

## **Re-thinking the Folk songs and Folk oral narratives of the Patuas of Bengal in terms of their Marginal standing**

**Mir Ahammad Ali**

A careful study of the socio-political status and the crucial religious standing of the Patuas of Bengal reveals their miserable plight within the dynamics of society and represents their long inert struggle to retain their rich artistic heritage and cultural identity. Generally, known as 'Patidar', 'Chitrakar' or 'Patuas', the pata-painters are a kind of narrative-graphic artists who use to sing folkloric songs, chant Patua lore, narrate pictorial stories and events (mostly mythical) along with their pata-paintings, famously known as 'Patachitra' or simply as 'patas'.<sup>1</sup> The pictures they make and the songs they sing are from their innermost thoughts because without the innermost thoughts, feelings and intuitions neither those pictures will stand, nor their songs will be composed and expressed. "In sort they [the Patuas] are" as Sourabh Datta Gupta claims "a unique tribe of folk artistes who are painters, lyricists, singers and performers rolled into one" (Datta Gupta 8).

Patachitra, commonly known as *pata* derives its artistic genre from the medieval performing art of both painting and an adjunct musical song. With the efficient use of various natural colours diverse stories, myths, themes and issues are being craftily presented on the piece of canvass and the accompanied song facilitates one to re-experience the pictorial story. In her remarkable essay 'Crossing the Threshold: Women Patuas of Bengal in Transition', Suvapriya Chatterjee lucidly points out the fact that:

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The author is independent researcher, formerly technical assistant at the Department of English, Vidyasagar University. E-mail: mirahammadali1990@gmail.com

Their [i.e. the patuas of Bengal] 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 patas are generally of two types: 'Jarano pata' or the rolled up canvas scrolls and 'Chowko pata' or the rectangular calendar like patas (Chatterjee 11).



**Figure 1: A Jarano pata (Scroll Painting)**



**Figure 2: Chowka pata (Four sided pata)**

The most familiar and popular type of patas are of the former 'Jarano' type which is extensively seen at Naya village, Pingla, Paschim Medinipur. On the other hand, we can notice that the Kalighat Bazar paintings fall into the latter category, known as 'Chowka pata'. In terms of theme also, these patas can be classified into several categories. The chief among these is the patas that deal with mythical and religious stories like 'Behula Bhasan' (Behula Floating), 'Srimanta Masan' or alternatively known as 'Chandi Mangal' (Benediction of Chandi), Krishna Lila (The Dalliance of Krishna), Ras Lila, Jagannath Pata, Sita Haran (Abduction of Sita), Gosai Pata, Sattayapir Pala etc. There is another type of pata that deals with secular subject matter.

The secular patas of the younger generation largely deal with major socio-economic, cultural and natural issues. First and foremost they deal with the history and the impact of historical events on society. That is why we have 'Sahebi pata' describing the contemporaneous impacts of colonial rule or 'Khudiram Fansi' that describes the events of Khudiram's hanging. Secondly, we find the patas that deal with numerous calamities like 'Tsunami Pata' which eventually records the catastrophic disaster of December 2004 or patas dealing with several mishaps around the world like the World Trade Centre bombing on 9/11 or the Mumbai terrorist attacks on 26/11. Thirdly, we

find several patachitras as a part of particular commissioned work concerning different social issues and awareness. In this regard, we see patas describing the benefits of Polio Vaccination among babies to eradicate Polio from India or ‘Briksha Ropon Pata’ (Plantation of Trees) in order to cease deforestation and make people aware of the ecological, environmental, medical benefits of trees.

In terms of religion these ‘Chitrakars’ (literally picture-makers or pictorial-artists, which is the usual surname for all pata-painters of Bengal), oscillate between two major religions – Hinduism and Islam. Prevailing Hindu cast system tries to thrust aside this Patua clan and prevents them to be a part of the Hindu society in spite of their repeated craving. Under the protection of some liberal Brahmins, a good number of tribal ‘Patakars’ from working class background longed for and entered the Hindu society and subsequently joined the ‘Chitrakar’ caste. And it is of no doubt that a good number of their mythical patas deal with the Hindu gods and goddesses. To quote Amitabh SenGupta, “Most of these paintings depict stories of Hindu deities”(SenGupta 12). To locate their position within the Hindu caste system two popular myths about the Chitrakars are found. According to the *Brahmabaivartha Purana*, one of the nine sons of Lord Viswakarma and his wife Ghrithachi, the Chitrakars were cursed and excluded by the angry Brahmins due to their (pata painters’) vulgar and erroneous portraying of Hindu gods and goddesses. Suhridd K. Bhowmik in the very first chapter titled ‘In Search of Origins’ of the groundbreaking book *Patuas and Patua Art in Bengal*, jointly published with David J. McCutcheon, very minutely observes that:

