

Bengal Patachitra

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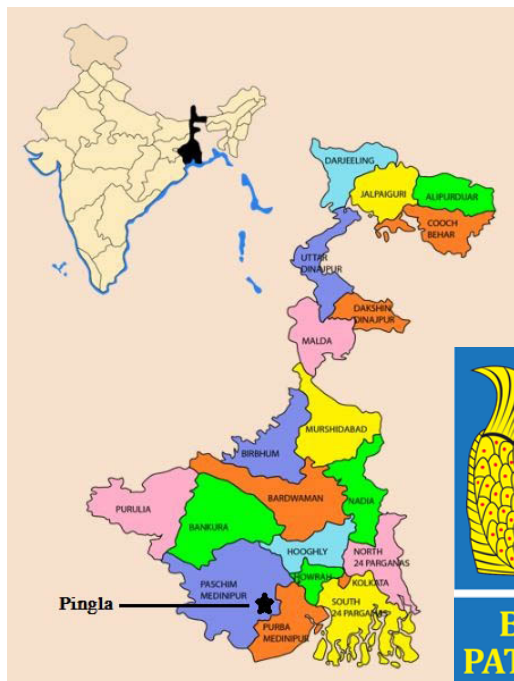
Introduction

Patachitra is the practice of visual storytelling. Stories are painted in form of panels on a scroll. The word 'pata' means cloth and 'chitra' means picture. As the painted scroll is unrolled, the performer sings the story, making links between the frames. The figures in the frames are depicted with hand gestures that link different parts of the story, and the singer also uses their hands to link the frames. The Patachitra style of Medinipur district of West Bengal – generally called Bengal Patachitra -is known for its bold colours, lines and strokes. The paintings are done using natural colours which the artists make from various trees, leaves, flowers, fruits and clays. The painters of Patachitra belong to a unique community known as Patuas (painters of Pata). All Patuas have the same last name Chitrakar. Chitra means a painting while Chitrakar means artist. Traditionally, the Patuas would travel from village to village, singing and displaying the scrolls to earn a living. The themes, songs and painting style are passed down orally to next generations.

Patas or scroll painting is one of the earliest art forms in Bengal, referred to in Brahmapurana. Patuas, according to the text, were the descendants of the supreme artist Lord Viswakarma and his wife Ghritachi.

The Patuas paint stories on their scrolls to illustrate the songs they sing. The songs are composed by the artists themselves. Earlier, themes of songs would only be on mythological tales but in recent times, they are creating compositions on contemporary events and social issues. Artists conceive individual ways of presentation. Thus, the same story may be differently portrayed by every artist.

Location



Patachitra is widely practised in both the districts of Purba and Paschim Medinipur of West Bengal. Villages like Naya, Chandipur, Narajol, Shahid Matangini, Panshura and Daspur specialize in the art of Patachitra.

The artists of Naya formed a society named 'Chitrataru' in 2010. In 2010-11 Chitrataru registered a Craftmark for Bengal Patachitra.



Chitrataru also administers the Geographical Indication for Bengal Patachitra. The GI tag (see logo) can only be used on patachitra art by registered artists in the defined geographical area which serves as a guarantee to consumers that they are buying a Bengal Patachitra product.

The key activities of the society include heritage transmission and skill training; promotion of the art, organizing and managing their annual village festival, 'PotMaya' and management of the folk art center. Promotional activities include the sending of artists to fairs, festivals and exhibitions across India and abroad as opportunities come, maintaining regular contacts with craft retailers, and organizing heritage transmission programmes for children and youth of schools and colleges.

The Patachitra

Generally there are three types of Patas. They are Jarano or Gutano Pata, Arelatai Pata and Chauko Pata.

The 'Jarano' or 'Gutano' Pata means a scroll depicting a story serially in vertical picture frames. It is about one to three feet wide and ten to twenty feet long, according to the length of the story, and the two ends are attached to two bamboo sticks.



Jarano Pata on social theme – Plantation

The picture frames in Arelatai Pata are arranged horizontally bound in two ends by wooden sticks. These are comparatively smaller with 3 - 6 frames together.

