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A Glimpse of Scroll Narrative Art: Survival of *Pata* Painters

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Art is universal. All over the world, mothers sing and hum their babies to sleep. Storytelling, rhyming and dramatized enactments are present in all cultures. The same is true of music and dance, as well as of depictions of people and animals, along with designs and patterns, which are drawn in pigment, charcoal, rice powder or paste, pulses grain, molded from clay, and carved or whittled from wood, bone, or stone. The emotion is expressed in a way since time immemorial. Humans everywhere decorate and beautify their environment, possessions, and bodies. Art also is ancient in its origin. Likewise, giving birth to and raising a child is not ending point of the motherhood.

The art and culture first evolve into rural folk. Folk played vital role in every community to shape its art and culture. Henceforth, folk practices evolve into rural life. The beauty and concept of Indian floor art, wall art and narrative scroll art always inspired and entertained the people from time to time. Hinduism, the religion of the majority of the citizens of India, has a heterogeneous faith, whose local manifestations are diverse. Folk religion in Hinduism may explain the rationale behind local religious practices as well as folk practices, and contain local myths that explain the existence of local religious customs or the location of temples. The subcontinent of India contains a wide diversity of ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups. Given this multiplicity, it is difficult to generalize widely about the folklore of India as a unit. The researcher believes that a community can only reach its full potential by involving everyone in its social and economic life.

The past generation anthropologists have greatly broadened their traditional field of work-that of primitive, tribal societies-to include larger social units, with more complex ways of life, with more complex historical origins, and with better historical documentation. These studies, usually qualified by the adjective "community," have been made in such diverse places as Mexico, Peru, Brazil, Ireland, Thailand, China, Japan, and India, The superficial characteristic which most of the communities so studied have in common is that they are neither "primitive" in the usual sense of the word, nor are they "civilized" in the sense of being integrated into modern industrial cultures. But the country like India became a center of attraction for the people around the world due to ancient Hindu and Buddhist mythology, intuit folklore, the great *Mauryan* ruler emperor *Ashoka*,

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great Gupta rulers emperor *Chandragutpa* (*Vikramaditya*) and *Samudragupta,* and the great *Palau* ruler emperor *Dharmapala* made this country proud as '*Subarnabhumai* ' as well as '*Kanakapura'* or the ' Land of Gold ' since the 3rd century BCE. The rationale of folk culture or folk religion may clarify the feasibility of folk as well as ritual practices. Belief of unlettered people, regional faith, religious customs and local myths are given birth of 'Narrative Art' as well as 'Scroll narrative Painting'. As a matter of fact, according to the scholars scroll painting, the art form is practiced primarily in East Asia.

Scroll narratives or *pata-chitra* is one of the oldest art practices in India. "It is mentioned about the existence of *Pat* and *Patuas* in Indian literature." [i] Subrata Manna has cited the aforesaid statement of Prof.Devaprasad Ghosh founder of Ashutosh Museum, Calcutta University. Dr. Devaprasad also told that two thousand five hundred years ago scroll played its role to provide education, entertainment and religious preaching to the citizen of India. These kinds of evidences existed in many places of India. Long length narrative scroll and *chauko/* squire scroll used to fulfill the needs. One can see from the biographies of Jain *Tirthankar Mahaveer* and *Gautama Buddha* in the sixth century BCE and the son of *Mankhali Goshal* who were the eminent founder of '*Aajivik'*[ii] community. He was the son of a *Mankha* means *Patua*. Sometimes people used to call them as *Panimankha> Patkar> Pattikar> Patua*. *Patuas* of Bengal pursue rituals of Hindus, Buddhist and Mohammedan. Their core profession was to paint and sing on the scroll.[iii]

Some evidences of ancient scroll are stated in this table

Sl.No.	Time	Book Name	Author	Role of *Patuas*
1	4th Century BCE	*Mahabhashya*	*Patanjali*	Here *Patanjali* wrote about spying role of *Patuas.*
2	4th Century BCE	*Astadhayee*	*Panini*	*Gramya Shilpi O RajShilpi* (*Patuas* are dedicated to village audience others are dedicated to Court's need)

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3	4th Century BCE	*Arthashashtra*	*Kautilya* *(Chanakya)*	*Nipunaka* a magician played a *Patua's* role for spying
4	5th Century AD	*Abignanamshakuntalam* *O Malavikagnimitram*	*Kalidasa*	*Chitralikhan O Chitradarshan*
5	7th Century AD	*Harshacharit*	*Banabhatta*	Description of *Yama-pata*
6	8th Century AD	*Uttarramacharit*	*Bhavabhuti*	*Chitralikhan O Chitradarshan*
7	8th Century AD	*Mudrarakshasa*	*Vishakhadutta*	Description of *Yama-pata*

