

Women as Storytellers: A Discussion on the Patachitra Painting of West Bengal

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Abstract

The paper is a part of an ethnographic study conducted with the Patachitra painters of Naya village in West Midnapore district of West Bengal. Patachitra is one of the oldest storytelling traditions in India, it means scroll (pata) art (chitra) and is traditionally a visual and oral performance. Here a 10 to 14 feet long scroll is unfurled by the storyteller (patua) as he or she points her finger at the painting (pat) and sing the narration (patergaan). All this process is entirely done by the patua or the artist, from composing the song, painting and finally singing to the audience. The art was primarily a bardic tradition in which the men patua moved from one villages to the other singing a story in exchange of rice or money. This tradition barred women patua as performers in earlier days, as they were engaged in household chores and in raising children, until a changing political economy changed the agency of women patua in the early 1990s. In a gendered lens, this paper addresses participation, agency and power within a folk community of artists.

KEYWORD: women, storytellers, Patachitra, gender.

Introduction

Scroll painting and performance has been known to be existing since the Buddhist times¹ and has been one of the oldest forms of storytelling and message transmission of the traditional ancient times in India. Patachitra is one of such performance that dominate the folk medium world in West Bengal, India. The art itself is many things, for instance, it can be the narration of an epic, a folk tale, or even a contemporary event and the artists here have a very fluid take on these. The patuas have a dual religious identity, they have both Hindu and Muslim names. The patuas are known to be traditional followers of Islam and depict Hindu Gods and Goddesses in their paintings, for which they have been subjected to various kinds of ostracisation within the Islam religion itself. But before that patuas believe they were Hindus, who belonged to the Chitrakar or artist clan, and that is both their caste and surname even at present. This paper particularly, draws insights from an eight-month ethnographic study with the patuas of Naya, West Bengal in which a thick description² of the process of the art and the painting itself has been engaged with. There were forty artists families interviewed and art practices in the community observed.

The Community

¹ Reference to Jataka tales has been made by Ananda Kentish Muthu Coomaraswamy (1929) linking them to Buddhist literature and the timeline as the early onset of picture scrolls in India

² In reading the visual texts, an understanding of Clifford's Geertz 'thick description' has been deployed. I have kept in mind the surrounding contexts in which the paintings were painted, and the stories were narrated, which is crucial to my analysis.

Patuas are traditional scroll painter community in many parts of Bengal and have been one of the oldest existing picture showmen³ in India. There are various places in West Bengal such as Birbhum, Bankura, Nandigram and Chandipur where this art is practiced but it is Naya, a small village in West Midnapore where this art has flourished. Midnapore is a district in West Bengal and because of its proximity with the State of Orissa, adapted itself from a similar art form but different style known as Pattachitra. Patachitra of West Bengal can be rather called Jurano Pat or scroll that are joined together, i.e the single frames when joined form the Jurano Patachitra of Bengal. Whereas Orissa has a very different and finer painting method than West Bengal, even the content explored are largely temple art or epic characters. Patachitra on the other hand has been a fluid art and because of changing social contexts, the art conformed to a pan-Indian ethos⁴. The pats were believed to be like singing bards travelling with their stories from one village to another in exchange for some rice. The pats and the patuas have been keeping pace with contemporary times for instance giving rise to Kalighat pat painters in the 19th century A.D in which the traditional form of pats were 'edited' from long scrolls to single frames to cater to the needs of the visiting pilgrims of Kalighat temple in Calcutta. The patuas of the 18th century colonial India adhered to a finer painting technique of Kalighat painting and the bourgeoisie culture of Calcutta was depicted in them. Later with changing times patuas started making scrolls on contemporary events That was the start of documenting the changing context, at present with the change of institutions from colonial rule to industry economy and large impact of development sector the Patachitra folk medium have adhered the stories as per their commissioners. The patuas as picture showmen have responded to the changing political economies, and in the process of doing so they re-created the narrative, the medium form and the ways of representations to the world.

The stories of Goddess Durga and Manasa (serpent goddess), Lord Krishna and Radha that the patuas represent in their scroll form part of the pouranik or epic scrolls. Similarly there are stories that represent contemporary events that are known as samajik or societal scrolls. There are more types of scroll themes such as paralaukik or the imagined stories such as that of marriage of birds and fishes which can be seen being sold in city fairs and events nowadays.

In the present context, the increasing demand of patuas in the local and global economy has given rise to increasing participation of all the members of the patua community, especially the woman. The woman patua has been travelling beyond her village and in doing so marking newer transformations within the patua community and also within the art.

Women in the art

Cultural Globalisation has affected the nature of traditional folk art in India, the traditions have found new meanings in the new commercial market with television

³ The word was used by Jyotindra Jain (1998) in his book '*Picture showmen: Insights into the Narrative Tradition Indian Art*'. Though it was first used by A.K Coomaraswamy (1929) in his book.

⁴ Pan-Indian is used in the context of history of India, its culture, adapted traditions owing to rapid changes in the history of rivers and the ruled kingdoms, inhabitation of people, or migration of people from one place to the other. In all these shifts of time and people, newer meanings were given to religion, tradition, social customs and hence creating a shared habitat of sorts.

and internet captivating the sense of the audience leaving the performance reduced to just handicraft commercial utility items. Bhattacharya (2005) speaks on cultural production as an exchange value and in terms of use-value, and the meanings that they generate are not static. In stating so, she re-establishes in her report that this very market for cultural production has increased over the years owing to the increased commercialisation of various other cultural activities. This led to a change in the mobility of women folk artists, as women patuas went beyond the local spaces of performances for promoting art and attracting international buyers giving rise to new aspirations of the rural-artists in terms of the new world they are exposed to.

