

Patachitra: A Reflection of the Indigenous Oral and Visual Traditions in the Living Heritage of Bengal

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Abstract

Patachitra, a traditional folk art of Bengal, represents a distinctive form of visual storytelling that integrates oral narratives and painted scrolls. Rooted in the indigenous practices of the Patua and Chitrakar communities, this living heritage reflects the cultural, historical, and social dimensions of Bengal. The art form has served as a medium for both religious and contemporary themes, encompassing mythology, folklore, social issues, and modern concerns. The paintings are created using natural pigments derived from plants and minerals, reinforcing a deep ecological connection. However, it has faced challenges due to urbanisation, digital media, and the socio-economic marginalisation of its practitioners. An attempt has been made to understand the significance of this living tradition, the continuity and changes in the scroll painting process, its regional variations, and the modern threats it faces. Additionally, this study highlights how preservation efforts, such as government support, exhibitions, and community-driven initiatives, have played a crucial role in sustaining this art form. Patachitra remains a vital link between the past and present of Bengal, embodying its rich oral and visual traditions.

Keywords: *Patachitra*; Bengal folk art; oral storytelling; living tradition; cultural heritage.

The living cultural traditions of Bengal offer a profound reflection of its history, ethnic diversity, and deep connection to nature. These traditions are expressed through tangible forms such as handwoven textiles, embroidered fabrics, handcrafted masks, and metalwork, alongside intangible forms like music, dance, and

storytelling. Among one of the most captivating expressions of these traditions is *Patachitra*, an ancient folk-art form that combines audio-visual storytelling through painted scrolls (Fig. 1). The tradition of storytelling is perhaps as old as the history of human evolution itself; with or without language, this practice enables the sharing of experiences, generates a range of emotions and responses, and fosters social connectedness



Fig. 1: *Patachitra*, Birbhum Style

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(Chattopadhyay *et. al.* 2020). The tradition of *Patachitra* has been handed down from generation to generation and continues to thrive as a living heritage of Bengal.

Patachitra is deeply rooted in the oral storytelling tradition, where *Patuas* or *Chitrakars* paint and sing narratives that resonate with local folklore and epics. The term *Patachitra* originates from the Sanskrit words '*Patta*' meaning cloth and '*Chitra*' meaning painting (Chakraborty 2017; Singh 2018; Das 2023). It refers to the practice of painting stories on cloth scrolls, often accompanied by song, known as *Pater Gaan*. This tradition, dating back to the 10th-11th century AD, combines visual art with oral narration, allowing artists, known as *Patuas* and *Chitrakars*, to tell stories of mythology (*Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Krisnalila*), history, social issues and contemporary topics such as nuclear warfare, child rights, and women's empowerment (Chatterjee *et. al.* 2021; Mondal2022). *Patachitra* is not only an artistic expression but also an essential tool for social education and commentary, reflecting the ever-evolving nature of society. A unique feature of *Patachitra* is its use of natural pigments derived from local resources. Artists use fruits, flowers, and stones to create their vibrant colour palette. This connection to the natural environment adds an aesthetic value and symbolizes the relationship between the art form and the land. Despite the rise of digital media and modern entertainment, the tradition of *Patachitra* endures, as *Patuas* continue to preserve and transmit stories through their painted scrolls, ensuring its place as a living link to the cultural past of Bengal.

Distribution and Practice of *Patachitra* in Bengal

Patachitra is a widespread art form practised in the eastern regions of India, including Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, and Bengal. In Bengal, the tradition has found strongholds in rural villages, where it thrives as a vital cultural practice. Prominent centres for *Patachitra* in Bengal include Naya, Dashpur, Narajol in West Medinipur; Chandipur in East Medinipur; Etageria, Bonta, Chandpara, and Satphalsa in Birbhum; and Lohadih in Bankura and Majramura in Purulia. These regions are home to unique regional styles, such as the Bengal style of Medinipur and Birbhum, the Santhal style of Bankura and Purulia, and the Kalighat style of Kolkata. Each region contributes its distinct features, enriching the overall tradition of *Patachitra* and highlighting the cultural diversity of Bengal.

