
Re-evaluating the Changing Tune of Scroll Paintings in Bengal - Patachitra Artform

Sunil Prasad

Department of Social Work, Visva-Bharati, Sriniketan, West Bengal, India

Corresponding author: prasad.sunil17@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The uniqueness of our Indian folk artistry has an old age historical and habitual belief and carries with itself a rich aesthetics in the whole world. This traditional art practices require a specialized skills and perfection which has been passed on through generations. The art work of the artisans depicts diverse realities and myths in their own regional way. These artisans over the years have disseminated ethical values through their scroll paintings and have reached out to the inaccessible areas of our country. The cultural and traditional vibrancy of our tradition can be seen in this painting.

Among this art form one of the famous art form are Patachitra paintings from West Bengal. This art has its own style and pattern of painting and expresses their own cultural identity, values and aesthetics. Patachitra art has a long history dated back to 2500 years and has contributed to the society through its audio visual scroll paintings narration. By just considering the Patachitrakars a folk art and a community practice in a defined region would not justify their uniqueness and undermine their contribution to the rural society and their role in keeping our old tradition alive and reaching out to the inaccessible areas of country and bridging the communication gap.

Over the period of time the Patachitra art form has shifted from oral and visual painting to just a visual paintings and the question arises that are we thinking about the sustainability of the uniqueness of this art form in the contemporary era. The demand of the contemporary situation has no longer confined the Patachitarakar to restrict themselves to their traditional periphery and forced them to transform their artform. The Patuas faced enormous problems and failed to compete with the liberalized market goods (Chatterjee, 2013).

Other major drawback which made the Patachitra artisans more vulnerable was illiteracy and this artisans are living in situation of poverty, negligence and deprivation even after so many years of Independence. These artisans also lacked any major policy support from the government. The fast growing city life devalued the rural folk art work and this rural artisan found it difficult to find a safe and respectable space within any urban boundaries (Jefferson, 2014).

At present the pressure are on these artisan communities either to preserve their tradition and uniqueness or to change as per the cultural shift and challenging globalized market. Hence, this study tries to focus on the issues and challenges faced by the present day Patachitrakars in terms of sustaining their own old tradition and for their own survival. The paper also tries to focus on the need of making the traditional art work as a source of livelihood for the rural artisans and preservation of our tradition through adaption.

Keywords: Patachitra, Livelihood, Artisans

India's living craft traditions has its own rich aesthetic value, knowledge and uniqueness. The folk paintings of India has always played a vital role in bridging the social, and cultural gaps, and preserved our heritage old tradition and history through paintings. Indian

Handicrafts reflects multi-coloured vibrancy of our society and culture. Art has always been the part of the culture of Indian society from the beginning of human history and as a part of religious establishments. Art sector in our country also provides employment to

large section our population. Among this various art forms one of the oldest and unique art form is Patachitra artform from West Bengal.

The word Patachitrakar has been derived from Sanskrit words Patta meaning a piece of cloth and Chitrakar meaning the ones who paints. The patuas or Patachitras were called as a wandering artist who travelled from place to place along with a painted scroll and narrated the stories along with the pictures. In the early days the Pata paintings were a medium of communication among people and reached out to the most inaccessible area of the state and the country spreading the issues of larger global and local concerns. The patau artisans are known for their scroll paintings and for narration of those stories painted in the scrolls. During any pat display the patachitrakar narrates the anecdotes which would be followed by their self compose ballads which had its functional appeal as it was a audio and visual method of educating the rural population and with their own local dialects and spreading the moral values. The ballads were very simple in their style, and had a taste of rural bluntness and ingenuous.

The patua artisan community has adapted a very fine folk art over the period of time as they passed through both Hindu and Muslim cultures, which is another important uniqueness of Patachitrakars giving them dual identity. They don't have a rigid religious belief and it adds as a plus point for them to come to fold in any religious belief.



Fig. 1: Subho Chitrakar showing a scroll painting depicting a scene from Ramayana

But the quest for India to become a globalized economy keeps aside the main point of what makes our country culturally unique. All the efforts to preserve our rich cultural heritage go in vain if not practiced on ground reality. At present the biggest threat to this kind of artisans craft work is from the manufacturing industries and because of globalization and liberalisation the influx of the cheap machine made goods have reduced the demand for the handicraft products. The change in the fashion trend too has impacted the rural artisans which have forced this artisan to adapt to the new culture and bringing changes in the generation old practices which made the Patau art form unique.

Over decades Patachitra art form has witnessed a cultural shift and has survived one way or another. Hence this paper tries to reflect on how the scroll painting art form Patachitra has witnessed a cultural shift and tries to focus on the need to make their sole livelihood dependency on their traditional craft and promoting their art work keeping intact the same old tradition, style and uniqueness in the art work.

