Educational Marginality: a Crisis among the Patuas at Naya, West Bengal

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Abstract
This paper presents a survey on the educational condition of the Chitarkar community of Naya, West Bengal. Traditionally the Chitarkars are a community of both scroll painters and oral performances, who have been engaged in this profession for many centuries. In the age of popular mass media and more recently after the globalization both the community and their art are facing many challenges. One primary solution is spreading modern education among them. With this objective, a survey was made in order to understand their situation and find out some liable solution so that the artist and their art survive in the future.

Keywords: Patachitra, Naya, higher education, communication.

Introduction:
Patachitra, a primitive performing art form in Eastern India, is found at Dubrajpur in Odisha and also at Naya in West Bengal. The painting of ‘Pattachitra’ resemble the old murals of Odisha and Bengal dating back to the 5th century BC. According to Buddhaghosha, Gautama Buddha admired Charanachitra, a primitive form of Pata painting (Ray, 69). Patua songs are also mentioned in Patanjali’s Mahabhasya: “... Patanjali in his Mahabhasya has vividly described how the folk artists used to depict the episode of ... The picture was painted on a scroll, suspended from the left hand of the “Pattikara”, who in course of his demonstration was singing a song in connection with the Yamapatta. Even to this day, a West Bengal Patua is simultaneously a painter, singer and balled writer...” (Ghosh, 45) An interesting account of the display of Yamapatta depicting punishment for misdeeds in life after death is to be found in Harshacharita by Banbhatta. There is a myth that at the time of “returning from hunting at the news of illness of his brother Rajyabardhan, he saw young boys attending to the demonstration of Yamapatta, where the Yama or the God of Death, seated on his mount, the bull with a stick in his right hand, has come to the world to take the life of one whose days are numbered.” (Sen Gupta, 47) Kautilya’s Arthashastra, the Buddhist text Aryamanjushreemulakalpa, and many other texts mention Patua songs.

An elaborate tapestry of music and visual art is what makes Naya “A Village of Painters” in Paschim Midnapore, West Bengal, India. At Naya “the earliest records of manuscript painting here date back to the Pala period by the middle of the 8th century A.D., but extant examples are available only from the 11th century. ... But Patai painting continued to be popular among the Hindus.” (Gupta, 29) But, during the Pala and the Sena eras, folk painters refused to follow the traditional method of painting (Shastriya riti), and, consequently, they were enlisted within the group of Nabasakhiii, ‘a group of artisans ranking as pure shudras below the baidyas and kayasthas of Bengal’ (Tiné and Mann, 154). Brahminical exploitation forced them to take to Islam in the period of Turko-Afghan political and social expansion in Bengal. It is believed that they created...
Gazi Pata to aid the spread of Islam. Earlier the male Patuas basically performed the art, but recently it is found that mostly the women are engaged in practicing this art form.

Fig. 1: Gazi Pir rides a tiger and holds a serpent staff. Credit: Dr. Sushma Jansari

A picturesque little village, Naya is home to around 250 Patuas or Chitrakaars, a unique community of folk artists who are painters, lyricists, singers and performers all rolled into one. The elders make it compulsory for teenagers to continue drawing Pata. According to artists like Bapi Chitrakar and Rani Chitrakar, “A few years ago some members of our village had left the painting and started doing other small business. But four or five years ago, when Patachitra gained popularity, and the sale of it increased, they came back.” According to Bapi Chitrakar (40), “It is compulsory for them to paint Pata as they belong to the families of Patuas.”

The monumental book of Frank J. Korom, professor of Religion and Anthropology at Boston University, entitled Village of Painters: Narrative Scrolls from West Bengal, published in 2006, has helped in popularizing this art in our time. A new interest for the Patachitras and the Patuas of Naya arose after the publication of this book among the researchers and the art lovers of West Bengal and also India. The painters are known as Pautuas, and at Naya, they are also known as more respectfully ‘Chitrakars’ and more interestingly the artist of more than 80 houses at this small village generally use ‘Chitrakar’ as their surname. The word ‘Chitrakar’ would signify both title and profession. Not only do these Chitrakars paint pats but also they compose a song for each piece of painting, which they sing while scrolling up and down the pats. The scrolls are ‘ten to twenty cubits in length and the width is from one and a half to two cubits’. (Mookerjee, 16).