The *Patachitra* Painting Process: A Step-by-Step Guide

Creating a *Patachitra* involves a meticulous and labour-intensive process, which ensures the durability and vibrancy of the finished artwork. The process includes

several stages, from preparing the canvas to crafting natural colours and finally painting the intricate designs.

Canvas Preparation

In the past, *Patachitra* paintings were created on *khadi* cotton cloth, known for its durability and texture. The process began with selecting this coarse fabric, which was then treated with a mixture of rice starch, tamarind seed paste, and tree gum. This slurry was applied to the cloth to create a smooth surface, and the process was repeated several times, with the paste becoming thinner with each application. Between each coating, the cloth was allowed to dry in sunlight, resulting in a durable and smooth canvas ready for painting. Currently, artists use art paper for their work, painting several episodes on each sheet and attaching cotton cloth to the back using rice starch as an adhesive to provide additional strength. These individual episodes are then attached to a long cloth, typically around 4.75 m in length, to create a scroll. For smaller works, artists often use a square format known as *chouka* pot (Fig. 2), while larger scrolls can reach lengths of up to 4.88 m, depending on the complexity of the narrative.



Fig. 2: *Chauka* pot

Methods of Natural Pigment Preparation

The vibrant colours used in *Patachitra* are carefully extracted from natural and eco-friendly sources, encompassing plants, minerals, and other organic materials (Fig. 3). This traditional approach not only reflects the indigenous knowledge systems of colour extraction but also emphasises sustainability and environmental harmony. The red pigment is derived from the seeds of the *Lotkon* fruit (*Bixa orellana*), yellow from turmeric roots (*Curcuma longa*), green from the leaves of the *Kundri* plant (*Coccinia grandis*), blue from the petals of *Aparajita* flowers (*Clitoria ternatea*), and purple from



Fig. 3: Pigment Extraction from Latkan seeds

the ripe fruits of Malabar spinach (*Basella alba*). In each of these cases, the plant materials are processed through grinding, crushing, or rubbing to extract vibrant natural juices. These juices are filtered to remove impurities and are further stabilised by mixing them with a binding agent made from wood apple (*Limonia acidissima*) gum or tree resin. This step not only enhances the brightness, gloss, and durability of the painting but also ensures its longevity on the artwork. In addition to plant-based pigments, other natural materials are used to create the remaining colours. For example, orange is sourced from *Geru Mati*, black is traditionally made by collecting soot from burning oil lamps, rice grains, or bamboo, and white is created from crushed conch shells. These pigments are carefully processed and stored in coconut shells, which help preserve their purity, organic properties, and long-lasting quality.

The Painting Process

Once the canvas and colours are prepared, the painting process begins. The artisans typically start by drawing a light outline or directly applying the paint, depending

on their confidence and experience. Different stages of painting include:

- a) **Base colouring:** The background is painted in bright, vibrant colours, with red, yellow, and pink tones common in Medinipur and Birbhum. In contrast, the Santhal style of Bankura and Purulia uses more muted colours like black and ochre.
- b) **Detailing the figures:** After the base colours dry, finer details are added with thinner brushes made from goat or squirrel hair. These details include intricate facial features, clothing, and ornaments.
- c) **Final ornamentation:** Decorative elements such as borders and floral patterns are added to enhance the aesthetic appeal of the painting.
- d) **Reinforcing the painting:** To ensure durability, a soft fabric is pasted to the reverse side of the canvas. This fabric is glued with an adhesive made from rice flour or arrowroot paste, strengthening the scroll for long-term handling.

Scroll Preparation: For large scrolls, extra fabric is added at the top and bottom to facilitate rolling and transportation. A stick is often affixed to one end to assist with the rolling process.

The figures in *Patachitra* are typically shown with faces in profile, torsos frontal, and legs often side-facing, creating a distinctive visual style. Once the painting is completed, it is allowed to dry thoroughly before being rolled for storage. Smaller standalone pieces may be framed for display, while larger scrolls are used for performances or sold as collectable artwork.

