

Patuas in a Bengal Village: In Search of Unity and Coexistence

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ABSTRACT: The Patua and the Patidar communities are both, as their names indicate, folk painters of West Bengal. They earn their livelihood by exhibiting their scroll paintings on different subjects from Hindu mythology to contemporary events to different government plans and programmes. This, they do along with the performance of unique rhythmic songs in folk tunes in front of the audience. Earlier they were treated as beggars. Their religious and cultural positions remain between the Hindus and Muslims. This art form is promoted as a cultural heritage of India by the government. The present paper endeavours to understand the dual religious identity, livelihood practices, and harmonious and peaceful coexistence of Patuas in a Bengal village Naya in Paschim Medinipur of West Bengal. The result shows that the Patuas follow dual identities, share the village space in harmonious coexistence with the neighbours play a unique role in the moral and mass education of the society, as mobile entertainers and social messengers in rural Bengal.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Habil parila shashtra, Kabil Kuran

Taha hate shristihala- Hindu Musalman.....

A portion of Patuageet — Habil read the sacred scriptures of Hindus and Kabil read the Koran from that two religions, Hindu and Muslim emerged.

India is a land of biodiversity, ecological diversity as well as diversity of language, culture and religion. There are 91 eco-cultural zones, accommodating around 4635 distinct ethnic groups and countless sub-groups. Some of the communities traditionally follow dual religious identity. As for example, 87 communities follow both Hinduism and Sikhism, 116 communities follow Hinduism and Christianity, 21 communities follow Hinduism and Jainism, 29 communities follow

Hinduism and Buddhism and 35 communities follow both Hinduism and Islam. In this context, people are living side by side in one brotherhood, respect each other's cultures and continue their own identity through socio-religious practices and occupations. These people interact regularly with each other in their socio-economic and religious spheres and have shared as neighbours, for a long. They retain their own culture and add to the cultural variety and heritage of India.

There are two groups in Patua society in West Bengal. One retains their Hindu identity and the other group associates more with the Muslims. These two religious groups practise different types of occupations. They also have different surnames (e.g., Chitrakar, Patua, Malakar, Sarkar, Paul, Gaji, Gayan, Chitrakar-Patua, Mal Patua, Bede, Baidya, Pateriya, Maskari and Patkar), and follow different socio-religious life and various traditional occupations. Some Patuas in rural Bengal follow a dual religious identity. From the very early days, male Patuas earned

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their living by entertaining the rural folks with their hand-drawn pictures on paper accompanied by songs from Hindu religious texts and epics, composed by themselves. Their noblest idea is a stylistic visual presentation along with illustrated by songs. These songs are very appealing because of their typical folk melody and compelling subject matter, with an essence of moral education. The artists are mobile entertainers and their occupation is begging. They are known as Patua, Patidar or Chitrakar. In early days, they were mostly illiterate, but well informed in their traditional performing art. This art form i.e. *patachitra* has survived through practice and orally transmitted through generations from father to son as in *guru sishya-parampara*. This is a highly aesthetic art form.

The first recognized public exhibition of *Patachitra* was held in March 1932 at Santiniketan and was organized by the late Gurusaday Dutta, the then District Magistrate of Birbhum. This exhibition was financed by the Indian Society of Oriental Art. Kaviguru Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Abanindranath Tagore and Sri Nandalal Bose praised the style of paintings and the accompanying mythological songs. Internationally famous artist Sri Jamini Roy held the Patua style of painting in high esteem and he is known as an urban Patua for his painting style and subject matters, which take a lot from the Patua style. Prior to the 1980's, Patua practitioners were primarily men. But since then, women too began to paint and sell their paintings. They were also trained in this art. Sustenance came their way in the eighties, when the state government, recognizing folk art as an effective tool to reach out to the grassroots, started employing them to educate the masses on family planning, immunizations, literacy campaigns, etc. They also participated in state and national-level art and crafts exhibitions and fairs. The art form has gradually earned popularity through these fairs as well as through mass media promotion.

Patachitra can be differentiated on the basis of size and subject matter. Over time, there have also been some changes in painting materials, painting technology as well as subject matters. However, the artists have left their earlier occupation of begging and has earned the status of folk painter and artist. Now, their *patachitra* has a great demand amongst art lovers globally for its beauty, aesthetics, and

subject matters.

It may be noted that the Muslim community does not want to marry in a Patua community. It is interesting to note that these artisans follow the Muslim ways of life on one hand, and on the other hand they practise their traditional occupation with Hindu religious pantheon. Patuas are distributed in 15 villages in Purba and Paschim Medinipur districts of West Bengal. Their dual religious identity is the best example of religious and cultural syncretism of both Hinduism and Islam. There is no conflict in intra and inter communities.

