranas, Epics, Ancient Literatures and Historical Descriptions. The style of painting is similar to the cave paintings of Mohenjodaro, Harappa and Ajanta. 'Patuas' and 'Chitrakars' have been referred to in literary works dating back to more than 2500 years. Some researchers opine that 'Patashilpa' was originally an art form of the Santhals (tribal community)."^{vi}



Some scholars like to locate patachitra in relation to the rise of Kalighat patachitra during the colonial period when the village patuas settled in the southern part of Kolkata and continue their work following the demands of the times. Connoisseurs and folk art collectors like Gurusaday Dutt--an Indian civil servant of the 1930s traced the continuity between the classical and the folk style and located the Bengal village as the key to the Pan-Indian Art style. But soon the patuas began to face hard times with the beginning of the 20th century and drifted gradually to other professions whereas some of them went back to their villages. It is believed that a large number of them resettled at a village called Naya in the West Medinipur district. They began to

take the title of *chitrakar* or *patua* to specify their caste status.

During 1987-88, the situation was unbearable. However gradually the socio economic conditions of these artists have been showing signs of improvement in the last couple of years with some of them gaining international recognition. Some organizations have been working with many artists of this school, in collaboration with the European Union. It is really shocking what EU can do, our government cannot.

Visit to Naya

I went to Naya (Reach Balichak from Howrah, then 20 minutes by bus) with our team in 2010. Naya is in Pingla block in West Midnapore district which has been able to celebrate the success of local artists in reviving the village heritage, for a mix of art and music in a rural setting. Naya and Chandipur (East Midnapore)) are villages of Potuas/ *Chitrakars* of Bengal. Almost every house here has at least one artist. There are around 53 Potua families in Naya. They have painted their houses with *potochitra* motifs.



During our visit to the village of Pingla, one visible change we witness was in the selection of topics for pot. Here, the artists were added bits of modernity to this art form. Some of them paint not just the divine mischief of Krishna, but also nightmares like 9/11, 26/11, Jnaneswari train carnage, national issues like the Babri Masjid destruction or the tsunami in Southeast Asia in 2004.



We met Robin Chitrakar, the only graduate of the village. We also met Anwar, who won the President's award in 2006. We found his drawing the best of the lot. Later on from newspapers we came to know that

There are artists like Anwar Chitrakar who has managed to sell one of his paintings to the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation for Rs 80,000. Anwar, whose paintings have been showcased at the Harley Gallery in the United Kingdom, recently released a graphic novel about a thousand Kalighat paintings. "Initially I used to sell an 8 by 12 inches painting for Rs 100-150 a piece but now I sell them for Rs 800 a piece on an average. I have also sold paintings for Rs 75,000 to Rs 85,000 a piece depending upon the size of the



painting,” says Anwar.^{vii}



We also saw Swarna and Dukhushyam, well known to many in the artists’ circle in Calcutta. A little secluded is the home of 55-year-old veteran artist Nanigopal’s home, three pots on Jesus Christ hang around his place. Here, pictures depicting tales from Ramayana hang alongside colourful scrolls with hard-hitting social messages like human trafficking. He was showing us the scroll painting of his grandfather which is 120 years old!

Notes

ⁱ Amrita Bose, Move over Rama, Sita wants to speak, <http://www.mid-day.com/specials/2011/jul/310711-Move-over-Rama-Sita-wants-to-speak.htm>

ⁱⁱ The pata can be accessed at http://learningobjects.wesleyan.edu/naya/scrolls/31_manasamangal.html. It also contains songs sung by Snehalata Chitrakar and Mayna Chitrakar.

ⁱⁱⁱ Frank J. Korom, Village of painters: narrative scrolls from West Bengal, Museum of New Mexico Press, 2006. I had the good fortune to meet Frank J. Korom, who teaches at Boston University and he speaks good Bengali.

^{iv} Scott Rothstein’s review of *Village of Painters, Narrative Scrolls from West Bengal* by Frank J. Korom, Folk Art Messenger (Vol. 19, No. 2, Spring/Summer 2007, <http://artfoundout.blogspot.com/2007/07/village-of-painters-narrative-scrolls.html>).

^v Frank J. Korom, Village of painters: narrative scrolls from West Bengal, Museum of New Mexico Press, 2006.

^{vi} Maleek Chitrakar at Saras Mela 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KcKoJaDNBpw>

^{vii} Pooja Sarkar ‘Deft strokes’. *Business Standard*, November 06, 2011.. <http://www.business-standard.com/india/news/deft-strokes/454636/>

Sourabh Datta Gupta is an independent researcher, cultural traveler and documentary photographer. He runs a blog at <http://sourabhdg.blogspot.com>. Email: bomadg@gmail.com