Nowadays the Chitrakars oscillate between being neither rejected nor totally accepted by the Hindus (McCutcheon & Bhowmik 11).

So, from such a traumatic standing their sense of being hyphenated arises and they remain within the confinements of marginality. The long-cherished yearning to be a part of Hinduism and the continual rebuff make them angst ridden. Though the Chitrakars of Bengal sing and present the mythical gods and goddesses in their patas along with their folk narratives, this sense of ‘in-betweenness’ looms large upon them.

Another popular myth about the Patuas runs like that they were originally Hindus and this myth subtly connects them with Lord Siva. At this juncture, Mr. Bhowmik’s insightful observation regarding this myth can be quoted which posits that:

The myth goes thus: one day Siva, the Lord of Gods, came in disguise of

an artist to see whether his image had been completed by an artist (patua) whom he had ordered to do so. The artist, or Chitrakar, in order to give the final touch, picked up a painting brush when he was also cleaning his teeth with a green stick from a tree. As it is very profane to do anything holy such as painting images of god at the same time as cleaning uncleaned teeth, the Lord Siva became very angry. As a result of such a sin, the whole Chitrakar group was rendered outcast by the curse of Lord Siva (McCutchion & Bhowmik 11).

In this case also, the sense of dejection and desolation haunts these artists and such expressions of their heart-felt emotion fill the canvas of a number of patas and oftentimes they croon their anguish/agonies in numerous songs and several personal interviews.

The Patuas from the very beginning have been very tolerant and flexible in embracing other faith, customs, cultural beliefs and ritualistic practices. In their act of espousing the Buddhist principles as well the Buddhist period becomes for them “the golden age”. “The Buddhist Kings and monks and preachers” as Bhowmik observes “made extensive use of the scrolls to explain the truth of this hapless world, and the punishments for his sins that would await mankind after death”. (McCutchion & Bhowmik 22).

Later in the Muslim period the conversion of the Patuas to Islam after being ruthlessly rejected by the dominant Hindu caste system provided them with a kind of temporary shelter. This act of embracing Islam can be discerned in their art form also i.e., in the patas which is chiefly “influenced by the Rajastani style of painting, imported to Bengal by the Mughals. This influence still survives” (McCutchion & Bhowmik 22).

Regarding their religious belief we find an interesting dichotomy among the existing Patua clan. In spite of embracing Islam, while the older generation follows Hindu customs, rites and prefers Hindu names, the younger generation, on the contrary, adopts Islamic way of life by regularly going to mosque, offering *namaz* (prayers) and reading Koran. That’s why, while the older generation paints and sings about the Hindu Dev-Devi (gods and goddesses) like Manasa, Durga, Chandi, Radha-Krishna, Rama-Sita etc. the younger generation is interested in the patachitras like Satyapir Pata, Gossai Pata, Hijli Masnad-i-ala and numerous other ‘secular’ patas that deal with contemporary social issues like Tsunami Pata, Sahebi pata, Khudiram Fansi (The Hanging of Khudiram) etc. But due to their practice of portraying images of Hindu gods and goddesses and other figures in their patas as part of their profession/

occupation they are not accepted in Islam community either because any type of image-making is totally proscribed in Islam as found in Koran and Hadith. The concept of aniconism is itself embedded in the Koran and Hadith and considers the practice of 'image-making' as *Shirk* i.e., unforgiveable sin for practising idolatry or polytheism. Because in the Koran, "Shirk" means as Peter S. Groff observes:

Worshipping other deities or creatures alongside God (i.e. polytheism). This is the worst form of disbelief and, according to the Qur'an, the one sin that cannot be forgiven. This is because it flies in the face of Islam's fundamental tenet, 'There is no god but God' (la ilaha illa Allah), effectively denying God's existence as such (Peter S. Groff 193).<sup>2</sup>

