

The Tradition of Scroll Paintings with a Special Emphasis on Lord Jagannatha

Asis K. Chakrabarti

Preface : A few words on Folk Art and Painting.

Folk art is an indivisible part of folk culture. The study of folk culture in the subcontinents of India dates back to 19th century. Some eminent personalities or connoisseurs began to study folk culture absolutely to quench their personal interest. In this respect the names of Dinesh Chandra Sen, Reverend Lalbehari De, Ramendrasundar Trivedi, Rabindranath Tagore, Abanindranath Tagore and Gurusaday Dutt should be always mentioned. Of them, Gurusaday Dutt is the foremost pioneer in the field of collection, consequence and deliberation of folk art and culture. As quoted by the famous Bengali historian Nihar Ranjan Roy Gurusaday Dutt had revealed the origin and flow of folk art and culture with the insight of an expert jeweller, who can easily identify a real stone."

Folk art has been defined in various ways and words. A thorough observation of the social, historical, geographical and cultural remaining of Indian subcontinent suggests that folk art is the art form created by the rural people for the rural people, which is centered round different kinds of folk and tribal religious rites, customs and festivals. The creation of folk art needs no grammatical norms set up by any ancient author of folk art and culture. The art form that is created by the spontaneity of a rural artist in the simplest possible way with the help of natural colours and ingredients may be termed as folk art.

Antiquity of Scroll Painting: Mythological Backdrop

Generally speaking, Pattachitra means art form or painting created on paper or on cloth. The literal meaning of the works 'Pattachitra' or 'Drawing of a Patta' seems quite absurd and this term might have been added later on, which is why, we find even in Tagore's songs - the words -

Tumi Ki Kebo- i-chobi,
Shudhu *Patte likha*"

i.e. "Are you just a painting
written only on a scroll ?"

The work Chitralekha has been in use since ages. In ancient India, the word 'Chitra' signified hand-drawn pictures and inscriptions or sculpted out images. In that age, to differentiate hand painted pictures from smeared or inscribed pictures, these were called written or "Lekhya" pictures and the practice of drawing was known as Chitralekhan'. In spite of being unaware of the grammatical authenticity of the word Chitralekha (writing of a picture), the Patuas have coined the term 'Pattalekha' (writing of a scroll). The words, 'lekha' suggests a link of the Patuas with the ancient scroll painters.

According to the concept of folk paintings being executed by the folk painter scrolls are written rather than drawn or painted by them. In Sanskrit, 'Patta' means a cloth. According to the history of Indian Art, in ancient ages, pictures were

drawn on cloth, which came to be known as, 'Pattachitra'. The creators of 'Pattachitra' were introduced as the 'Patuas'. On the basis of regional differences, the Patuas are classified as - 'Pattikar', Patkere, 'Pattidar', Mistry and so on.

However, the Patuas claim to have descended as a class belonging to 'Chitrakara', who had taken birth from celestial parents - the celestial artist, Vishwakarma and the celestial dancer, Ghrithachi. Now-a-days, art form are not created on cloth, rather all the creations are produced on paper. "Gazi Patta" and "Yama Patta", collected by Gurusaday Dutt were made on cloth. These are now conserved in the Gurusaday Museum of Bratacharigram, Joka, Kolkata.

The Chitrakaras' or the scroll-painters were mentioned in the 10th chapter of Brahmavaivarta Purana, written in about 11th or 12th century A.D. At a certain time, the celestial artist Vishwakarma descended from heaven and took birth in a Brahmin family. Simultaneously, the celestial dancer, Ghrithachi took birth as a daughter of a Gopa (milk producer) family'. They got married and gave birth to nine sons - Malakara, Karmakara, Sankhakara, Kundibaka or Tantubayee, Kumbhakara, Kangsakara, Sutradhara, Chitrakara and Swarnakara. According to mythological story, Vishwakarma and Ghrithachi were the original parents or ancestors of the Patuas or Chitrakaras. In this regard, they are as honourable as any other artist or artisan of the Hindu society. In reality, however, Patuas are considered to be untouchable and ostracized. There is a myth behind this ostracism. An ancestor of the present day Patuas once draw the portrait of Mahadeva, the Great Lord of Hindu religion without seeking His permission. After drawing the portrait, the artist was naturally, very much annoyed and afraid as to what would happen, if the Lord would get angry with him.