Review of Literature

The term globalization is a debatable topic and has its own advantages and disadvantages in the economy at global and local level. Globalization is a process which refers to the growing socio-economic interdependence of countries worldwide through rising size and variety of transactions of goods and services, capital flows, widespread diffusion of technology across border and moreover the interaction and interdependence of people and culture throughout the world. Due to globalization there has been worldwide diversification of culture rather than unification, that there is increasing number of heterogeneity in world cultures rather than homogeneity (Jefferson, 2014).

Its ill effects can be seen because Globalization is held responsible for unemployment, cultural degradation and difficulties of competition. In the case of Orissa artisans globalization has reduced the number of women craft entrepreneurs which negates women's development and empowerment. Globalization has resulted in the downward mobility of the women craft workers. Invisibility, non-sustainability and vulnerability are on

rise for women craft workers in the craft sector in the era of post globalization. Globalization has squeezed the bargaining power of the women craft workers (Rath N, 2016).

The process of becoming a part of a globalized world has made India as a nation worry about what makes it culturally unique. The movement to preserve this uniqueness usually falls on rural folk cultures, whose traditions change more slowly because they have less access to modernizing influences. The problem with idealizing the static nature of folk art is that it keeps the artists from improving their lives, at the risk of abandoning their work to seek out other economic opportunities.

Over the period of time with the growing intensity of forces of globalization alteration entered the life of the rural people through advanced technology, consumer products, commercial entertainment, hybrid cultures and mobile capital. Liberalized trade and increased mobility corroded their plain rustic lives leaving lesser space for the Patuas. The Patachitra has become one of the dying arts at present situation in the country. The traditional village audiences of the Patuas turned their face away from them in this state of fluctuation. The Patuas faced enormous problems and failed to compete the liberalized market goods (Chatterjee, 2013). Illiteracy made them even more vulnerable exhausting their artistic spirit. From then onwards the Patuas have lived a life of poverty, negligence and deprivation for decades after independence. The sophisticated city-dwellers devalued these rural folk painters who found it quite difficult to gain a safe, respectable space for themselves within urban boundaries. The art of making Patachitra also lacked any specific thrust or policy support from the State Government (Navaneeta Rath, 2016).

Objectives

- ❖ To re evaluate the change in the style of paintings of Patachitra art form.

Methodology

The present study is based on qualitative research. The researcher used case study method. The artisan was selected from Biswa- Bangla Hat, Bolpur Shantiniketan.

The artisan are originally from Medinipur district of West Bengal and presently residing in Bolpur Shantiniketan. They are district level trainer of this art form and have travelled many state's of India and represented the Patachitra art form stalls in the exhibition.

Case studies

Over the period of time the Patachitrakars of Naya village of Medinipur region have developed a distinctive style and a form of folk paintings which can be seen in their walls and floors of their home and other handicraft products. These paintings have their own significance and in contemporary era have their own style of conveying message in the society. Among this painters the researcher met with Subho Chitrakar one of the well known Chitrakar and a district level trainer. He has travelled different parts of the country and has attended several fair trades representing Patachitrakar community.

Case Study 1:

As per Subho, he is the 14th generation of his ancestor's practicing this art form. His wife, mother too are engaged in this profession and they earn around 12000 to 15000 monthly. Subho narrates how the tradition of oral and visual paintings of patachitrakars have just been limited to oral presentation and mostly preferring single frame pictures as its cheap and affordable by the city dwellers. They have formed a committee named Hatichowk Nirkar Chowk Lokoshikha Shilpa Patau Samiti in the year 2000 to organize the work of the pataus of Medinipur but are facing many challenges and one of the major challenge is that of financial aid and a regular market for their products. According to him the amount which he receives as a trainer is very low and that is not sufficient to meet his daily needs. He gets ₹ 3000 per month. At district level he trains students under the Gram Sishkya Parampara Training (Baisc Taining / story telling). He is the 14th generation of his ancestors who is carrying forward the Patachitra art work and till date is struggling for a permanent source of livelihood and a better standard of living. His wife and mom both are involved in the same profession and the collective income of their family members is around ₹ 12000 to ₹ 15000.

He also revealed the unique colours used in Patau paintings which included indigeneous vegetal and earth colours prepared by themselves and is eco friendly. The respective colours are derived from following materials:

Table 1: List of eco-friendly colours derived from natural sources

| Colours | Materials derived from |
|---------|--|
| Yellow | Haldi |
| Black | Burnt Rice |
| Green | Helenchi |
| Red | Ratajawa Flower |
| White | Dust of Shank |
| Blue | Nilkant flower |
| Cloth | Cut pieces of clothes and a paste made from Bel. |

But over the decades a shift in the materials used in the paintings has been witnessed and the use of chemical made paints can be seen. Subho Chitrakar says that in order to meet the demand of the contemporary market this shift has been witnessed and it's easier for the painters to use the colours as it is easily available. The audio visual narration of the scrolls has also been limited to just visual paintings. The tough competition in the market is been faced by the Pata painters and hence they are forced to adapt to the modern demands and taste.