Primarily the patuas were primarily wandering artists- who would travel from place to place with painted scrolls of different patachitras and collected rice or money for their livelihood. The Patuas provide edutainment to the rural audiences singing stories from mythology, social context. Singing with pats is a community affair of the Patuas; a traditional entertainment marking the identity, the existence, the culture and history of their society. Their patas 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 pata or the rolled up canvas scrolls and chowko pats or the rectangular calendar like patas. Thematically the songs of the Patuas are based on Indian mythology and on different social issues like human trafficking, girls education, rural election, rationing system, etc. Social messages like conservation of trees, female infanticide, child trafficking, and AIDS awareness also figure in their paintings. In addition to the scrolls, the Patuas also paint single-panel images of traditional subjects, such as a cat eating a lobster or fish, tigers, rows of cows or white owls.
Many Patuas from the village have won the President’s Award too. They have also participated in exhibitions, cultural exchange programs and festivals in the USA, Germany, Australia, France, Britain, Sweden, and China, as well as all over India. With their work winning widespread acclaim, Naya is now regularly visited by art collectors and enthusiasts from all over the world. Yakub Chitrakar, one of the most renowned artists in the area who has flown to London and Liverpool to display his work. Leading artists like Gurupada Chitrakar and Anwar Chitrakar have won a national award. Anwar Chitrakar has managed to sell his paintings to the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation for Rs 80,000 and had his work showcased at the Harley Gallery in the UK. He won the State Award in 2002 and the National Award in 2006. His work on Kalighat Patachitra paintings has been showcased at Kolkata’s Victoria Memorial and London’s Victoria & Albert Museum. A woman Patua artist, Gauri Chitrakar, was credited with the President’s Award. Amit Chitrakar, Ruma Chitrakar, Soma Chitrakar, Ajay Chitrakar, Hajera Chitrakar, and Meena Chitrakar have won state-level awards. Manu Chitrakar, Manimala Chitrakar, Rohim Chitrakar, Mayna Chitrakar, Jaba Chitrakar have travelled to places like UK, France, USA, Italy to showcase their art performance. A documentary film titled Singing Pictures: Women Painters of Naya, has been made by Lina Fruzzetti, Akos Ostor and Aditinath Sarkar, which has won the Material Culture and Archaeology Prize at the Ninth Biennial International Ethnographic Film Festival of the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI), held in Oxford University, on September 19-21, 2005. The film shows the daily lives of the painters as they paint, sing, cook, take care of their children, and meet the cooperative.

But, in the age of popular mass media and more recently after the globalization both the community and their art are facing many challenges. One primary component of any solution measures to include spreading modern education among them. With this objective, a survey was made in order to understand their situation and find out some liable solution so that the artist and their art survive in the future.
Research methods and tools:

For collecting the data on the involvement of the community in getting a formal education, the researcher made a survey in the month of January, 2016. Before visiting the field the researcher made a questionnaire. The researcher asked the questions to 25 sample members of different age groups and collected data on their schooling. For getting more accurate data the researcher also visited the schools surrounding the village. The data were collected through personal interview of the Chitrakars. After collecting the data, the researcher has analyzed the establishment of different age groups and the application of these categories to raw data through tabulations and then drawing pictures.

Problem:

Behind the glory of the Patuas, there is a bitter truth that they are themselves out of the reach of higher education. Recently with the help of different projects on the revival of folk arts and culture undertaken by some universities and with the help of some foreign institutions and visitors the Patatchitra of Naya is gaining worldwide popularity and getting economic stability. But the most crucial crisis they are facing in this twenty-first century is the lack of higher education.

Globalization has opened out massive opportunities. The artist community can develop their performance by learning information and communication technology; they can sell their artworks at any part of the world by doing online business, can communicate with the customers and the organizers very instantly and independently without depending on the mediators by whom the Patuas are sometimes exploited and used. In order to get the benefits of globalization, the community must have access to modern education. After getting the mainstream education, they can choose different ways of earning money by using their artistic skills. Some of them may work for the marketing of the Pattas or some of them may work as entrepreneurs. Though some organizations regularly organized some specialized trainings for them, the trainings are not sufficient because they need to have at least some mainstream foundational education like a general degree or professional degree. This lack of education is hindering them to narrate the true essence of their art and to communicate in English with foreign visitors. They are deprived of formal modern education and training. The survey reveals the following data:
### Education Qualifications of the Chitrakars

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Groups</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7-10</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>40%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-15</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-21</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Primary Data

### Highest Educational Degree/ Level Obtained

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Groups</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Degree/Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15-25</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>H.S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>M.P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-35</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>VIII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-50</td>
<td>Male</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
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</tbody>
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Source: Primary Data

Though the children of the Patua families, studying in schools, are given a stipend of Rs. 500 per month, as stated by Rani Chitrakar, few of them attend school regularly. According to artist Bapi Chitrakar “My parents and grandparents were illiterate. We are also illiterate, but our children..."
are studying in school level. The young generation is becoming more interested in learning after seeing the visitors or scholars coming from different parts of India or abroad.”