Twentieth century's eminent artist cum author Binod Bihari Mukharjee penned down in his book- *' Pat O Patua'* meaning 'Scroll *and Scroll Painter',* the author wanted to point out that there is a close connection with Jain miniature art and *Patachitra.* He also mentioned that Buddhist art style is not that much closer connected in comparison with Jain art. But this assumption may not be true. One can find the influence of *Pata Chitra* in Buddhist art and literature. It is an undeniable fact that in many states of India *Pata Chitra* art is ever-existing from time immemorial. *Patuas* or scroll narrators of ancient India, scroll narrators of contemporary India as well as Bengal are versatile in nature, they are poets, artists, composers, singers and performers. *Patuas* are bards who move into villages from morning to late-afternoon, unfurl scrolls or *patas* and sing at the household's doorsteps. *Patuas are* also known as *Charana kabi* as they move into villages and in that connection scrolls are called '*Charanachitra',* since Buddhist era. From Ramayana and the Mahabharata, Jataka Tales and lots of heroic legends have been widespread in isolated bardic songs. Over times, such legends gathered additional elements in the mid -Ganges simple unless they had been compiled into the epics. Moreover, the epics have versions within variant religious perceptions, the Hindu-Jain-Buddhist. The process of transformation also imbibes the elements, for instance the bardic trends in present Bengal signify many of the pre –existing life of indigenous groups[iv].

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Uneducated and unlettered *Patuas* are unable to write correspondence letters, but subsequently they exhibit a profound knowledge and skill about the hereditary practices of *Patuas* culture. *Patuas* narratives of popular culture and contemporary events are really reinterpretations, compared as an arched like light through the prism of their own folklore and history. To display the scroll, at first the *Patua* kneel down on the knees and holds the top side of the stick of scroll with left hand. The end stick of the scroll is held with the right hand and then starts singing in a rhythmical manner. Scroll-narrator initiates to unfurl the right hand-part and furls the left hand-part as well. Not only unfurls the down part of the scroll with the right hand but also indicates to the images or characters on the scroll by the right hand. *Patua or Patuas* cannot illustrate or depict pictorially all the panels according to the composed story. The intermediate gap is filled with dramatic body movements along with the aid of high pitched songs.

The love of *Krishna* and *Radha* has been given expression in the lyrical poetry of many Indian languages, particularly Bengali. The Bengali saint *Chaitanya* was said to be an incarnation of both *Krishna* and *Radha*; he was Krishna on the inside and *Radha* on the outside. *Sri Chaitanya* also composed many devotional poems celebrating the divine love, but they have not survived.

The wandering bards sing stories about picture panels depicted in their scrolls and make living through their narratives. Their stories also depict Hindu saints and Muslim saints. With changing times, the *Patuas* have crafted their message as per the requirement. Now they are creating scrolls reflecting social issues, such as literacy and the environment. With globalisation, *Patuas* are responding to stories featuring international issues, but with a local twist. During the performance of his scroll researcher interact with *Dukhushyam* and other *Patuas.*

Dukhushyam Chitrakar says, "Wherever I have gone, I made the people understand our scroll or *pata* painting tradition and how it is moving with narration means singing *pata* or scroll songs along with the display of scroll paintings. If you want to understand the life of *Patuas,* then sincerely try to cope up with our narrations." *Swarna Chitrakar* was singing the scroll painting or *patachitra* made on '*Neel Bidroho'.* In her scroll narration, she was urging Britons to quit our country. The painful chapter of Bengal farmers was explained by her.

Dukhushyam Chitrakar defines that Bengal has numerous folk songs, but *patas or Patuas* music is well organised with the amalgamation of four five folk songs. Those are the *Baul song, Fakiri song, Kavigaan ,Panchali* and *Tarjaa* song which are the typical folk music of Bengal in proper combination. *Dukhushyam* says, each scroll song has a *poyer* with rhythmic ups and down called chorus. In other words, it has to be sung in high pitch or low pitch voice. While we compose music

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we take inspirations from various song styles, music, its tunes, its rhythms and essences. All these are like to incorporate in *pata* songs or scroll songs.