In the changed scenario, within the context of male dominated folk art form who are given importance as artists and not as just wives of the artists, the women patuas have given agency to the characters of the women they represented in the Patachitra. The women patuas have explored range of stories, as one of 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center, another on Rani of Jhansi, or Sarojini Naidu but these themes did not come to the women naturally, they were commissioned to do so. But as one sees the scroll paintings they painted, one can notice the women in their stories are just like them, clad in a saree as they wear, adorned in jewelry which they relate to, as a fact there are nothing dissimilar or fictitious that a woman patua draws in the scroll. The gender roles in patua art have changed since Patachitra was revived since the 1990s. The history of women's participation as artists in West Bengal follows the history of many other folk artists living in the rest of rural India. The recognition of women as artists in Bengal is a new concept. The role of women was restricted to childbearing and domestic work. The tradition of scroll makers called for mobility from village to urban spaces, in which women did not take part before. The patua women did not move out for selling the scrolls, neither did they make them. One of the interviews with a woman chitrakar who was eighty-two years old, clears the idea of women patuas as art makers. Women made clay dolls, and these clay dolls were sold by the male family members when they visited the city fair or even travelled from village to village for performance. It was further shared that the male and female chitrakars were dependent on each other regarding the way they practiced art. Women participated in art-making, but passively and without absolute creative choice. For instance, whenever men artists painted, the women's creative ideas were taken in consideration, like, what they think of the art and so forth, but this did not mean that women could make that art. There was no absolute sense of freedom to the artist that was given as compared to present day.

Gender Role

The changing times limited the audience for patuas. Television and radio were becoming more popular in the suburbs and city dwellers soon forgot the patuas. For long women, chitrakars merely used the surname without using their full potential in the scroll painting process. They did not complain because they were involved in other art-making processes which I will discuss later. The patuas started looking for alternative jobs, and some even stopped painting. It is then that the revival of an age-old tradition became necessary and Patachitra soon came under the scrutiny of researchers, non-government organizations and the government bodies around late 1980s to 1990s. Finally it was also understood that man and woman need to participate in art making to make the community of artists grow. It is then when the oldest member of the community of artist in Naya, was paid to teach women and men patuas in the year 1984. The women patuas did not come out of their homes to

participate at first in the workshop. Some of them shared that they were scared to hurt the feelings of the male members. It was not right, they thought, to paint alongside their husbands. On one hand, there were some male members who despite the tradition dying, didn't allow women to attend the workshop, while on the other hand there were men who asked their wives to participate in the workshop. In these cases there were men patuas who knew they were getting old and their eyes weak, or in some cases there was a need to have a better financial stability in these cases men patuas asked the women patuas to learn Patachitra. Soon after the workshop, there were no more Patachitra being made or performed in the village. The villagers got the money to attend, to teach and then they soon forgot. The eldest Chitrakar who conducted the workshop witnessed a different energy amongst women chitrakars while facilitating the workshop and he too was very sad to see no growth in the community of artists. He later asked some of these women later after the workshop to accompany him to city to see how a patua performance is done. The patuas are bonded in a familial level, the art is carried from one generation to the other, so it was not surprising that this eldest male chitrakar was related to these women. He was one's grandfather, one's uncle and one's father-in-law. He thought if they moved out, perhaps the rest of the patuas will remember their tradition and women as well will move out of their homes to perform the art. So he knew that these women are stronger in their expression and can take the art further, and if they succeed maybe the rest will follow. At the same time in another village Daspur, not very far from Naya, Gouri Chitrakar was awarded the President's Award for her art entry in the late 1980s and also became the first woman patua to win the award. This was during the same time that women in Naya were still thinking of being a part of Patachitra and somehow seeing a few women moving out to perform gave many families the assurance that it is safe for women to be artists.

Soon after this with the coming years women patuas have outnumbered men patuas in Naya, they teach men, children and foreigners who come to stay in the village.

Future Insights

The women chitrakar's process of painting got intertwined with her domestic duties. It was observed during the ethnographic study that all men patuas take a break at around 4-5sh in the evening from their work in the near by tea stall, to smoke a cigarette, drink some tea and just simply hang around. But women patua did not do the same, it was that time when she was preparing dinner and after a quick dinner she would sit with her painting. The changing political economy has given a lot more agency to the women in this art community, but there is a lot more that needs to be addressed in the domestic level, in a way where partnership of just not art but family duties are shared by both the gender.

Men patuas have a common understanding that women in their community and likewise are stronger than men, because they are patient, they give more labour to work and housework, to raising children. The biggest virtue of a woman patua, as said by men patuas are that, women are patient in these roles, and for them this is how they see Durga or Radha when scripting their pat. Some men patuas also shared that it is not just children they raise, they also kind of raise their male better halves. Male patuas shared that the reason they portray women as goddesses, or more of goddesses' stories is so that these women get the respect they deserve in their actual lives. The Patachitra as an art has evolved, and not just the art but with it the artists community

has grown bigger and better, it is no more a dying art rather a flourishing art with a conscience, but with it the women's responsibility has increased twofold.

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