So, once again, by the dominant discursive politics of religions (both Hinduism and Islam), the 'individual' Patuas or the Chitrakar community as a whole is found to remain 'marginal' and as a result, their pictorial stories, mythical songs, impressive compositions and folkloric narratives have largely been marginalized. At this point Mr. Bhowmik insightfully contends that:

Despite all social development in their society the Patuas remain in this *state of belonging* neither to the Hindus nor to the Muslims (McCutchion & Bhowmik 13). [Emphasis mine]

So, once again the "state of belonging" as Mr. Bhowmik points out speaks volumes about their miserable plight. They feel traumatized due to their tentative religious identity and they experience the wave of anguish within. A good number of their patas, as we shall observe later portrays their deepest angst and represents the inner quest for their own 'self'. In a number of personal interviews also given by the older Patua artists this "state of belonging" emerges over and over again.

In an interesting pata-pala called 'Behula Bhasan' or alternatively known as 'Manasa Mangal' (Benediction of Manasa) jointly performed by the two artists of Naya village Rani Chitrakar and Susama Chitrakar, the sense of togetherness in their performance is discerned in rendering the glory of goddess Manasa. Such kinds of mythological, religious, and popular folkloric songs and stories provided the Patuas with a popular thematic sustenance which 'taught and delighted' the then trendy zamindars and common village folks alike. But due to their marginal standing their oral narratives and pata songs have largely been made subsidiary to the 'privileged' 'Mangal Kavya'

(Poems of Benediction) of the Medieval era of Bengal.<sup>3</sup> In terms of the language of their oral songs and narratives, the ‘established’ and the then ‘standard’ Bengali language of the ‘Mangal Kavyas’ always headed above the regional ‘low’ dialect of these patuas.



**Figure 3: Rani Chitrakar and Susama Chitrakar jointly performing ‘Manasa Mangal’**

In another solo performance by Rani Chitrakar centred on a social issue titled ‘Maachher Biye’ (Marriage of Fish), the entire ecological cycle of the submarine world is craftily described. In a joyful marital procession of *Darriyan Maachh* (Dariyan Fish) all the other accompanying underwater fishes are performing diverse activities like the playing of the flute by Soal fish, the playing of tabla by Koi fish etc. But the very end of this pata reveals their eventual panic of an abrupt threat of being devoured by a large Boal fish. The very idea of *Maatsonay* peeps out from this pata in a fable-like dramatic presentation, where the larger and powerful Boal fish tries to devour all the other species of fishes of the same stream like Koi, Punt, Pankal, Soal, Chingra etc. Literally, this *Maatsonay* refers to the process where larger and most powerful fish/fishes devour the smaller ones. But the term is politically charged as well as it implies that the weaker sections and masses are oppressed, controlled and at last destroyed by the



**Figure 4: Rani Chitrakar presenting the pata ‘Macher Biye’ (Marriage of Fish)**

Symbolically, this very idea of *Maatsonay* may throw light on their own sense of loss of the ‘self’ and the agonized/ painful lamentation of the gradual eroding of their art and culture. We may assume that the popular entertainments of the 21<sup>st</sup> century like T.V, Cinema, Mobile Video, Internet etc. are corroding and annihilating their rich, artistic cultural tradition bit by bit. In his stupendous review of Frank J. Korom’s book *Village of Painters, Narrative Scrolls from West Bengal*, Scott Rothstein elaborates this point further:

For generations, Chitrakars enjoyed a secure, *yet marginal place in West Bengal society*. But modernity has challenged the Chitrakars’ world. How can a Patua with only a painted paper scroll and a song compete with television or the latest Bollywood film extravaganza (Rothstein)? [Emphasis mine]

But on the other hand this is also true that in this post-digital age and easy global reach the glory of patas is being revived day by day through a number of ways like digital archiving; collecting, transcribing and translating the oral and pictorial texts; worldwide tour and a renewed global interest to safeguard and sustain such endangered folk art forms.