Dukhushyam was singing a scroll song from *Manasa Mangal*-

> *"Let's float the boats Oh dear sea mates .....*
>
> *Let's float the boats in the Sea…"*

They composed this song in a *poyer* tune of rhythmic pattern in a group of five to seven singers giving their voices. He even told that the music composer, Pratul Mukherjee has incorporated same tuning in movie song of "*Behula - Lakhinder"* released in 1977. *'Poyer'* rhythmic chorus songs. He also gave example about that the folk song "*Bandhu Teen deen tor Barite Galum dekha pailum na-a-a, Bandhu Teen deeeen…..* " O dear friend last three days continuously went to your home to meet you, O dear friend …three days…but why did not you meet me? " a popular folk song sung by famous Bangladeshi singer Runa Laila her music composer has taken the tune from *Krishna Leela* narratives.

Montu Chitrakar – a scroll narrator asserted that people nowadays need to be entertained in different ways. So we are also composing our narrations that way to attract and impress our audience.

Swarna Chitrakar is of the opinion that the singing and display of scrolls, both are the integral part of scroll narrative. Both are complementary to each other. Without song nobody can understand the image or content being painted on the scroll. Unless the narrative song is explicated, it's impossible to get recognition as a folk artist. That is why throughout the generation, our *pats* have been accompanied by songs and that is why we are called as *'Patuas'*.

Dukhushyam says that in olden days they used to travel from village to villages, performing scroll narrative in the kings' palaces and in the houses of the *zamindars.* In those days, there were no Cinemas, TV or Videos. Thus, they were the sole entertainers of the rural Bengal people. Villagers used to see the images of their scroll along with pictures rural audience used to listen to their songs. Thus, it was a movie for them. They used to get invitation from many families. In those days *patuas* used to go for performance in a group comprising of seven people who used to move at a time. They used to narrate *Savitri- Satyavan, Manasa Mangal and Chandi Mangal* scroll. Devoted housewives used to listen to them sincerely.

Jaydev Chitrakar says that their performance will go in vain if they are not singing the narratives. Since the generation of our ancestors is dedicated to this profession and making people aware of various issues through their painted scrolls and narratives. When tradition passes through them,

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they we are also in the flow to entertain as well as educate people about many difficulties people face in their daily life, be it myth, epics, history, contemporary or social issue oriented themes.

Swarna Chitrakar stresses that making *patachitra* is their tradition. It is their family occupation. She remembered that when she used to be a child, she used to accompany her father during his performance. That is how; she learnt some songs from epics as well as mythology from her father. Later she says, she was formally trained by *Dukhushyam* uncle for all the mythological *poyers* like *Ramayana, Mahabharata,* even *Mangal Kavyas like Manasa Mangal, Chandi Manga, Dharma Mangal* etc. Simultaneously old and experienced *Dukhushyam* has given some coaching on how to make scroll on social issue like violence against women were taught by *Dukhushyam* uncle.

Patuas community got the realization that they need to bring transformation in scroll performances. Otherwise, they are on the verge of existence. As per the mode of changes they brought new ideas, new themes and new narratives in their performance.

Swarna Chitrakar created efforts to show and narrate Manasa Mangal Scroll, Radha Krishna Scroll. She conjointly painted Nirbhaya Scroll. *Swarna Chitrakar* narrated the story of *Nirbhaya* scroll songs, but she was not willing to display the same because she was in the contract with American Centre, Kolkata. American Centre wants to publish a book about *Nirbhaya* rape case. *Swarna Chitrakar* is the recipient of many awards.

Montu Chitrakar says that his grandfather and ancestors never had the concept of having a portion of land for cultivation. His ancestors used to earn lots of meals, grains and coins from the lower middle class and middle elegance families patrons of rural areas. They used to get shelters at the *chaar chala, aat chala* in the front of the *Chandi mandap,Sheetala mandap or Shiva Mandap, jalsatratala, langarknana or clubghar*. From a single safe haven, there had been performances for 15 days. They used to earn more by using narrating scrolls from *Ramayana, Mahabharata, Krishna Leela, Chandi Mangal and Manasa Mangal*

Mantu Chitrakar said that he has identified from his grandfather that when radio came to villages, their profession failed to get abundant audience. When the TV came, it slowly brought disturbance and shook our profession. With the access to Radio, TV and Cinema in demand their form drastically reduced. Mainly middle class Bengalis in rural areas got coloured TV and from that day onwards their profession shoved to the brink. Their art form was near to extinction. Thus, continuous struggle has been made to keep this age old art form alive. The people of this generation liked to see movies. They enjoyed watching beautiful faces, dance and comics on the silver screen. The rural Bengal population had gone averse against the scroll narrative performances.