But almost all of them leave their school and take painting as a full-time profession. This lack of higher education is making a problem to them in communicating sincerely and clearly with the outside visitors. They take the help of a translator. Rani Chitrakar has also confessed this problem. She has also added that a translator cannot always clearly transfer our feelings and emotion linked with our songs to the visitors. It is not that the senior artists are not interested in learning English. “We gave a proposal”, said by Bapi Chitrakar to me, “for learning English four or five years ago to the local administration and they gave us training.” Rani Chitrakar has added that no one has studied in a university from her village. Only one or two members have passed from college. But they are also now engaged in painting Patachitra. The artist thinks that if they give English education to the children it will come of use as “child is the father of the man”. She added, “They also came once to train us in using a computer, but it was a vain attempt.” She laments for her lack of education as she cannot communicate comfortably with the foreign visitors. They suffer from an inferiority complex because of their marginality in the most necessary English education.
I met also another artist and collector named Bahadur Chitrakar. He has single-handedly built a museum at his own residence. He has collected ancient musical instruments, masks, coins, Patachitras, ornaments, etc. from different states of India and also from Europe and Africa. But, unfortunately, his maximum educational level is Class IV. This crisis of education hinders him to understand the cultural texts and folk arts of different countries. He has collected also many books of folk art and culture but “because of my lack of education and my inability to read those”, as said by Bahadur Chitrakar “I can no keep them in order and cannot understand the letters.”

I met another artist, Mamata Chitrakar aged 31. According to her, “I have not passed even class I. But I want my children to be educated so that they feel comfortable when they will go to perform at different places. Her husband, Gura Chitrakar aged 38, who is also an artist, has only passed class IV. Most of the Chitrakars aged more than twenty have hardly crossed the boundary of a primary school. But they want their children to be learned.

![Fig. 6: Mamata Chitrakar](image)

Fig. 6: Mamata Chitrakar

Fig. 7: Susama Chitrakar with her mother Rani Chitrakar

Though some artist like Susama Chitrakar (26) who has passed class X, are sending their children to a English medium school, so that they can learn English in order to learn English better and communicate in the language more fluently and correctly, most of the members are too much reluctant of the education of their children. It is found that only one person of the Chitrakars is a graduate whose name is Anwar Chitrakar. So, the lack of higher education among the old and middle-aged artists and the lack of interest in a study among the young and child ‘Chitrakars’ are creating a problem for themselves to make their art more popular and famous in the world.
Though they are naturally skilled in drawing Patachitra, they are becoming marginalized in this twenty-first century when each and everyone is striving for getting education. This lacking is making them educationally marginalized in different universities, colleges where they go to perform and are surrounded by highly educated visitors and audiences.

According to Rani Chitrakar, “Only four or five students study in English medium schools.” She has also stated that the other students who are enrolled in a Bengali medium school like Naya Primary school attend the school once in a month.” Some members want their children to receive a quality education but the environment in the village is not supportive of that. “Since morning” as said by Rani Chitrakar, “most of the children in the start playing marble instead of studying at home. How can the children of our own family concentrate on the study?” Some Patuas want to change the situation but they cannot. Fortunately, I conversed with a child artist named Mahadeb Chitrakar aged 13. He studies in class VII. According to him, “I am more interested in painting and I want to be an artist also in the future.”

Fig. 8: Mahadeb Chitrkar

**Reasons for the lack of formal education among the Patuas:**

1. There is no high school near the village. The nearest high school to this village is Lakshmibari High School which is about thirteen kilometers away from the village.
2. The nearest school to the village is Naya M. S.K School which is again in a distressed condition.
3. The older artists are in fear that if their offspring get a higher education, they will be transformed into other professionals leaving their traditional profession of painting.
4. Poverty has caused them not to be interested in study in their adulthood rather than to be interested in painting.
5. The elder artists are not also conscious of the benefits of getting a formal education.
6. They have not been also counseled for studying in schools and colleges by any organization or the local administration or even the researchers who visit the art village only for collecting data for their own benefits and for upgrading the community educationally and socially and economically.
7. There is only one general degree college named Sabang Sajanikant Mahabidyalaya which is about fourteen kilometers away from the village. In this college, there is no such college related to art and performance.

8. The social responsibility of the educational institutions is lacking in the locality.

9. No such initiative has been undertaken by the State Government and also the Central Government especially for the educational development of the community.

10. The overall degradation of the educational system throughout the decades in the state has caused their lack of schooling properly.

Possible measures for improvement of the situation:

1. The public authorities should be serious about the educational development of the artist community.

2. The teachers of the nearby schools should motivate the students belonging to the Patua community to be school bounded.

3. The guardians or older artists should be regularly convinced how formal education will improve them as artists.

4. Special training centers should be established so that the artists can learn how to use information and communication technology and how to sell their products online.

5. The young artists should be trained on entrepreneurship so that they can make business with their Patas.

6. The artists should be trained regularly in learning communicative English so that they can communicate with the foreign customers and researcher scholars, and organizers, and consequently, sell their Patas in the global market and perform on the global stages independently.

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Rani Chitrakar, Mahadeb Chitrakar, Susama Chitrakar, Mamata Chitrakar, Gura Chitrakar, Bahadur Chitrakar, Bapi Chitrakar, Gurupada Chitrakar, Yakub Chitrakar, Jaba Chitrakar

Notes

i The word Patachitra means 'painting on a piece of cloth'.

ii The word 'Pata' has been derived from the Sanskrit word 'Patta' meaning 'a piece of cloth'

References


Mookerjee, Ajitcoomer. *Folk Art of Bengal*. Calcutta University, 1939.