The early works on *Pat* and *Potuas* were done by Gurusaday Dutt (1939), Dinesh Chandra Sen (1941), Asoke Mitra (1957), Asish Bose (1967), Binoy Bhattacharjee (1980), Chinmoy Dash (2009), Dipak Kumar Bara Panda (1998), Mc Cutchion and Shruit Kumar Bhowmik (1999), Chumki Piplai (2010), Nabakumar Duary (2015) and others. There is no record of Patua population in Dalton's (1872), Risley's (1915), and Hunter's (1946) books. Gurusaday Dutt made a significant contribution to Patuas of Bengal and he has systematically recorded their paintings, which are now exhibited in Gurusaday Museum, Kolkata. *Patachitra* is a very fascinating work for the researchers and they deal with its various aspects in different places of West Bengal and in the adjoining state of Odisha. These aspects are painting technology, songs, changing aspects of painting etcetera. However, there is no significant research on the community's dual religious identity and their coexistence. Hence, there is a lot of scope for anthropological study and dialogue on their harmonious coexistence in the context of religious and cultural diversity.

For this particular study, the village Naya in Paschim Medinipur district of West Bengal has been selected. This is a Patua-inhabited, multi-ethnic caste dominated old village with a sizable population of Patuas and other ethnic groups. This settlement is called Patua village and this village is famous for *Jaranopat*, *Gutanopat*, *dighalpat* or different types of scroll paintings, as well as for *chowka* or square painting. Its fame has gradually spread through Patuas and their *patachitra*. The present study is mainly focussed on following objectives: to understand the dual religious identity of Patuas; to study the

livelihoods practices of Patuas, and to study the harmonious coexistence of the Patuas.

The Cultural Setting of Village Naya

Naya village is a caste dominated Patua inhabited village, famous for its *patachitra*. Many art lovers know this village for its traditional *pat* painting. This village is situated in Pingla Police Station in Paschim Medinipur district of West Bengal. The ethnic composition of the village comprises of Brahmins (priests), Mahishyas (cultivators), Napits (barbers), Dhopas (washer men), Tantis (weavers), Kamars (blacksmiths), the Oriyas, the Muslim Patuas and the Tribals (Santal and Lodha). They live in separate *para* or hamlets like *Tanti para*, *Mahishyapara*, *Patuapara* etc. According to 2011 Census, there are 3960 people in 962 families, of which 300 Patuas are living in 70 families in Naya village. The population of scheduled caste and scheduled tribe are 20 and 498 respectively. The total literacy rate of the village is 79.92 per cent. Village primary school, Shishu Siksha Kendra, ICDS Centre, health sub-centre, cremation and burial grounds are located in different parts of the village. The religious places of the village are old Siva temple in *Chandrapara* and two mosques in *Patuaparas*. Patuas are mostly land less, who have only a piece of habitudinal land. They are mainly dependent on *pat* painting as their livelihood. These people interact within their same community people as well as with neighbours in day do day life in economic and religious spheres. Since 2010, banglanatak.com, a Kolkata based NGO, has been organizing *patamaya* i.e. *pat* fair or *Potuamela* in Naya village every year in the month of November for a week .. It is organized for exhibition cum sale. All Patua families exhibit their paintings on their verandas or courtyards of their respective houses.

Patachitra: An Ancient Culture

The *patachitra* is one of the famous folk paintings of Bengal. The root word *pat* means cloth in Sanskrit and jute in Bengali. The community's name and surnames of the painters may come from the words *pat* and *chitra* (or painting) respectively. The practice of exhibiting scroll painting is found in ancient Sanskrit Vedic literature *Katyansutra*. After death of Lord Buddha, the story of *Jataka* was depicted on

scroll painting in *Armanjusree*. The great poet Kalidas mentioned the Chitrakars and the exhibition on scrolls in his famous dramas, namely *Abhijnam Sankuntalam* and *Malavikagnimitram* in 15th century. The *Brahmavaivata Purana*, in middle of 13th century, deals with the origin, occupation, caste affiliation, etcetera, where the Naba Sayak caste group includes the *Chitrakars*. But in the later period of history, the Chitrakars lost their rank and were ousted from *Naba Sayak* group for their deviation from traditional paintings (Bhattacharjee, 1980:2). The description of Yamapat was found in Harsha Charita of Banbhata in early 7th century and in *Uttar Ramcharitam* by Sankrit Pandit Bhavabhuti. Stories from epics were depicted in scroll paintings from Pal Dynasty and Sen Dynasty for mass education. The distinctive style of painting actually flourished during the Mughal period in Bengal.

