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# Myths and Folktales in the Patachitra Art of Bengal: Tradition and Modernity

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## Introduction

The *Patachitra* is a traditional performative art from eastern India. Especially a predominant part of traditional media from the present Indian states of Odisha, West Bengal and parts of Bihar and Jharkhand, *Patachitras* are expressed in their original ways and methods, which are different from each other in each of these regions. This variety is reflected in the form of artistic expressions, methods of paintings, mediums used for painting as well as the history that went into making each one of them unique and original in their own specific ways. This paper looks into the *Patachitra* paintings, especially from Bengal, which evolved down the course of history to embody and reflect oral traditions, folktales and mythological stories with various reflections of waves of migrations.

Just like the *Patachitra* traditions, another important section of folk tradition also embodies knowledge about life and lifestyles from yesteryears, folktales. Originating as mere parts of oral traditions, these were scripted and printed through the meticulous collections of various British administrative officials in the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century in Bengal. The reprinted editions of these publications are available in modern times variously by the efforts of Archaeological Survey of India and Anthropological Survey of India.

Thus, on one hand, the intervention of technology helped to preserve a vital section of cognitive reflections. On the other, another important strand of the religious and socio-cultural reflections of life has been preserved through a different mode of traditional media- *Patachitra*. The art form and the stories not only speak of changing identities of migrations, but anxieties and predicaments pertaining to socio-cultural and religious transformations. As the performative art preserves the paintings till date, the stories themselves form an important part of intangible heritage, which are also available variously through books as well as New Media in modern times- preserving history away from the pages of books and journals. As often the pattern of the performative art of the *Patachitra* get transformed in the wake of globalisation into a mere descriptive art in modern times, the stories have also been reduced to simplifications, additions and deletions of once lucid and lengthy local epics. Several important sections pertaining to geographical transformations and migrations form these paintings and stores have also got lost in time; only the visual depictions remain. With a strain of preservation of intangible cultural heritage, on part of several governmental and non-governmental agencies in Bengal, and across India, the

metamorphosis of these traditions has also led to recreating the stories of migration. This paper looks into this aspect of transformation and alteration- as a continuous, subtle symbolism- which has existed throughout both the traditions of *Patachitra* as well as folktales from Bengal and what they embody in modern times. The paper is based on extensive fieldwork across various months from the specific regions of Bankura, Birbhum, Purulia and West Mednipur districts of West Bengal from 2004 through to 2012.

The *Patachitra* form of performative art from Bengal follows a tradition of intangible cultural heritage- which is better expressed as a form of oral tradition which has been around for centuries and been handed down orally from generation to generation. Residing in close geographical proximities, the regions of West Bengal, Odisha, Jharkhand and Bihar all have a tradition of *Patachitra* painting- though each one is separated and distinct from the next with reference to artistic expressions, methods of paintings, mediums used for painting as well as the history that went into making each one of them unique and original in their own specific ways. As the paintings depict a section of history, a similar form of unique expression of history is folktales. Preserving an important part of socio-cultural reflections through time, folktales help to carry an important essence of intangible cultural heritage. Most of these stories have never been scripted and remains to be only part of oral traditions- apart from a few specific ones which were collected and published by the judicious efforts of various colonial administrative officers more than a century ago. The region of Bengal is also home to three important *Mangal Kāvya*s (Benediction poems): *Chandī Mangal Kavya*, *Manasā Mangal Kavya* and *Dharma Mangal Kavya*. This paper specially refers to the folktales from two important *Mangal Kāvya*s- *Manasā Mangal Kavya* and *Chandī Mangal Kavya*- which are also extensively portrayed through *Patachitra* traditions from Bengal. The stories from these two *Mangal Kāvya*s are extensively reflected through books and publications, in a similar manner as the *Patachitra*.

### **The *Patachitra* from Bengal, the *patuas* and their tales of migration**

As the *Patachitra* from Bengal represents an important trend of oral traditions, a vital transformation helped to further the process of transmission in the same way towards the last quarter of 19<sup>th</sup> century- the extensive use of the printing press for collecting and disseminating information from various administrative quarters. In an attempt to collect information about the various socio-cultural, religious and economic activities of India across various geographical regions of the nation- British administrative officers used to collect and print various data pertaining to the people of India. This is also the beginning of the establishment of the Anthropological Survey of India, the Archaeological Survey of India, the Geological Survey of India and other such governmental bodies. As these records started an important trend- for the very first time- officially documenting and mapping the population of India- their availability in modern times adds to the historical knowledge. The reprinted editions of these publications are even available in modern times variously by the efforts of Archaeological Survey of India and Anthropological Survey of India – of the Government of India. Thus, some parts of the oral traditions pertaining to migratory histories have been preserved through the intervention of technology. On the other hand- several others have been preserved through a different mode of traditional