Incidentally, Mahadeva was just then coming by. Then the painter hid the paint brush inside his mouth. Mahadeva asked the artist that why had he made the brush unclean by keeping it inside his mouth. The patua replied that he had done it out of fear. Mahadeva got angry and said that the Patua could have thrown it away. On the other hand he had made it unclean. So he had to accept the punishment. Then Mahadeva imprecated that from then on, the patuas would be ostracized from the society. They would neither be Hindus nor Muslims. They would have to perform Muslim rites and work like the Hindus i.e. they would draw pictures and read or sing. As far as mythology is concerned, this is the reason behind the ostracism of the Patuas due to the imprecation of Mahadeva. So the Patuas now go to Mosques like the Muslims and draws the pictures of Hindu deities, sculpt out their images and sing the praises of Hindu deities presented on the scrolls.

The reason of the ostracism of the Patua community has been mentioned in the Brahmavaivarta Purana. Since they had violated the rules of painting directed by the Brahman, the Brahmin society had cursed them. As a consequence of which, they have been outcasted. So, both mythology and folklore suggest that violation of set up norms had led to the ostracism of the Patuas. This fact is further supported by Parashurama's sloka -

*"Vyati Kramena Chitranang Sadyashchitra Karashtta
Patito Brahma shapeno Brahmonanancho kopata"*

i.e.. Deviation from the normal art form has led the Patuas to be outcasted by the curse of the Brahmin society. Regarding the ostracism of Patuas, Gurusaday Dutt pointed that the form of Bengal's generalized Hindu religion is quite separate from the Scriptural religion devoted only to Brahma. The eternal, independent imaginative Bengali soul could not conform to a fixed

regulation set up by the scripture while performing religions rites and creating images of deities. Rather, the Bengali Patuas have formed and moulded the images of deities according to their own imagination and expression. As a result Bengal has its own forms of Rama, Sita, Lakshmana, Shiva and Durga. They bear no similarity to their original mythological forms. The generalized form of Bengali Radha-Krishna does not conform to their corresponding mythological form. Bengali Patua's Rama, Sita are different in appearance and nature from their counterparts mentioned and portrayed by Valmiki or Kritibasa. To reach the mass and to fulfill their heart's desire and imagination, the Patuas were courageous enough to violate the rules set up by the dominating Brahmin society even at the cost of their identity and existence; and have been bold enough to reflect Bengali sentiment and spirit in their songs, on their pattas and in the moulding of images of deities.

Historical Backdrop

So far, we have been dealing with the mythological introspection of Patuas and their creation. Let us now go into historical introspection. The oldest information regarding Patuas dates back to 200 B.C. when Patanjali had mentioned Chitrakara tribe in his writing. We get more detailed information in the Jataka stories of the Buddhist religion and Kalpasutra - the holy book of the Jains. In the 5th century A.D., the great poet Kalidasa had mentioned Patuas in his famous dramas 'Abhigyanam Shakuntalam' and 'Malabikagnimitram'. In the first part of 7th century A.D. Vanabhatta had mentioned Chitrakara in his Harshacharita - a biography of king Harshavardhana. The story goes like this - once, while returning from the forest, king Harshavardhana sighted a Yamapattika or Yamapatta merchant exhibiting his scrolls to an enthusiastic audience being surrounded by groups

of eager boys. The main image on the Patta was that of Pretnatha who was riding a buffalo. Besides this, there were other images also. The Yamapattika song -

*"Matapetri sahasrani Putradwear Shatanecha
Yuge Yuge byatitani kasya te kasya ba bhaban".*

Apart from this, in the 8th century A.D. drama 'Mudrarakshas' written by Vishakadatta, we find the presence of Yamapattika. In this drama, it was written that the Patuas or Yamapattika merchants had to perform the task of secret emissaries by order shows the arrival of the Patuas at Pataliputra in Chanakya's residence, after they had collected secret information i.e., in this way. Chanakya used to gather information from Yamapattika merchants and collect painting which revealed the presence and location of his enemies.

"In the Uttara Ramacharita" written by Bhavahbuti in the 8th Century A.D., Chitrlekha and Chitradarshana i.e. scroll painting and exhibition have got much importance. Patuas and their art forms have also been highlighted in some Middle age literatures, like Parashuramasmriti, Rupa Goswami's 'Vidagdha Madhaba' drama' and Gopal Bhatta's 'Haribhaktibilas' etc.

Through analysis of all these available sources, it is found out that the Patuas, mentioned in Harshacharita and Mudrarakhshas used to draw the image of Dharmaraja Yama and terrific sights of hell or Yamalaya on their scrolls. These paintings used to be exhibited being accompanied by relevant songs in residential houses for enriching their knowledge about forth-coming days. The mere intention of this mobile exhibition was nothing but to refrain the common people from committing any crime or sin. On the scrolls were shown the ultimate punishment to be given to the sinners on the earth. It is quite surprising that even today the Patuas show Yamapata. Their

mode of exhibition is similar to that mentioned in Harshacharita. The only difference lies in the showing of Yamapata at the end of the scroll of Ramavata, Krishnaleela. etc. The Yampata is created only in the district of Birbhum. The modern patuas conclude their patta exhibition by showing either the greatness of Lord Jagannatha in Srikshetra or the Yamalaya.