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Since birth, the *patuas* are dedicated to this profession; they should not allow their age old tradition to fade away. Few *patuas* were able to manage with this diverse situations because they knew that other correlated art form like idol making and *Dual Chitrakar* can do both. They paid full heed on earning their livelihood from idol making. They knew the way to make relief panels on brick build houses. They are even deft in designing entrance door panel of middle class households. Thus, they possessed painting sense. *Dulal Chitrakar* and some others move towards those kinds of earning. Most of the *patuas* did not know to make idols; naturally they started experimenting in scroll narratives. But, earning for livelihood became quite strenuous. *Patuas* of many districts ceased their practice or engaged with the profession correlated in *patuas* art. They realized the need to take a fresh approach to make their age old folk art form survive. *Montu Chitrakar* created mimicry tunes just like Harmonium, *Tabla, Kahartaal* and flutes. Nowadays, he is dexterous in scroll narration instead of painting scroll.

Montu Chitrakar stated that they have started their challenging journey with old man *Dukhushyam*. *Dukhushyam, Niranjan, Shyamsunder* came forward to give their efforts to bring a Renaissance in this folk practice. Themes from myths and epics were kept at bay and composed new scroll narratives. They borrowed the action from *Jatra*, not only gesture and acting, but also musical instruments, beats or *talas* were incorporated for vocal narration. Even tunes from Bengali movies songs, folk songs like *Baul, Bhatiyali, Fakiri, Kirtan, Tarja, and Kaavigaan* have juxtaposed in their narration. Simultaneously, they brought new themes like *keccha kahini/* corruption, counseling on various diseases, crime affairs, accidents or incidents happening in India or abroad have been incorporated in scroll narrative themes.

Manu Chitrakar realized that time has shown its colour in the true sense. With a new approach, they composed new scroll paintings as well as narratives to reach people, based on novel themes and new events happening around them. This way they have started attracting people; as an outcome researchers have seen audience turning back to this folk art form.

This community exists in poverty line. They are not getting much benefit. This context required quiet genuine patrons like West Bengal Handicrafts Developments Corporation Ltd. (*Manjusha*), Kolkata, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi, National Folk Support Centre, Chennai, *Shilparamam*, Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh Handicrafts Developments Corporation Ltd. (*Lepakshi*), *Shilpgram*, Udaipur, Rajasthan Handicrafts and Textile Corporation, Jaipur, Gujarat Handloom & Handicraft development corporation Ltd, Gandhinagar. Artists are getting *Shilpi* pension of Rs.75/- per month, after the age of 65 , few *Patuas are* getting rice for Rs.2/kg , that is not sufficient for their livelihood. *Patuas* are having a lot of struggle in their life; they are unable to continue their school education due to financial stringency and scarcity of time. Therefore the government should take some initiative. Educated *Patuas* can handle many hassles in government

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offices (in case of loans). One has to take initiative to scrub and cleanse the mind-to expiate – individually and as well as a society. Quiet flows The Ganges. When will we have a change of mind, society and time? Now we need some strongholds behind them to give them support, as well as to bring *parivartan* in our outlook. Countless sobbing innocent folk painters faced encroachment of their residential space and are deprived of their rights. These helpless muted *Patuas* are afraid even to whisper against those powerful political leaders.

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[i] Dr. Subrata Kumar Manna wrote in his book *' Banglar Patachitra, Patua Sangeet, Patua Samaj O Lokosamaskritibignan'* under the subtitle 1.1 '*Pater Pratnatattik O Sahityik Nidarshan' meaning* Anthropological and Literatural evidences of the Scrolls. Published by Pharma KLM Private limited, Kolkata-12. ISBN no: 81-7102-169-7, P.-6, 2012. Print.

[ii] *Ajivika*, an ascetic sect that emerged in India. *Ajivikas'* worshipped '*Goshala'* as a divinity, and the tenet of *niyati* developed into the doctrine that all change was illusory and that everything was eternally immobile. *http://www.britannica.com/topic/Ajivika*

[iii] H. H. Risley's book The Tribes and Castes of Bengal, vol.I &II, Calcutta, Bengal Secretariate Press, P.172, 1891. Print.

[iv] Above lines cited from scholar Amitabha Sengupta's book "Scroll Paintings of Bengal: Art in the village, PP.10-11, AuthorHouse publisher, 2012, online Google books.