The researcher meet another Chitakar in Visva Bangla Hat and tried to find out how the Pata paintings have changed over the period of time and the challenges faced by them.

Case Study 2:

Shifali Pal Chitrakar (name changed), 60 years old and belonging to Patachitrakar community, lives with her daughter and son. She is from East Midnapur. The economic condition of her house has worsened after the death of her husband and at present the family income is ₹ 5000 to 6000 per month. As narrated by her, she has been in this profession of painting since last 30 years and she has witnessed a drastic change and the shift from oral and visual to only visual painting and

the interest too going down of the common population. She was looking for a place in the market area but the locals did not allow her to set up the shop in the market area. According to her, she does not get the real amount for the work she has done. For example the price of the bamboo stand is ₹ 100 in which she does not include the labor cost involved in the process of making.



Fig. 2: Handicraft work and paintings done by Patachitakars

According to her the actual price has to be ₹ 150. Is she raises the price, she fears that the common people would switch on to the plastic stands which are much cheaper in the market which the trend can be seen this days. She thinks that due to easy availability of cheap goods like hand bags, t-shirts and paintings people have less interest in their products.

She considers that the help given by the government is not sufficient as the location given by the government authorities for setting up the stalls are far away from the market which makes it inaccessible for many people to visit the stalls.

The key issue in this case is that a better platform is required for Patachirakar artisans where they can show cases their products and get justified price for the products made by them. The present support by the government is also not sufficient as the support is not sufficient enough to help the Patachitrakar artisans to provide them a means of survival. The shift in the trend of production by the artisan has also shifted from the originality of the real Patachirakrs works which again is a matter of concern and it has to the preserved.

Analysis

In spite of many efforts from the Western countries and their fluctuating interest towards the Indian culture, the sad reality about the artisans in the third world countries and India is that they are still living a life of a struggle and poverty. In the present context of globalized and free market, the rise of machine based low cost and superior product has created enormous problem for the traditional artisans in West Bengal. Due to the rise of global market the local artisans have lost their holds on the old patron client and market network. In this competitive market the artisans are also being exploited by the middleman and the small scale merchants who pay minimum in terms of wage and their price of the products. The assistance from the government too has not been that supportive or of a great help to the artisans because of which they are still unsuccessful. The local artisans due to their poor communication skills and illiteracy get exploited and become vulnerable.

The young generation of the artisan community considers that the cheap and superior products from other parts of the world will out price their products made of their hard labor. Hence they are switching to the other unorganized sector to work leaving aside their traditional work. In spite of globalization serving the handicraft sector, in a wider lens various small scale industries are facing enormous problems and have failed to compete with other cheap products introduced in the market as compared to theirs. So, there is a critical need of the state government to invest more and it's the responsibility of the state government to ensure the betterment and development of this sector.

The major drawback is that the handicrafts products of Patachitrakars are at a receiving end in most of the cases due to lack of power to sell. Hence the middleman and the capitalist occupy the top position of the production ladder. The illiterate artists face the major challenges of understanding the market hence take help of middleman who pocket the surplus profit. As the result of which the artisans are becoming poor in spite of having the demand of their products in the market.

Because of the above-mentioned issues and challenges, the younger generation is compelled to search for

another viable occupation. A report of the United Nations suggests that in India, over the past 30 years, the number of artisans have declined by at least 30 per cent and many of these artisans are joining the ranks of casual wage labourers and the informal economy.

Due to the demand of innovative and new products, the originality of the product is being lost which is another issue.

Hence an effort has to be made to:

1. Increase the opportunities for creating better livelihood sustainability in the income from craft.
2. Promote craft practices as a major economic activity and developing a better market space in both local and global level.
3. To preserve the skill of craft which in on a verge of exploitation, extinction and make it a part and parcel of our culture.
4. Promoting Community-based artisan enterprise development.

CONCLUSION

It's usually stated that with the rise in globalization there is economic prosperity in the developing countries. However, the situation is different if we consider this fact in relation to the traditional artisans, as they are also one of the victims who have become vulnerable due to free trade, lower prices of products as compared to their own products and other issues. The progress of developed countries is been done at the expenses of the developing or developed countries, which is a matter of concern. Globalization has become a tool to do the business at global level but the real victims of this tool are the rural and middle class traders among which rural artisans are one of them whose sources of livelihood is in threat and some steps has to be taken preserve this dying artwork and protect our rich culture and heritage.

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