The above introspection reveals that over the ages, the Patuas have been performing a dual role of entertainers and social reformers by kindling the flame of righteousness in the souls of the mass populace.

Identity of Pattachitra : Making and use of colours

Bengali *patta chitra* can be divided into two varieties a) Ekachitra : containing many small chaukas or square pattas with only one continuous story. b) Dighal patta containing numerous paintings depicting an intricately inter woven story, consisting of many parts. Since the Dighal Patta is rolled up, it is also known as Rolled up or Jarano patta. The patuas sing while showing the Dighalpat.

At either end of the Dighal Pat, bamboo sticks are fixed and the scroll is rolled up from the lower stick. The upper stick protrudes out from the top of the first picture. In the districts of Birbhum and Burdwan, the patta is kept on a bamboo stool during exhibition. But in other districts, the Patua holds the upper stick and then gradually opens out the scroll, revealing the pictures serially. Simultaneously, he points at the painting with his right hand, to describe the theme and tell the story. Then he folds the scroll downwards. This process goes on till he ends. The art form of the Patuas is a metamorphosis of the traditional art form of the pre-Buddhist era. Comparative studies show that the originality of the scroll painters has retained the simplicity, the

spirit of the liveliness, the humour and vigour of the ancient art form. This art form is a synthesis of ancient art and renovated later as modern art. It is created by the application of a few bold, skilled, emotional line drawings and depends on the use of a very few primary colours. The combination of colours, form and shape is one of its kind. These ancient pattachitras reveal great intrinsic skill and intricate imaginative spirit of the Patuas.

Bengal's pattachitras are quite replete with the wealth of humour, emotion and natural spontaneity. The appearance of human form is absolutely natural, devoid of any artifice, self created gestures. Even the flora and fauna have been depicted to their fullest details. The depiction of manliness in the masculine figures and feminine beauty has added an extra glamour to these pattachitras. Figurative mode of expression is a uniqueness of pattachitra.

Dighal Pat is quite long, sometimes stretching from 5 to 15 feet in length and 1 to 3 feet in breadth. The story continues in a series of boxes, either from the top to bottom, or from side to side. Initially, Pattas were made on cloth or hand-made paper. At present, they are written on mill-made paper. Earlier, the colours were prepared by boiling flowers, creepers, soil, rice, coconut shells, etc. Then gum extracted from tamarind and wood apple seeds was mixed with the colours. Now, the Patuas collect the gum and artificial colours from the market. As a result the brightness is doomed.

Theme of Pattachitra - continuity

The Patuas have not restricted their theme to the boundaries of epics like Ramayana, Mahabharata or other historical story or folklore, rather, they have diversified into different directions, emphasizing on the mass educative side, to promote public welfare. The Patuas have

expressed viewed life-style of the Bengalis on their scrolls. This has been done to educate the rural populace. The Bengali life-style has been reflected through Krishnaleela of Mahabharata, different stories of Ramayana, the putting on of Durga's white bangle by Shiva, farming, Cattlerearing, etc. To a Patua, Ayodhya of Ramayana, Krishna's Vrindavana, Shiva's Kailasha mountain, every place is located in Bengal. The characters are more human than divine. They appear in Bengali forms. Rama was married according to Bengali customs, Parvati's favourite decorations include shankhahathe white bangle of married Bengali women and vermilion the red powder put on the forehead of a married lady.

The deities, life-style has taken a form, quite analogous to Bengali lifestyle. Thus the Bengali society has been uplifted. They have reflected the Patta as a medium to express many complex matters in a simple way. For instance, virility based on Karmayoga and ancient life-style has been expressed in Ramayana Patta, deep spiritual and philosophical truth has been conveyed via Saktipatta and wavelengths of spiritual loves vibrated through Krishnaleela. All these complex and deep matters have got a lucid and modest rhythm in the skilful hands of the Patuas. They have never ever forgotten the story bondage between religion and sensuous art form. To awaken the ideals of righteousness and truth in the heart of common people, they have reminded us of the ultimate punishment in the court of Yamaraja, where all our earthly sins will be accounted for by Chitragupta, who is considered to be the ledger- keeper of the Yamalaya.