A good number of Hindu Patuas migrated from Medinipur to Kalighat area in Kolkata long ago for better living. They shifted from scroll painting to square *pat* for pilgrimages at Kali temple. They were known as Kalighat Patua and their settlement was called *Patuapara* or Patua's hamlet. The subject matters range from Hindu gods and goddesses, social events, social evils, hair decor, *babu* culture of Kolkata, cats with fish, prostitution, vague saints, etc. Their painting style is different from the rural Patuas of Bengal. There is a place and roads with prefix the word *patua* e.g., Potuatala Lane in Kolkata.

THE PATUA

An Ethnographic Note

Patua society is patriarchal in nature, and by religion they follow both Hinduism and Islam. They speak in local Bengali language. Patuas are endogamous community. Their common surname is Chitrakar and their personal names are both Hindu and Muslim e.g., Ranjit Chitrakar's son's name is Sahajan Chitrakar. A common and popular myth regarding their origin is as follows:

“One day Lord Siva, the Lord of Gods, came in the disguise of an artist (*Patua*) to see whether his image had been completed by an artist whom he had ordered to do so. The artist, or Chitrakar, in order to give 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, and at the same time cleaning unclean teeth, Lord Siva became very angry. As the result of such a sin, the whole Chitrakar group was rendered outcast by the curse of Lord Siva" (Mc Cutchion and Bhowmik, 1999:12).

It is also reported that a good number of social movements have been organized to bring them back to Hindu society since 1950s.

The material culture of the Patuas is very simple and traditional. They live in four slopped low-height houses with thatched/ tiles/asbestos roofs. There is no distinction in dress pattern, hairstyle, body decoration, ornaments of both genders of Patuas. Men use religious caps at the time of entering the mosque for prayer or at the time of reading of Quran. They are non-vegetarian. Their family size is small and nuclear. Most of the boys and girls are educated up to the middle to secondary level of school education. However, one boy studies in an art college in Kolkata. They follow the Hindu *panjika* to fix an auspicious day for the marriage of boys and girls and it is conducted by *Munsi Mollha* from Patua society who follows the traditional marriage rules and customs. Generally, Muslims are not likely to marry Patua boys or girls. Therefore, they select bride and groom from Patua society in the same village or different villages in Purba and Paschim Medinipur districts and other parts of West Bengal. They bury the dead body in the burial ground after performing traditional rituals. Patuas observe their life cycle rituals from birth to death. These are:

- *Chatty*: birth rites on the 6th day of childbirth.
- *Ekusabasi*: shaving the hair of the newborn baby and trimming nails of the mother on 21st day from birth of the baby.
- *Sunnayt or khadna*: which is also called *khatnideoa* or *musalmani kara*. It is performed by *khalifa*.
- *Bhojni*: first rice eating ceremony and feast, called *annaprasan*.
- *Sadi*: marriage ceremony held in day time in presence of *Munshi Molla*.
- *Parbasi*: elaborate death rituals like *dafan*, *jannyat*, *kabar*, *charkulpora*, *kuppora* and

challis in presence of *Moulabi* or religious chief, family members, neighbourhood and relatives. They observe the death pollution period for 15 days.

Patuas observe some Muslim festivals and occasions in family and community level like *Sabebarat*, *Id*, *Bakhret*, *Idalfetar*, *Edujoha*, *Qurbaninamaj*, *Muharram* and so on. They observe *Jamaisasthi* and *bhaiphnota* joyously.

Learning Process of Patachita

Earlier *pat* painting was practised by the men only. Since more than three decades it is practised by both genders. The school-going children assist their parents in painting as well as in domestic chores. They learn painting from their immediate family, kin members and play mates through their socialization process. They learn collection of vegetable colours from local resources at different time and seasons and preserve them year long. They learn about different stages of painting process i.e. from making painting instruments, to preparing scroll paper, learning painting techniques, pasting of paper on old cotton cloth, composition of songs etcetera. Children also learn about the exhibition of their paintings along with songs. They gather knowledge of common and popular stories of Hindu epics, folk stories from their parents or from television and from folk drama. However, they also gather knowledge on contemporary issues from print and electronic media, from local people and from kin and family members.

Livelihood

Paintings of Patuas are demonstrated only at the time of the begging in village areas. They depict *patachitra* or paintings on different subject matters like mythological stories of Hindu gods and goddesses, birds and animals, domestic life, contemporary events, freedom movement, awareness programmes, government plans and programmes, welfare programmes and so on. Earlier, the men earned a few pennies, rice, vegetables and old cotton *sarees* from villagers by exhibiting their scroll paintings as they sang along with it. The audience listened very attentively and paid regards to the gods and goddesses. At the end of the songs, the performers mentioned the original stories, name of the performing

Patua and his address. Sometimes they would also request the house owner to give little more rice, vegetables and, used old sarees. They use old torn cotton *sarees* for strengthening the scroll of painting paper. Earlier the Patuas were treated as beggars but now they are recognised as folk painters. Earlier, they never sold the *pat* in fairs or any other places. Now their main source of income is to sell their *patachitra* in fairs in villages, towns and metropolis. They have started pat painting on other materials like dress materials, house hold articles or bed spreads which are available in government and private art and crafts shops, and souvenir shops in different parts of India.

