Patachitra as Contemporary Folk Visual Storytelling

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Abstract

The traditional art of patachitra in Bengal – a centuries-old narrative painting genre, performed through songs (pater gan) – has recently taken on a new form: a form of visual journalism centered on modern crises. In Nayan village in the Pingla region of West Midnapore, patuas are creating new patachitras on the COVID-19 pandemic, cyclone Amphan, climate change and social unrest, which are capturing the collective experience of society. In these issue-based patachitras, vibrant images and songs come together to document events, criticize the state of society and capture people's emotions and memories. This article compares these modern patachitras with traditional mythological patachitras. An Color and technique of of patachitras is, showing how natural colors and symbolic consonants give depth to the subject matter. It also discusses pater gan or 'live performance' and how the scope of this art form is increasing manifold through social media and exhibitions. As a result, Patachitra has become a living folk journalism today where tradition and current news blend together to create moral narratives and visual reports.

Keywords: Bengal Patachitra, Patachitra storytelling, Folk narrative, natural colors

Introduction

Patachitra (from the Bengali words pat, meaning 'cloth' and chitra, meaning 'picture') is an ancient folk art of Bengal, originally practiced by the semi-nomadic artist community patua (or chitrakar). Historically, patachitra usually depicted religious and mythological stories such as stories taken from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, or Mangalkavya presented in a series of long picture panels. During each performance, a patua would slowly unroll the pat and sing the story in his own voice this song is called pater gan (Belanus, B). This combination of images and music was a form of mobile "educational entertainment" that has long served as a means of moral education and entertainment in rural Bengal

However, in the late 20th century, a change began to take place in the art of patachitra. Faced with the decline of traditional patronage, many patuas moved to the cities they began participating in city-based haats, fairs, and art fairs, and many were forced to rely entirely on the craft for their livelihood (Zanatta, M., & Roy, A. G 2021).

In 2010, an organization called Chitratru, formed by artists from Nayan villages, obtained Geographical Indication (GI) recognition for "Bengal Patachitra," which played a significant role in the revival of the art.The most significant change was that patuas expanded their subject matter from mythological stories to contemporary ones. Researchers have noted that

since the 1980s, social songs have been added to patachitra performances, where recent events, natural disasters, or social problems have been the subject matter.

Although mythological songs are still performed, national events, disasters, or stories with social messages are now also taking place alongside them. For example, veteran artist Swarna Chitrakar of Nayan village has won national awards for his paintings on issues such as female foeticide, dowry system and women trafficking.

This paper analyses this transformation: how the Patuas of the Pingla region of West Bengal are developing a form of folk visual journalism through their paintings and songs on local crises from the Covid-19 pandemic to climate change.

Historical Context of Pata Chitra

The history of the patachitra tradition of Bengal dates back thousands of years. Some researchers trace the origins of this art form to the Pala dynasty (8th–12th centuries). Ancient patachitra were usually painted on palm leaves or cloth, using dark colors prepared from mineral and vegetable materials.According to the Daricha Foundation, patuas traditionally traveled from village to village, carrying painted patachitras in their hands, and singing songs the words and melodies of these songs they often composed on the fly. This oral-visual folklore – called pater gaan – was not only entertainment, but also a means of social dialogue.In Daricha's words:

"These itinerant songwriters composed their own songs and melodies… and, as they traveled, played the role of entertainers and social reformers. These songs are called 'pater gaan'."During a performance, the Patua would slowly unroll the scroll and sing along with each scene. The two parts of this musical form the Pater Gaan (also known as Povar when sung in a group) and the Chitrapat were inseparable. Over centuries, this tradition remained primarily devotional. Temples and festival committees often commission scrolls of Vaishnav saints, local folk deities or auspicious tales (Durga, Krishna, Gazi Pir, Bonbibi, etc.) daricha.org. The scrolls were ritual artworks used in village rituals, school-room teaching or fairground shows. Even under Mughal and British influence, patachitra style retained its lineage: it produced the distinct Kalighat Patachitra in Calcutta with lively, bold images (an evolution of the same roots. Technique-wise, traditional patachitra is made by treating cotton cloth or paper with a glue-sized ground (e.g. tamarind seed paste mixed with chalk) to create a smooth base. Artists then sketch figures (often freehand) and outline them with thick black lines. They apply flat washes of color (made from natural dyes) Apply and let each layer dry in the sun. The colours used in Patachitra are mainly derived from plants and minerals. For example, yellow is made from turmeric (halud), blue from indigo (indigo), and red from red clay or clay minerals. These colours are bound together with natural glues or gums to make them permanent. These ancient methods of making colours are still in use today. For example, black ink is made from lamp smoke or charcoal powder, red is made from annatto seeds or lac obtained from certain insects.