media- *Patachitra*. The art form as well as the songs accompanying the myriad expressions speak of not only changing identities, but anxieties and predicaments pertaining to socio-cultural as well as religious transformations. These stories are preserved till date through the paintings- all of which form an integral part of the living traditions of the region. It is also important to mention that the entry of these stories into the oral traditions have also been a tough challenge on parts of the *Patachitra* painters, locally referred to as *patuas*, *pattidar* or *poto*- and mostly people hailed from Islamic religion. Not being presented as converts into Hindu religion, the *patuas* ideally started to maintain dual identities- with two names, with each resonating the essence of either Hindu or Islam as well as follow the worship of dual religious ideals as well. Such an ideation helped to ease the entry into Hindu households with their performance through *Patachitra* and the narration of folktales from the *Mangal Kāvya*s. Over the years however, the performative art of the *patuas* has got transformed to a mere descriptive art through the selling of the *Patachitras* to interested audiences in modern times, which eliminates the accompanying music and song which describes the painting. On the other hand, the stories from the *Mangal Kāvya*shas also got reduced to mere pictorial depictions of once lucid musical expressions through story books of folktales from Bengal. Several of these songs as well as the stories have also got lost in time; only the visual depictions remain. With a strain of preservation of intangible cultural heritage, as the mere art survives through the benevolent efforts of several governmental and non-governmental agencies in Bengal, and across India, the metamorphosis of the art has also led to recreating the stories of migration. This paper looks into specific stories from *Chandī Mangal Kavya* and *Manasā Mangal Kavya* aspect of transformation and alteration- as an evident and eventual dimension of all cultural expressions and attempts to understand the surviving folktales therein.

The *Mangal Kāvya*s are part of local Puranas- dating between 13<sup>th</sup>- 18<sup>th</sup> centuries from Bengal. Loosely translated into English as *Poems of Benediction*, these consist of religious compositions and narrations representing indigenous deities of rural Bengal, especially keeping with the socio-cultural scenario of Bengal. The significance of the *Mangal Kāvya*s lies in the fact of its amalgamation of local and folk deities with a Vedic or Hindu mythological god or goddess. The narratives are usually written in the form of verses. The three major types of *Mangal Kāvya*s from Bengal consisted of- *Manasā Mangal*, *Chandī Mangal* and *Dharma Mangal*, - and all the three narrate the portrayal of the magnitude of *Manasā*, *Chandī* and *Dharmathakur* respectively. They are considered the greatest among all the native divinities in Bengal. But restraining the accounts of other deities, there are also minor *Mangal-Kāvya*s known as *Shivāyana*, *Kālikā Mangal*, *Rāya Mangal*, *Shashtī Mangal*, *Sītalā Mangal* and *Kamalā Mangal* etc. Each strain is composed by more than one poet or group of poets who are on the whole the worshipper of the god or goddess concerning their verses.

The arts of navigation, boat building and maritime warfare developed in Bengal because of the long rivers and the long seacoast. Bengal carried on a large sea trade mostly through the ancient seaport of Tamralipta. River and sea voyages are often characterised in Bengali folklore and literature, particularly in the *Manasā* and *Chandī* poems. Being situated in the extreme east of India, Bengal served as the connecting land link between the sub-continent, Burma, South China and the Malay Peninsula

and Indo-China. Bengal not only acted as intermediary in trade and commerce but also played an important role in the cultural association between the diverse civilizations of South East and Eastern Asia. An inscription in the Malay Peninsula of the fourth or fifth century A.D. records the gift of a great captain Buddhagupta, who was probably Bengali.<sup>1</sup> Many ancient texts mention Bengal having trading contacts through both land and water with China and Tibet to Java, Sumatra, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Malaysia. Both the stories from the *Mangal Kāvya*s relate to the stories of these trading activities from the region and also speak about the significance of the merchant class. The migrations reflected therein- weaves an important message for the masses e.g. how trade and commerce helped to bridge across geographical, spatial and temporal differences.

As the trading sea-coasts increased, the contemporary touches of history incorporated further elaborate explanations of migrating people as well as geographical displacements of lives. However, what remains interesting about both the stories is the fact that each of them traditionally originated as oral traditions, then being depicted through visual arts and finally scripted down by around 16<sup>th</sup> century AD into *Patachitra* and still later by last quarter of 19<sup>th</sup> century into publications. These are all examples that show life in transitions and migrating from one to another geographical location. It is also important to understand the significant portrayal of the concept of a river amidst such a connotation- which forms an integral part in all the above stories. The concept and symbolism of a river is used to portray transition as well as changes- gradual changes and not rapid. The system of a river also portrays a trend of continuity of life in the new land as people move on in search of new settlements and opportunities and there looms an anxiety of expectations from the new experiences. This is best reflected through the story of Behula-Lakkhinder of *Manasā MangalKāvya*. The story of Dhanapati of *Chandī Mangal Kāvya*, on the other, too, uses the symbolism of river to portray the long length of time that lapses in its due course- till the end of the story. It is also a symbolism, especially relevant for a wandering merchant community, which states a promise of future glorified prospect, which is reflected through the references of the deity- Kamaleya Kamini in the story of Dhanapati. Thus, the maximum portrayal of the river-system of Bengal (especially the Ganges and Padma rivers of undivided Bengal)- was famous in ancient times for river and sea crafts.