Subjects of Patachitra and Extension of the Artform

The usual subject matters of the scroll paintings are *Chandimangal, Behulabasan, Manasabasan, Behula Lakhinddar, Srimanta Masan, Sabitri Sattyaban, Kamale Kamini, Sitaharan, Sitar patal prabesh, Ram-Ravaner juddha, Mahi Ravan Badh, Draupadir bastraharan, Datakarna, Taraka Badh, Radha Krishna Jalkeli, Krishnar nowkabilash, Kaliadaman, Nimaisannayas, Gourangalila*, deforestation, incident on freedom movements, epidemics, flood affected people, accidents, tsunami, assassinations of Prime Ministers Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi and such others. Sometimes they are employed by the local administrators for mass awareness and developmental programmes like mass education and awareness programme related to health, environment, eradication of dowry system, illiteracy, female education, polio vaccination, thalassemia, eradication of child marriage, use of smokeless hearth, forestry, etc. For their performances, the Patuas receive remuneration from local administrators and earn the folk artist status. They also perform on stages these days.

A few Patuas make earthen Hindu idols like Laxmi, Saraswati, Ganesh, Kartik, Durga, Kali, and such others occasionally. Some of the Patuas draw *chalchitra* of *Durgamerd* (half circle backdrop of the Devi Durga) just before *Durga puja*. Patuas also make *Pater-Durga*. It is a permanent oil painting of goddess Durga for worshipping during *Durga puja* which is kept very carefully by the family members of the respective family for use in the following year.

Now they are also employed to decorate the *Durga puja* and *Kali puja* pandals in Kolkata and other towns and cities in India. Sadly, only a few people can compose new songs or give proper lyrics to contemporary events.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The society of Patuas is neither Muslims nor Hindu. This dual identity is reflected in their day to day life, life cycle rites and rituals, religious behaviour and in their chief occupation. Most of the older generation have Hindu names and young generation are proud to be called by Islamic names. Chitrakars take part in socio- religious occasions of the Hindu villagers and Hindus are also invited by them. They contribute money in *gram pujo* or worship the village deity and take the offerings made. Inter dining is permissible and there is no restriction. They have no conflict of cultural ideology and religious ideology within the community or with neighbouring Hindu communities.

Most of the Patuas are artists like any other artisan caste in Hindu society. Sustainance came their way in the eighties when their art form was recognized as a mass education tool. They have a lot of contribution in developmental activities and as story teller. In this regard, an experienced and aged artist Ranajit Chitrakar of Naya village stated that “*a good Patua should have some essential qualities like knowledge in painting technology, painting skill, vivid idea of story of each painting, ability to compose songs, good voice, knowledge about lyrics and rhythm. He should also have knowledge about Hindu mythology and Hindu ideology*”.

Patua society in West Bengal is the best example of unity in a diverse cultural society in a village situation. These artisans are mobile entertainers with a social message in rural Bengal.

India is a land of diversity. It is characterized as a country with the one in many, the individual in the aggregate, the simple in the composite. The millions of people have different faiths and cults and observe different customs and rites. Despite this fact, culturally India is one and whole and it is one of the most ancient cultures of the world, where unity, social cohesion and coexistence with each other prevails on the basis of intergroup relation, mutual trust, respect,

tolerance, equality, inclusion, integration and interdependence.

Today, we see ethnic violence and riots in different parts of the globe. However, it has never happened in Naya village. Ranjit Chitrakar travels to neighbouring villages, performs the Patua songs on the story of Rama-Sita in front of different Hindu castes, and returns to his house. Then he reads the Namaj and his wife Anjuman Bibi lights up the lamp at *Tulasi mancha* in the evening as Anjana Chitrakar. We appreciate their harmony they have created by blending two religions effortlessly in their day-to-day life through generations.

CONCLUSION

Awareness about the rural art traditions of Patidar has recently grown. Surprisingly enough, this awareness has been rapid and widespread, though not always accompanied by a proper understanding of their intrinsic merits and applications. The important role of Patuas in society is unique and their life and philosophy is based on a cultural and religious amalgamation. In the contemporary situation, it has a global perspective. Its practical application creates a better environment, better individuals and a better society.

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