Comparative Analysis of Regional Variations in *Patachitra* Painting

This tradition of *Patachitra* across the regions of Medinipur (i.e., both East and West Medinipur dist.), Birbhum, and Bankura-Purulia showcases significant regional variations in themes, styles, and colour usage. While these regions share a common artistic heritage, each has developed its unique approach, influenced by local culture, religious practices, and social contexts. Bankura and Purulia, although distinct districts, share similarities in style, technique, and colour use due to their proximity. The following comparative analysis explores the differences and similarities in the themes, stylistic features, and colour applications in the *Patachitra* art of Medinipur, Birbhum, and Bankura-Purulia.

Themes and narratives: The thematic content of *Patachitra* varies greatly across these regions, with each area reflecting different aspects of local culture and spirituality. In Medinipur, *Patachitra* art includes a wide

range of themes, both religious and secular. It often depicts stories from the *Mangal Kavya*, especially the tale of the goddess *Manasa*, as well as other cultural and historical narratives. Medinipur artists also address contemporary issues, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and social events like the Nirbhaya case, reflecting the region's adaptability to modern concerns. In contrast, Birbhum *Patachitra* focuses primarily on religious themes. The art from this region is deeply devotional, often portraying religious figures like Chaitanyadev. It promotes values of love, devotion, and kindness. A key symbol in Birbhum *Patachitra* is the cow, representing protection, fertility, and compassion, which reflects the region's emphasis on spiritual teachings and moral messages. The *Patachitra* of Bankura-Purulia is distinct, as it is heavily influenced by the Santhal community's cosmology. The themes focus on creation myths, spiritual beliefs, and the relationship between humans and nature. Figures like *Marangburu* and *Durga* are often depicted, representing the cosmic forces of good and evil. This art often explores ideas like karma, the afterlife, and cosmic justice, which are central to the indigenous community's worldview.

Style and artistic features: Stylistically, the *Patachitra* art of these three regions varies significantly. Medinipur *Patachitra* is known for its elaborate compositions and intricate details. The use of bold outlines and a wide variety of colours helps create complex and dynamic visual narratives. Artists from Medinipur employ a variety of techniques to create richly detailed figures and backgrounds that tell multiple stories within one composition. This style is visually dense, combining both religious and secular themes in a single artwork. In contrast, Birbhum *Patachitra* has a more minimalist approach. The art is characterized by fluid, flowing lines and a simpler composition. The focus is on clarity and simplicity, and the designs are not as intricate as those found in Medinipur. The spiritual themes are emphasized through simplicity, allowing the viewer to focus on the core message of the art. The art from this region often uses a reddish base for the figures, creating a warm and inviting aesthetic that reflects its devotional nature. The *Patachitra* from Bankura-Purulia stands apart with its bold, straightforward style. The figures are drawn with strong, clear lines, and there is minimal decoration in the background. The colour palette is more restrained, typically using black, white, and ochre. The figures are simple and direct, without the finer details found in the other regional styles. This simplicity reflects the Santhal tribe's connection to nature and their focus on spiritual and cosmic themes.

Use of colour: Each region has its approach to colour selection and application. In Medinipur, the colour palette is rich and varied, using bold and bright colours

to create depth and intensity in the artworks. Artists use a wide range of colours to highlight the different elements of the composition, giving the artwork a lively and complex visual appeal. The use of contrasting colours and the layering of hues are common, adding vibrancy and dynamism to the art. Birbhum *Patachitra* (See Fig.1), on the other hand, uses a more limited colour palette, focusing primarily on shades of red, ochre, and black. The restrained use of colour in it reflects its minimalist style, where the emphasis is on the message rather than visual complexity. In Bankura-Purulia, the colour palette is even more restrained, with the primary colours being black, white, and ochre. This limited use of colour emphasises the boldness and simplicity of the figures, which are drawn with strong, confident strokes. The colours are often flat, with little to no shading, giving the artwork a stark, raw quality that reflects the spiritual and natural themes of the Santhal people.