Reading Bengal's folklore, one has to understand that much of the contemporary oral traditions were re-textualised as part of contemporary history of the vernacular public sphere in light of events of the medieval period. Such attempts of en-textualization and re-contextualization add an essence of contemporary touch to historical value. Though the original stories of both *Manasā* and *Chandī MangalKāvya*s are much detailed with several characters and smaller stories woven within the bigger framework, the adaptation and portrayal of both is a medieval touch and probably thus, dates back to 15<sup>th</sup> century Bengal, especially patronised by local nobilities and kings of the regions under study. Thus, much of contemporary Bengal's oral lore has been re-contextualized from popular medieval texts like the *Mangal Kāvya*s and these are still enacted in villages. New forms of oral compositions as well as more recent publications are modelled on the poetic language that was formed through these texts and their subsequent modern adaptations.

In the essence of representing history, the stories also helped to convey an important message of geographical re-locations and migrations and the often complex issues associated with it. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) stated the temporal dislocation between the site of origin and the present location of particular cultural forms- signals the presence of folklore and its integral association with lifestyles. As the stories originate, travel and finally end at a different place, they transcend the barrier of time and space. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett thus conceptualises

“culture as heterogeneous, layered and composed of multiple strands that are interconnected in rather haphazard and contingent ways. This sense of contingency comes about through the juxtaposition of different time scales such that the idea of locality or location becomes the conceptual frame within which the heterogeneous and circulating strands that we call culture come to cohere, if only for a moment.”

However, as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett points out, even before location comes to be viewed as a spatial category it is a temporal one, and by constituting the present as a series of disjunctive moments, folklore creates a gap between the contemporaneous and the contemporary.

These stories of geographical displacements also reflect a trend of folk rituals and belief systems and they are supposed to also reveal an interaction between the forces of globalisation and parochialisation, or *margi* and *deshi* aspects (Marriot 1955). For most scholars this interaction is a long-term and largely unconscious process. Traces of the re-textualisation is still evident in modern times as many of the stories of the *Mangal Kāvya*s are re-interpreted in modern times through the transformation of *Patachitra* into mere descriptive art or from the time (last quarter of 19<sup>th</sup> century) when these stories were scripted and finally penned down by colonial administrative officials. Many genres of folk song in Bengal- including from *Manasā Mangal* and *Chandī Mangal Kāvya*s- have been cultivated into popular forms that require different kinds of performative contexts. The concepts of migration are also reflected as a dialogue- inter-connecting the global with the local.

The conception of a cultural region is important in the study of folklore's engagement with forms of modernity (Blackburn 2003). Self-conscious reflection on context, style, and the process of transmission actually occurs precisely at this level. Further, this is the level at which the local is conceived of as such and thus also is the level at which "meta-discursive practices for creating, representing and interpreting" folk discourses are developed. As the discourse elaborates and connects the regional with the global, it rather refers to the formation of a social field- formed by a network of governmental processes, cultural flows and forms of popular transmission shaped by oral, print and visual media. Thus, the stories of migration also speak of resettlement with a degree of anxiety which creates new cognitive solutions. Speaking through an important symbolism- the river systems, thus, the migration tales always attempts to recreate a social identity- by juxtaposing the local with the global. Thus, as Behula and Dhanapati sail afar into the seas and finally reach their destinations; the stories also speak of the continuous struggle for survival.

## Figures

Reflecting the essence of a river



Fig 1: The significance of river reflected through the portrayal of stories from *Manasā Mangal Kāvya* (of Behula and Lakhindar) and *Chandī Mangal Kāvya* (of Dhanapati merchant) (courtesy- author's personal collection. Artists- Anand, Karuna, Moyna Chitrakar)



Fig 2: Scenes from the story of Behula-Lakhindar from *Manasā Mangal Kāvya* in a *Patanchitra*. Left: Showing Lakhindar on the death-bed on the night of his marriage- with Behula sitting next to him. Right:- Showing Behula and Lakhindar floating down the river, with several gods keeping a vigilant eye on them)(courtesy- author's personal collection. Artists- Anand, Karuna, Moyna Chitrakar)



Fig 3: Various *Patachitra* depicting the portrayal of river- being an important part of depicting migrations and geographical re-locations. (Left:- the 2004 South Asian tsunami reflected through artists impression. Right:- A story of the birth of the deity Krishna as a mortal- from Indian mythology)(courtesy- author's personal collection. Artists- Gurupada, Karuna, Montu Chitrakar)

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