Among the recent generation of Patua artists, the popularity of a large number of patachitras that deal with the mythical issues is being diminished. The original form and content of those accompanied mythical songs are also being altered and corroded due to their lack of interest to persist the oral transmission. In this context, Dukhushyam Chitrakar, an elder member of the Patua clan detects another major factor that the present generation is much more involved in painting rather than narrating stories or composing songs. They lack the curiosity in narrating the mythical patas, learning the age-old songs or composing newer ones. So, though their paintings provide for them monetary benefit and smooth livelihood, the importance of songs and narratives is decreasing day by day. In Dukhushyambabu's own words:

Today these kids [the younger Patua artists] paint, but they don't learn the songs. I'm not sure if the tradition can continue this way. After I go, all this could be lost (Songs of a Sorrowful Man).

Amidst all these confusions and turmoil, the patuas of today's Bengal negotiate between different religions and opt for a moderate path. While these Patuas of Bengal embrace a tolerant Sufi Islamic tradition that draws on Hindu spirituality, they, at the same time, honour and value the Hindu way of life and also Hindu gods and goddesses. In Dukhushyambabu's view the patuas are like Lalan, the beloved poet and also like the Sufis and Fakirs. They are far above the narrow confinement and rough division, decreed by the different, dominant religious authorities. Many Patuas frankly admit that they have no caste but in their own words 'Manob Jaat' (Just Humans).

Finally, it can be said that there are numerous other patas which emphasize the true ethos of humanness/humanity discarding the shallow fragmentation framed by different religious groups. At this moment a particular pata called "Santal Pata" presented by Tapan Chitrakar (alias Abubakr) can be mentioned which evokes the true essence of Indian ethos of 'Humanity' and 'Commonality' in religion:

He Musalman-e Allah bole, Dada go Musalman-e Allah bole

Hindu bole Bhagaban.

Ek mayer Santan.

Amra Manabjati, Ek mayer Santan. (Santal Pata)

Translation:

Muslims invoke the Lord by the name of Allah, Hindus by Bhagaban.

We do belong to a common parent.

We all are humans, we do belong to a common parent.

In the face of impending digitalization and amidst all sorts of continual cultural transformations, the Patuas of today's Bengal are determined to retain their art, culture and tradition. Their munificent cry for the flexible 'moderate path' embracing and encompassing all sorts of religious and cultural ethos (be it Hindu, Islamic, Buddhist or Santal) serves as an epitome of the quintessence of true humanitarian ethos "Manob Jaat" (Humanity as a whole). These Chitrakars (true to their surname) dissolve into different religious identities and keeping in mind the market demands, their patas are being decorated according to the diverse religious fashions. It is obviously true that the popularity of the mass media, engrossing digitalization and "bollywood extravaganza" (Rothestein) hamper and impede the sustainability of these kinds of folk art forms. But at the same time, it is also evident that the assistance and active support of a large number of erudite scholars, interested researchers and involving academics strive to safeguard and preserve this antique art form even in the face of endangerment. Nowadays, so many seminars, workshops and colloquium on 'Marginal voices' have been ensued to revive these folk art traditions and include it in the mainstream body of discussion; thus, let it come out from the narrow clutches/confinements of marginality. The pictorial stories, especially the mythical ones and its accompanied songs (which are in severe endangerment) are being collected, preserved and transcribed through audio recording, video documentation and digital archiving. In the perpetual tug of war between tradition and modernity, the stature of these patas is optimistically escalating. The patachitras have now turned out to be a worldwide phenomenon. From international book fairs to numerous festivals and craft fairs around the world (both in India and abroad) their patas are largely being displayed, narrated and sold out at a convenient price. Mr. Rothenstien's assertion in this regard posits his own firm conviction that:

Yet the Patuas are resilient and are determined to claim a place in today's India. (Rothestein)

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**Notes:**

1. The word ‘Pata’ derives from the Sanskrit root word ‘Patta’ which means ‘a piece of cloth’ or ‘canvas’ and the word ‘chitra’ means ‘painting’. Therefore, the word ‘Patachitra’ means pictorial stories done on the piece of cloth.
2. Interested readers may look at the essay by Uri Rubin, ‘Prophets and Prophethood’, in *The Blackwell Companion to the Qurʾān*, edited by Andrew Rippin. (Malden, Oxford, Victoria: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 254-255.
3. During the Medieval Period in Bengal, different versions of “Mangal Kavyas” (describing and dealing with the same story) existed which put forth diverse alternative discourses.

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