Traditional Continuity as well as Contemporary Adaptations

In *Patachitra* paintings, the vibrant scrolls, paired with the evocative songs of *Pater Gaan*, create a unique fusion of art, music, and narrative that continues to thrive in rural Bengal. Rooted in the practices of the *Potua* and *Chitrakar* communities, *Patachitra* art has evolved to adapt to modern dynamics while preserving its ancient traditions. Though it has gained recognition as a valuable cultural heritage both in India and internationally, this recognition remains largely confined to a few villages like Naya and Pingla in Medinipur. Today, artists are expanding the art form beyond traditional canvases, creating commercial products such as sarees, dresses, and home décor. *Patachitra* is no longer limited to its rural origins; it has found a place in global art markets and exhibitions (Das and Soni 2024). Artists have broadened their themes to address contemporary issues such as environmental activism, social justice, gender equality, and political discourse (Basu 2022). While traditional *Pater Gaan* continues in rural areas, urban adaptations have integrated *Patachitra* into interior décor, fashion, and digital mediums. Some artists are experimenting with contemporary techniques, such as incorporating glass paintings, digital prints, and mixed media. However, to cater for the demands of the modern world, artists are now more inclined towards contemporary themes. Consequently, the ethnicity of this art form is diluting the artistic evolution of traditional forms, and the tradition of *Patachitra* is facing numerous challenges that eventually might threaten its continued existence.

The rise of digital media, urbanisation, and the shift towards more lucrative forms of employment have led to

a gradual decline in the number of artists practising this traditional art form (Bhattacharyya 2022; Rath *et.al.*2023). Additionally, the *Patua* and *Chitrakar* communities, who are the custodians of *Patachitra*, often face socio-economic marginalisation, with limited access to resources for artistic production and marketing. These communities, once integral to the rural social fabric, are now grappling with the pressures of modernity and the erosion of their traditional livelihoods. The need for preservation has never been more urgent. *Patachitra* is not just an art form; it is a vessel of cultural memory, a medium through which the *Patua* and *Chitrakar* communities have passed down stories of their gods, their histories, their struggles, and their hopes. Its preservation is essential for maintaining the integrity of Bengal's cultural identity, fostering a deeper understanding of its folklore, and ensuring the continuity of indigenous oral and visual traditions.

Sustainable Solutions

As much as *Patachitra* is an artistic practice, it is a way of life for these communities, and their survival depends on it. There is an increasing recognition of the importance of such indigenous arts, both in India and globally. Efforts to promote the sustainability of *Patachitra* have focused on reviving its traditional practice while simultaneously adapting it to contemporary contexts. Artisans are encouraged to integrate modern themes into their works, creating a dynamic space where traditional knowledge meets modern narratives. At the same time, increasing awareness and respect for these communities and their work can help attract both national and international support through exhibitions, cultural exchanges, and collaborations. The revival of *Pater Gaan* performances, local workshops, and collaborations with urban artists are just some of how the tradition is finding new life.

Furthermore, institutional support is crucial to ensure that *Patachitra* does not fade into obscurity. Government initiatives, non-governmental organisations, and cultural bodies must focus on safeguarding the intellectual property rights of these artisans and providing them with platforms for their craft. Financial support, access to training, and the creation of markets for their artwork can enable the *Patua* and *Chitrakar* communities to sustain their livelihood while keeping their cultural practices alive.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the significance of *Patachitra* transcends its aesthetic value. It is a crucial expression of the identity, history, and cultural practices of the indigenous communities of Bengal. Therefore, preserving this ancient

art form, especially through the empowerment and recognition of the *Patua* and *Chitrakar* communities, is essential not only for the sustenance of these communities but also for the cultural diversity and richness of Bengal itself. *Patachitra*, as a living tradition, must be cherished, supported, and passed on to future generations, not just as a relic of the past but as a vibrant and evolving expression of indigenous creativity, resilience, and cultural pride.

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