Notably, the legacy of this storytelling or pictorial song-and-picture performance continues to this day. The largest Patua community in West Bengal is currently located in Midnapore

district. There are about 100 Patua families in Nayan village alone. A 2018 cultural exchange programme found that Nayan Patuwars were depicting contemporary events as well as mythological stories on pot.

The local organisation Chitratru (founded by Nayan artists in 2010) has obtained a craft-mark and geographical indication (GI Tag) for "Bengal Patachitra", which has been a significant help in sustaining the art form.These artists still identify themselves as 'Chitrakar' and regularly produce and perform Patachitra, although they are now largely organised and exhibiting, and with the support of various NGOs and galleries, rather than travelling as before.

Contemporary Transformation : Patachitra as visual reporting

In recent decades, Bengali patachitra has entered a new phase visual journalism. Driven by a combination of necessity and inspiration, patuas are now drawing on their scrolls to depict secular news, social changes, and natural disasters.Zanatta and Roy (2021) note that patuas are compelled to innovate to keep their performances fresh and relevant. As a result, they have introduced a new genre social songs alongside mythological stories.Since the late 20th century, the content of patachitra has changed significantly, it now includes contemporary global events.Rural journalist Mitali Joyee has made a similar observation modern patachitra is now not just an art form but a vehicle for social awareness, where contemporary reality and folk art styles have come together. In other words, these scrolls have become canvases for reporting on community issues. In fact, the subject matter of the new patachitras is now much broader and more diverse. Mitali Joyi mentions in her report that artists from Nayan village have created patachitras on issues such as "women's oppression and exploitation, the Chandrayaan mission, the environmental movement, the pain of partition and religious harmony."One of these is Swarna Chitrakar, who won a national award for his patachitra on women trafficking and female foeticide.

Another prominent artist, Bahar Chitrakar, has painted a patachitra centered on the Sundarbans, in addition to depicting the political unrest of Bangladesh in the 1970s and the story of the folk goddess Ban Bibi. She notes "This painting reminds us that it is only through sustainable living that it is possible to avoid conflict and protect nature and human life."

Similarly, researcher Priyanka Basu (2022) has shown in her research that the climate crisis has now become a major theme in the patachitra presentation of modern West Bengal. Artists like Manu Chitrakar are painting the entire scroll with global warming.The most dramatic examples come from recent disasters.

COVID-19: During the pandemic, Nayapatua artists have created direct virus-based potachitras. The images depict the coronavirus as a snorting, horned monster or a red, spiky figure. Masked villagers are seen washing their hands or pleading for help. The artists' songs (pot songs) that accompany these potachitras explain what COVID-19 is and urge caution

For example, Swarna Chitrakar sings a potgee, "My heart is breaking… the world is filled with sorrow" a song that highlights the impact of the pandemic (folklife.si.edu), and urges

listeners to help the needy In the words of Folklife Magazine, "these cartoons tell the story of the pandemic through images, while the accompanying songs explain COVID-19, its effects, and ways to protect oneself. These new cartoons effectively serve as filmed health bulletins and mourning diaries recording collective experiences on the one hand, and serving as a medium for education and critique on the other.

Image 1 (Source- Click by Betty Belanus)

When Cyclone Amphan hit the Bay of Bengal in May 2020, the Patuas' own huts and artworks were damaged. Bellanus (2020) notes that many artists' thatched houses were flooded and damaged, destroying their patachitras and livelihoods (folklife.si.edu). Although relatively little information on specific patachitras related to Amphan is available, the disaster forced the Patuas to reflect extreme weather in their songs and art, which brought about a greater environmental awareness. In particular, the Sundarbans murals of the Bahar painter (as mentioned above) reflect such climate threats, where aggression and destruction are vividly depicted.

Farmers' and Agrarian Issues:

Although not widely reported in the sources, agricultural life is inherent in the patachitra of Bengal. Sen notes that rural and seasonal contexts often dominate the colour and composition of patachitra .For example, earthy greens and browns are used to depict paddy fields and harvests in scenes of cultivation or monsoon Since the recent Indian farmers' movement (2020–21) was a major social event, it is expected that patuas may respond to this in the same way that they have responded to other political issues Although explicit examples of this are rare in the literature, the genre is open to such adaptations: Basu notes that patachitra has produced scrolls on the Nepal earthquake or global warming so a "social song" scroll on the farmers' movement is also possible in the future. In short, modern patachitra is a kind of pictorial news of current events. These scrolls are not static art; rather, they are a series of images that locals can "read," often accompanied by song. By depicting specific events (symbols of a virus, burning fields, protests) and adding moral commentary through verse, patachitra criticizes society and records collective sentiments. Zanatta and Roy conclude that

patuas do not simply present events, but add "their own moral truth" interpreting the news from a folk perspective.