They have always sung the victory of truth and defeat of sin, thus kindling the flame of truth among the populace. On the other hand, the concept is that a good deed can lead a man to heaven has been emphasized through the scroll - paintings. To support this, the Patuas conclude

their pattachitra by the story of a sex-worker Heeramoni. To remove any kind of confusion among the common people; they end their pattas with stories of deities like Balarama, Subhadra and Jagannatha in the background of Sriksheeta.

Even today the Patuas are playing a great role in creating awareness in the society by pointing at the evil sides of many social rites and customs, political abscess, etc. keeping pace with the progress of mankind, the Patuas are here to besiege social decadence and upgrade the undeniable role of traditional values in forming and shaping a healthy, successful society. So, many contemporary events are now chosen as the theme of Pattas like - freedom movement, steamer wreck at Kakdwip, brutal murder of a taxi driver by a female, the everlasting quarrel among daughters and mothers-in-law, the advent of Kalikal etc. On the other hand, as a part of social reformation, they have created Vidyasagar Pat with an intention to spread literacy; a protest has been heard through their creation against social ostracism. In the rural field, pattas are creating mass awareness by focusing on issues like family planning, evils of dowry-system, etc. Herein, lies the liability of the Patuas to the society. They have documented the exploitation of poor Indians by the British and the freedom movement in the Khudiram Pat and Saheb Pat. Today, to reach out to the mass, they are creating 'Banyar Pat' which shows devastating flood and then the necessity of relief supply, so that the Government and common people can join hands to help the flood - stricken people.

Earlier, the Patuas were almost unable to read and write, but now they have become enlightened by the flame of knowledge. So, they have entered the international arena, breaking all the barriers of a regional limitation. They have depicted the role of disarmament, the historical event of French Revolution through their pattas,

thus symbolizing the victory of truthful mankind against injustice.

Emphasis on Lord Jagannatha

According to Dr. Manorama Biswal Mohapatra, Sri Jagannath is the terminal embodiment of the concept of a unitary confluence of all religions. He is also the melting pot and centrifugal meeting, point of Aryan and non-Aryan civilizations. Lord Jagannath is the saviour of the downtrodden, oppressed and hapless people, assuming roles and enacting miracles. He is the depository source of the toil, and work and endeavour, inspiration, reverence, faith, piety and progress. For these very reasons, the Jagannath consciousness has become ubiquitous, radiating near and far. He is the symbol of universal brotherhood. His principal preamble is, "humanity on earth is but one family". It is precisely for the very reason that various sects and religions such as Vaishnav, Shaiva, Shakta, Boudha and Jam traditions have transcended barriers to mingle and blend immaculately in Lord Jagannath. Lord Jagannath also encompasses the animistic tribal religions. Before Him, starting from the tribals; others like the Brahmin, untouchables/Chandals, Sudras or even the Muslims - all have become His children traversing on a single path. Similarly Sarala Das in "Mahabharat" has conceived Jagannath as the incarnation of Buddha. In Tirtha Chudamani of Mahabharat it is mentioned that in Purusottam Kshetra: Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra reside amongst 40 lakh 32 thousand Gods and Goddesses. Indradyumna had received the Primordial sacred log [Daru Brahma] from Jara Sabara and had entrusted the task of carving out the idol to an old carpenter-artisan. The three incompletely chiseled sacred log idols could not reach the final finishing stage since the vows made by Indradyumna was obliquely breached as a fait accompli legend finds a place in 'Mahabharat' or Sarala Das who has unconditionally accepted Jagannath as Buddha.

The story of Lord Jagannatha has been depicted in Pattachitra by two different ways. In one way, the Patua painted the story of Lord Jagannatha, depicting several panels with colourful presentation of different episodes related with invocation of His Holiness's life, preaching for best deal of human livings and arising of human moralities through His blessings. In another way, He shows His super-eternal power for rescuing human beings from misfortune in life, if they pertain to follow His preaching to sustain in life without hazards just after the panel depicts Hell scenes in bottom part of the scrolls where He has been portrayed as Jagannatha Trinity - meaning one who has faith in Lord Jagannatha, could easily passe the hazards raised out of sin committed by he or she with or without conscious.

New Vaisnavite Movement launched by Lord Chaitanya for harmony

The good teaching and morals of Lord Jagannatha had been highly preached by Shri Chaitanya Deva not only in Bengal but also in several parts of our country with the aim of establishing a transconfederation of harmony among the people irrespective of castes and creed for a better world of living with Prema or Love and Ahimsa or non-violence paved the way of universal fraternity through Harinama Samkirtana - the eternal tune which makes the satisfaction of Lord Jagannatha as a means of worship through devotional rhymes.

Asis K. Chakrabarti is a Curator/Executive Secretary, Gurusadaya Musuem, Brahmacharigram, Joka, Kolkata, West Bengal.