Crossing the Threshold: Women Patuas of Bengal in Transition

Suvapriya Chatterjee
The University of Burdwan

Abstract
This paper examines the colourful genre of Patachitra capturing its history, ancestry and aesthetics with a special focus on the women patuas and their agency in tracing the trajectory of this art towards modernity.

Keywords: Patachitra, Women Patuas, Modernity.

“Rather try these. These are newer,” (Chitrakar, Hajra) lures Hajra Chitrakar with her exquisite pat-products. Her “newer” products include painted costumes, accessories, key-rings, flower vase, decorative items and puppets. Beside the mosaic of these brightly painted products her fifteen years old daughter, Jyotsna sits scribbling a sketch of Lord Ganesha with extreme attention and care. “Unlike the long folded pats this will be a square pat which looks somewhat like a calendar” (Chitrakar, Hajra), her mother illustrates her daughter’s efforts. She is a female successor of the Chitrakars and its rich cultural past. Chitrakars or Patuas were traditional painter-singers provided with inherent skill, artistic sensibility and practical knowledge of colour preparation and colour mixture practising the art of their ancestors for over thousand years. Their art was a legacy which was inherited by each successive generation. They have been influenced by the classical tales emanating from Indian history and the stories of its enchanting folklores of ancient days transmitted orally across hundreds of centuries. They can be regarded as a folkloric community. Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger defines folkloric community as the one “...that shares both the knowledge of a particular folklore repertoire and the rules by which members of the community...
communicate through those genres.” (Flueckiger 185) They successfully defined themselves with a sense of identification and self-worth through their art that fostered a common cultural consociation. Such folkloric community accommodates several folkloric imaginations within their artistic expression. This paper aims to trace the changes in the configuration of this ethnic community as it gains a control over its own modernity and the significant role of gender in the re-articulation of the traditional Patua population to claim agency over the state’s cultural history.

The Patuas both educated and entertained the rural audiences singing episodes from mythology and displaying pats side by side as they moved from one village to the other. Villagers would gather around the Patuas to listen to their tales as they unfold their patsor painted scrolls displaying one scene after the other. Singing with pats was a community affair of the Patuas; a traditional entertainment marking the identity, the existence, the culture and history of their society. Their pats were props for their performance made out of painting a series of pictures demonstrating a religious or mythological episode with vegetable or organic dye on handmade paper. The pats are generally of two types: jarano pats or the rolled up canvas scrolls and chowko pats or the rectangular calendar like pats.

However, with the growing intensity of forces of globalization alteration entered the life of the rural people through advanced technology, consumer products, commercial entertainment, hybrid cultures and mobile capital. Liberalised trade and increased mobility corroded their plain rustic lives leaving lesser space for the Patuas. The traditional village audiences of the Patuas turned their face away from them in this state of fluctuation. The Patuas faced enormous problems and failed to compete. Illiteracy made them even more vulnerable exhausting their artistic spirit. From then onwards the Patuas have lived a life of poverty, negligence and deprivation for decades after independence. The sophisticated city-dwellers devalued these rural folk painters who found it quite difficult to gain a safe, respectable space for themselves within urban boundaries. 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 1970’s this folk art emerged as a unique unparalleled art form of Bengal to boast of among a new rank of educated audience of urbanity. A vast fascination for pats as visual exotica among the metropolitan elites resulted in the creation of a platform for the Patuas and the urge to
produce more and more *pats*. As the demand for *pats* increased largely women of *Patua* families came forward to participate in the production of *pats*. Malini Bhattacharya writes, “For better or for worse, this transformation of the pat from a performative device to an exhibit has enabled the woman of the *Patua* community to gain more access to the process of production and selling of *pats*.” (Bhattacharya 26) The elder members of the *Patua* community were entrusted with the responsibility of training women. For example Dukhushyam Chitrakar, an aged *patua* of Naya, Pingla, of West Midnapore took initiative for the harmonious and progressive development of innate abilities of women *patuas* and for stimulating a creativeness of their mind which can explore new horizons. He instructed some basic fundamentals but encouraged originality and inventiveness to perceive new bearings and connections. By the conscious endeavor of few such enthusiastic artists women of *Patua* community emerged as new *pat* artists, socially efficient and vocationally self-sufficient.

Karuna Chitrakar speaks, “I have to come to the city every now and then to attend fairs, exhibitions, workshops and seminars. I paint traditional *pats* which deal with the grand subjects of the ancient times. Also I compose new songs on contemporary themes.” (Chitrakar, Karuna) Thus she is found keen to integrate the old with the new. Earlier they concentrated on traditional *pats* that deal with religious stories and folklores. Their songs were composed by male *patuas* and were highly structured. They narrated those tales faithfully without alteration. However, we have the Manasamangal *pat*, Chandimangal *pat*, Sitaharan *pat* in which undertone of feminist voices in fierce contestations with patriarchal superiority can be traced out. Not only these traditional *pats*, we have contemporary *pats* where female *patuas* transcend the narrow space of the “private” to acquire the power of an explicit feminist overtone subverting the patriarchal ethos. Turning away from religious tales and romantic legends *patua* women took up the social problems that beset their own time. Sabera Chitrakar’s *pat* on deforestation shows how the loud din of trade, glare of industries and increase of population have enhanced deforestation even more. It reflects her feminine ecological consciousness and ethics as also the existential symbiosis between community and nature. At present women *patuas*.
are extensively utilized in governmental projects to campaign about environmental consciousness, female literacy, gender discrimination, women’s health and social evils.