Image 2 (Source- Click by Betty Belanus)

Performance and Pater gan Tradition

A central and enduring feature of modern Patachitra is that it still exists as a living performing art not a silent art like still images. The art is fulfilled only when it is accompanied by music, following the traditional style known as Poter Gaan. In this ancient Bengali folk art, the Patua (who paints and sings the Pot) does not just display the Pot he brings it to life by telling a story. Each Patachitra is opened one by one, and with each scene, the artist sings the story through a song or poem written by him. The combination of this

series of images and rhythmic verbal narration becomes a visual-audio performance that is both visually stunning and emotionally moving.

According to the Daricha Foundation, these Patachitras often depict mythological, moral, or social themes, and each Patua composes songs based on the content of his or her scroll. In the past, the art form was deeply connected to religious stories or epics, but the real power of potter gaan is its ability to embrace contemporary events. For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, Swarna Chitrakar quickly responded by painting new pots and composing awareness songs on hygiene, mask-wearing and precautions. His daughters also created pots and songs about the virus from their own perspectives, reflecting personal experiences and social concerns.

Therefore, the potter's song survives as a unique form of oral journalism. In a performance during Covid, Bellanus observed that each picture drawn on the scroll is narrated through a Bengali song, where the potua sings and explains each scene. This lively song also expresses the emotions of the potua in a chorus, the painter Mamoni pleads for help for the poor, where the audience hears his language of sorrow and protest. Even in online or socially distanced exhibitions, the pota chitra is presented with singing. As a result, the performance of this song transforms the entire pota chitra into a kind of folk news broadcast, where the patua himself acts as a newsreader. This type of presentation is what keeps this art form alive whether it is an old story or new news, the content becomes collective and memorable in this process of opening the pot and singing it.

Visual analysis of Modern Scrolls

Modern Patachitra scrolls retain the distinctive visual style of the art form, but now also feature symbolic representations of contemporary events. The image above (Image: Covid Patachitra by Swarna Chitrakar, source: Smithsonian folklife.si.edu) is an example. Here, the coronavirus is depicted as a red-hued horned monster, dominating the upper frame and looking down at villagers wearing masks and washing their hands.

The bright colors and compositional style follow the traditional pattern: solid color fills, dark black outlines, and ornate floral patterned borders. However, their significance has now been interpreted in a modern way. The red color of the virus (reflecting the colors of Durga's power and wrath) indicates danger. The villagers' clothes are dyed in natural colours (yellow, green, blue), which stand out brightly against the ochre background – colours made from turmeric powder (yellow), indigo (blue) and vegetable gum.Their worried expressions and postures tell the emotional story, which is accompanied by a scroll in song. The scene carries a moral message: wash your hands, wear a mask – and it is presented as a dramatic image. Each color has a specific cultural meaning in Bengali tradition.

Red, often used in depictions of goddesses, is seen as a symbol of strength, power, or crisis.

Blue – as seen in the arms of the virus or the guardian deity behind it – signifies purity or spiritual elevation.

The green borders and masks of the scroll subtly convey messages of life and healing, as green symbolizes nature, well-being, and rebirth.

Seasonal context is also important – rural scenes typically use green and brown, which are associated with the fields and soil of Bengal.Although the Covid scroll is an abstract image, modern paintings such as those of floods or crops are also painted in the green and brown colors of the Bengal delta region – which connects these images to local realities.In short, the use of these colors – which are taken from the colors of local plants and soil – becomes an important language for storytelling.

Technically, the scroll in Figure 46 is made in the traditional manner: a coating of tamarind-chalk on cloth or thick paper, on which the outline is drawn with lamp ink or smoke, and filled in with natural colors. Even when artists create new images, they still use kath-bel gum or gum arabic as a binder and let the artwork dry in the sun. This continuity maintains the scroll's aesthetic as "original" rural. At the same time, it creates a kind of echo with the subject matter: using the earth's own colors to depict a land-based pandemic or climate catastrophe creates a subtle connection between medium and message.