The 'Chauka Pat' is smaller in size and square or rectangular in dimension. The Chauka Pat is used for painting one particular deity or a mythical or social subject. A typical example of this kind is the Kalighat Pata.

Patachitra is associated with various themes and motifs.



Arelatai Pata on mythological theme - Mahisasuramardini

Traditionally, Patachitra connects to mythological themes. The mythological Patas depict stories based on the epics - the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Puranas, the Mangal Kavyas - Chandimangal, Manasamangal etc. Some narrations of stories such as Radha-Krishna, Savitri-Satyavan, Durga slaying Mahishasura, Data Karna, Satya Pir, abduction of Sita etc. are very popular among the artists. A recurrent folklore based narration used in many Patas is



ChoukoPata on everyday life - Farmer couple

the Wedding of Fish. Tribal folklores such as Tribal Wedding and Creation of the World are also recurrent thematic elements.

Patuas also paint Patas on various historical events and contemporary issues. Patachitra artists have been commissioned to paint a wide range of topics on women rights, child rights, literacy and environment conservation as a tool of public communication.

Different historical as well as contemporary themes such as the freedom struggle, the Indigo Rebellion, the Partition of Bengal, the Tsunami of 2004, the Gujarat Earthquake, 9/11, lives of freedom fighters like Khudiram and Bagha Jatin and historical figures like Rabindranath Tagore and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar have become common.

The artists constantly experiment with their traditional skill on various material, surface etc. according to the demand of the consumers. The Patachitra motifs are being used on diverse products including apparel, accessories, lifestyle items, furniture, jewellery etc. Thus, one can find Patachitra motifs of Sarees, Kurtas, t-shirts, earrings, necklaces, hand-fans, kettles, coasters, lamp-shades, bags, umbrellas, diary-covers etc. Medinipur Patachitra motifs have, of late, also been used as illustrations of books such as "The Patua Pinocchio", "Savitribai – Journey of a Trailblazer" and "I See the Promised Land". The Patachitra paintings are also used in space design and installation such as in museum galleries, airports etc.



Products with Patachitra motifs

Process

The ingredients required to make a traditional Patachitra are papers, cotton cloths, adhesive and natural colour.

The process of Patachitra painting involves some basic steps:

1. At first, a base is prepared by coating paper with the soft, white, stone powder of chalk and glue made from tamarind seeds. This gives the canvas-cloth tensile strength and a smooth, semi-absorbent surface, allowing it to accept the paint.
2. The figures are then painted onto the prepared surface where the flat colour is applied first without any prior pencil lining. Outlines are next added on the dried flat colours in order to finish the motifs.
3. Patuas use natural colour extracted from plants to paint these scrolls. The paints are mixed with wood apple gum which acts as a natural adhesive for the colours.
4. After this, a layer of recycled soft fabric is pasted on the reverse side of the paper to make the scrolls more durable.
5. Finally, the paintings are dried in sunlight.



Steps of Patachitra paintings

Raw Materials

The artists extract the natural colour from different sources:

Colour	Source
Black	Soot from oil lamps, cooking fires, burnt rice or bamboo-char were traditional sources of the black colour. Nowadays, the soot is scraped out from exhaust pipes of trucks with a stick.
Red	New leaves of the Segun tree, i.e., teak, is used to source the red colour.
	The seeds of Latkan (Annatto fruit). Saffron is also rarely used to extract the red colour.
	Betel leaf, lime and catechu are purchased from the market and are crushed together to extract the red colour.
Blue	Petals of Aparajita, i.e., the Blue Pea flower or Clitoria flower are used to extract the blue colour. This flower grows in abundance in Bengal.
Brown	The matured leaves of the teak tree are used to extract the colour brown.
White	Kusum Mati is a special type of stone and clay, of which only the white stones are used to extract the colour white.
Green	Runner beans (Kundri) and leaves of ivy-gourd and flat beans are used to make the green paint. The leaves are collected and crushed by a pestle to extract this colour.
Yellow	Raw turmeric roots are the source of a bright yellow spice and dye.