A woman *patua* spends about one month designing and painting a single pat. First, the outline of the figure is drawn and then the inner parts between the borders are filled with colours. Next, the borders are finely painted to give the figures a finished look. In case of Patachitra, Nivedita Das writes, “The border of paintings is very much important like that of the central theme.” (Das 250) Floral borders and geometric borders are two types of border that are evident in these paintings. At last, the minute decorations are added in meticulous detail. The use of space is fascinating and layered. The kaleidoscopic arrangement of colours adorns the background beautifully in a warm and endearing way. The figures with their big, comely and simple face delight the senses with their grace and delicacy. *Patuas* use natural colours extracted from herbs and plants. The brushes are made from animal hairs tied on a wooden handle while sap of wood apple or babool plant was used as glue. Nature plays a crucial role in the art of the *Patuas*. Their paintings depict the diverse myriad of flora and fauna in abundance. It reinforces the emotional bonding of the female *patuas* with nature and their recognition that all human and non-human lives are embedded in nature.

In the ever-shifting world scenario the rising generation has not only to be conveyed the techniques and experiences of the older generations but has to make necessary changes in these activities to meet new situations and demands. They must amalgamate the past with the present assimilating all sorts of experiences cultural, domestic, political, social and regional. Patachitra these days has
reached from the local to the global; the art of women *patuas* reflect this trajectory explicitly. It mirrors our times in all its rich changes, flux and fluidity. *Patua* artists are using chemical colours rather than natural colours for its increased stability, bright hues and convenience. Mani Chitrakar says, “Chemical colours give intense uniform colour and blend easily to give variety of colours.” (Chitrakar, Mani) Thus the better-flowing, easily workable chemical colours have surpassed natural colours. They are also easy to carry, much lustrous, available readily and are less expensive than natural colours. A comparative observation of traditional *pats* painted with vegetable dyes and *pats* painted on decorative articles using chemical colours will reveal the difference between the two.

Women *patuas* are also experimenting their art over various other items to bring forth wide array of products. The percentage of their imagination has also grown to a large extent. Contemporary *pats* are not only about décor but also about utility. So, women *patuas* are always trying to create something unique and exceptional in the market that may be appreciated by customers worldwide. They are now painting *pats* over shirts, costumes, dresses,
accessories, key-rings, cards, vases, show-pieces, bags and caps. In order to meet the demands of consumers they are increasingly painting on diverse articles. Presently *pats* on vases and pen-stands have become commonplace. So they are designing patachitrás over mobile covers, lampshades, umbrellas, folders and bookmarks. Patachitra has traversed beyond *pats*.

This continuous flux requires them to constantly upgrade their style and keep learning how to design new items. The fast growing competitiveness among the *patuás* also with other artists has brought about radical changes. “We have to bring changes as customers love variety. They want newer things and we design accordingly keeping in pace with time” (Chitrakar, Hajra), says Hajra Chitrakar. They are ready to be ahead of their competitors by celebrating and promoting creativity and innovation. Bina Chitrakar, a girl in her teens tells as she paints on a fat round bangle, “These (the pat-bangles) are very fashionable and popular among girls I have seen.” (Chitrakar, Bina) She loves to surprise her mother by designing exquisitely new pat-accessories for women. She gains concepts from television shows, magazines and newspapers. She goes to school and has won several prizes for her talent at the district and state level. She blushes to utter those new ideas regarding *pats* that she has in her mind. Thus the coming generation of women *patuás* is well-informed about the changing tastes and latest fashions. With their ceaseless effort Patachitra goes beyond tradition, dogma and static conditions in an ever-shifting society. It has also attracted foreign consumers creating a market abroad. For its brilliant use of colours, creative motifs and original style it has outpaced other forms of art and crafts. Patachitra is no longer just a spectacular display of colours but also utilitarian in its purpose. This transition of Patachitra has uplifted the economic and social status of its artists and has given this dying art a dynamic existence. It has discovered a range of possibilities unrestricted by a limited form bewildering its
lovers. This is a successful synthesis indeed, a fruitful fusion of a traditional style of painting with contemporary elements.

End Notes

All the photographs except the third one are taken by Suvapriya Chatterjee.

1. Dukhushyam is an iconic figure, an age-old experienced patua who is radical many ways, particularly in inspiring women of his community to learn painting Patachitra and composing songs that were done exclusively by men before.

2. Karuna Chitrakar is a female patua artist of Medinipur, West Bengal who has learnt the art of Patua painting from Dukhushyam Chitrakar. She has conquered poverty and hardship by virtue of her art.

3. Hajra Chitrakar is famous for composing excellent pats over contemporary issues like HIV/AIDS, bride burning, water pollution and tsunami.

4. Santal Pat deals with the origins of the Santals, the largest tribal community of India and their concepts of the life and life after death. These pats are found extensively in Purulia and in the north-eastern regions of Bankuradistrict in West Bengal.

5. This photograph has been used by me previously in my documentary film Patua Women in Urban Space: A Dialogue Between Tradition and Modernity directed by me, Manasi Roy Chowdhury and Susmita Chakravorty.

References:


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Suvapriya Chatterjee is currently pursuing Ph.D in English Literature from the University of Burdwan. E-Mail: suva.ju@gmail.com