In addition to color, narrative format still guides the viewer's gaze. Like comic strips, modern scrolls often progress from left to right or top to bottom. The main panels in the Covid scroll are arranged sequentially: first the threat (top), then the villagers' reactions (middle), then the messages (bottom). The classic frame is created by the use of a lotus border and alternating colors. According to Basu's research, Patuas often place an animated character (here a virus) on top of human characters to show interaction, a practice common to Manasamangala Kavya.

The end result is a kind of "storyboard" in which the image and the poem tell a story together. In terms of storytelling, these scrolls have now become shorter and more focused: influenced by cinema and television, modern Patuas often express long stories in single-panel or short story form, but keep the emotional and moral aspects sharp. Importantly, these scrolls do not just present information; they also express the reactions of the patua. The diary-like features of the artwork (the faces of the villagers, the melody of the songs) are a record of collective feelings. As Zanatta say of the pandemic-themed scrolls, "the adaptation of influences to the patachitra… is an almost uninterrupted symbolic language inherent in their history." The painters have taken up the challenge of reviving their tradition.

In practice, this means that each new scroll contains an editorial voice. For example, Swarna's Covid song calls for social solidarity ("Please give food to the poor"). In effect, the art becomes a cross between a protest poster or an editorial cartoon. It uses every medium of patua art layout, color, text to convey a moral message.

Amplification via Exhibition and digital Media

These modern patachitra stories have been greatly expanded through exhibitions and digital platforms. Before COVID-19, naya gram artists often displayed their patachitras at fairs and village markets in Kolkata. But due to the pandemic and cyclones, travel and fairs were

stopped, putting the patuas' income at riskIn this situation, various organizations are organizing the transfer of patachitra through virtual and hybrid mediumsFor example, in 2021, an online exhibition called "Life on Scroll" (organized by IIT Kharagpur and Gurudev Tagore Centre) allowed naya artists to perform scrolls via Zoom.In another event, the new patuas installed poster-sized patachitra panels outside a farmers' market in Kharagpur (as per Figure 6 of Janatta 2021)which combined folk art with a commercial environment.

These new spaces have brought art to students, urban audiences, and even international audiences something that would have never been possible in the era of itinerant singers. Social media has also greatly amplified the voice of patachitra. Videos of live performances (such as Swarna Chitrakar's coronavirus scroll performance) have gone viral on Facebook and YouTube, drawing public attention to the art and its message. Kolkata-based NGO 'Banglantalk' has helped spread these videos, effectively turning local folk art into a viral awareness campaign."Online exhibitions have become a great opportunity to showcase oral traditions through live performances alongside scroll displays" the researchers note.In short, the temporary lockdown has pushed patuas to digital innovations live streams, Instagram pages, virtual reality tours of 'patamaya' (new festivals) that have enabled them to travel around the scrolls on Covid or climate more widely.

This digital transformation is not a replacement for traditional performances; rather, it has added new mediums. Now patrons from all over the world can collect prints or frames of modern Patachitra, and expatriate Bengalis can also learn to sing. Moreover, in collaboration with designers, Patachitra motifs are now being used on mugs, fabrics, and wall paintings. making folktales a part of everyday life.But even as Patachitra goes online, the connection between images and direct storytelling remains the cornerstone of its journalistic power.

Conclusion

Thus, Bengali patachitra has evolved from a mere scroll of religious stories to a dynamic folk-journalism that documents and critiques contemporary life. By painting and singing about current events, Patua artists are creating a kind of social history. The evidence is clear: in recent years, patachitra has addressed issues such as coronavirus, cyclone disasters, environmental threats, gender inequality

These works of art do not simply depict events; they interpret them from a local cultural perspective (often illuminating solidarity, suffering, or resistance). The performance-oriented 'pater gan' turns each scroll into a verbal report, and the symbolic use of color enriches the narrative with traditional meaning.In fact, Patuas have made today's news headlines their subject matter, while continuing the tradition of "story-telling" of their ancestors. In the words of one researcher, the patuas "do not merely report events… but add valuable commentary to them as if they were conveying their own moral truths". Through new media social media and exhibitions this modern folk press is now reaching far beyond the village. Yet, the core art forms clothes, natural dyes, songs, and the unchanging traditions of painting remain the same.The series of panels of the patachitra scrolls still tell one story after another, but now, in addition to gods and goddesses, they also feature hospitals, storms, and protests.

In short, the patachitra art of Bengal has proven itself to be strong and relevant a living tradition that continues to capture the voice of the people in images, through each panel and each song.

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