

Origin of the Patua Community: A Study

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Abstract: *Patuas are mainly famous for their Patashilpa. Patashilpa forms a significant part of the rich heritage of Indian folk art and culture. Mysteries and wondrous myths are tightly interwoven together at different layers of the history of this community of folk artists. Various attractive stories about the origin of Patuas, their paintings, cause of being excluded from the mainstream Hindu society are described in different literary resources of India, from ages. It is thought that they have fallen from the Hindu society by the curse of the Brahmins for paintings which are denigrating to Hindu scriptures, compelling them to live out of the main sphere of the society. There are several such myths regarding this. Once they used to form a part of the Hindu social hierarchy, but subsequently being tagged as 'Mlecchha' (Yabana) by the conservative Brahmins they became marginalized and started living in a state in between Hindu and Muslim society, and this very fact distinguishes them from the mainstream society. In this article I will try to look into those aspects of Patuas and Patashilpa of Bengal which have still remained undiscovered and try to trace the origins of the Patua community in Bengal.*

Keywords: *Patua, Chitrakar, Mass Entertainers, Maskari, Patashilpa, Gazi Pat, Potikar, Patikar, Patidar, Gayla, Dhvaj Danda, Papyrus Leaves, Thatta-Maskari, Chowki, Tribe-Caste Continuum.*

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Patua Chitrakars are a tribal community of ancient folk artists and mass entertainers of India. There are many legends and myths to their name. This community is considered as the offspring of Devashilpi Bishwakarma. Chitrakars have been mentioned in several ancient Indian literatures. It is also known from ancient literature that they were once employed as spies. They are also referred to as 'maskari' which means clown or funster. Various stories are prevalent about these Patua Chitrakars of Bengal. Their religious identity is also quite controversial.

They are mentioned in the *Puranas*. The *Brahmavaivarta Purana*, supposed to have been written in the middle of the thirteenth century, tells the story of the birth of Chitrakars. The Chitrakars were born from the union of Bishwakarma and Aryakanya Ghritachi, who have a faded tradition in Devakul. They belong to the 'Nabashan' group.¹ In the womb of Ghritachi, Bishwakarma gave birth to nine children. They are, Malakara, Karmakara, Shankhakar, Tantukara, Kumbhakara, Kanshakara, Sutradhara, Chitrakar, and Swarnakara. Among them the Chitrakars are Patuas. So according to *Puranas* the Chitrakars are the children of god Bishwakarma.

In the *Brahmabaibarta Purana*, Gheitachee's narrative describes:

“Malakar, Kanshakar, Tanti, Swarnakar,
Karmakar, Shankhakar, ar Sutradhar,
Kumbhakar, Chitrakar ei nay jan
Biswakarmar ourasete labhila jeeban.”

The journey of Patashilpa in Bengal began with the propagation of Buddhism and the Jataka, the life story of Buddha. At least that's what it's all about established yet. Bengal was already a region outside the Vedic-Brahmanical realm. Buddhism flourished in Bengal during the Pala period, which began in the mid-eighth century. The Pala kings were patrons of Buddhism. Eastern India was also the seat of Buddhist Tantra. In that period, the artists belonging to this Chitrakar community were engaged in propagating and spreading Buddhism through their paintings. They were both mass-entertainers and folk teachers. From the end of the Pala period, royal affinity towards Brahmanical deities was evident. And throughout the Sen period, Brahmanical religion was specially nurtured. In this era, the heads of the Brahmanical society came down heavily on the Patuas. They have been ostracized for drawing anti-scriptural images. Subsequently they lean towards Islam. But since painting was forbidden in Islam and there was no tolerance for paganism, they were not properly acknowledged there either. After converting to Islam, they started painting pictures centered on Islam. From then on, Chitrakars started painting Gazi Pat and composing songs related to it. Patuas have not only been used to propagate the greatness of Hindu gods and goddesses, but also to propagate the greatness of Islam. Binoy Bhattacharya writes: “According to the rules of Islam, drawing of animal and human images is prohibited, but it was not prohibited for the sake of propagating Islam through the ghazi pat. They used to preach miraculous stories at the court of Ghazi instead of the court of Yam. Here too, Gayla or the cowherd had to be punished for not begging for milk despite having milk at home.

Ghore moilo gowalini, Batane moilo gai
Haila Goru moila koto lekha jokha nai.

At last the cowherd yielded to Haji and said, I will give away the custody of the cow in the name of Ghazi if it survives. Instantly due to the supernatural power of Ghazi, the cowherd got all the dead cows, calves and his wife alive.”²

Renowned researcher, first receiver of Deshikottam, Shri Kshitimohan Sen recorded a part of a song meant for Gazi pat which he had heard in his childhood:

“Jamdoot Kaaldoot daine aar baaye,
Tar maidhye baises achhe Jam rajar maaye.
Gazir kon gune,
Taraiya lau bhai Gazir naame.”³

The Chitrakars are known by various names. In our ancient literatures, they are mentioned with various names- Maskari, Potikar, Patikar, Patua, Patidar etc. In *Brihat Banga* there is a reference to the Patidar class:

“Since the time of Buddha, we come across a group of people whose business was to propagate education among people by showing their paintings. Their title was “Maskari”.

Kavikankan uses the word ‘maskari’ in the sense of a painted cloth attached to a bar or a “dhwaj danda”. (first part of *Chandikavya*). Probably Christian priests adopted this Buddhist custom in the first and second centuries. They used to draw such pictures on Papyrus leaves and have them rolled like them. Such first and second century paintings are kept at Vatican. Images that were meant for the public had sometimes a lot of humorous aspects to entertain the audience. So the way they used to entertain the audience with their words, came to be known by their names. People still use the word “Thatta-Maskari”.⁴ They also had a special place in society in the pre-Buddhist era. They were involved in various occupations. Dinesh Chandra Sen writes, “We have known the Maskaris since the seventh century BC. This was the means of livelihood of Makhasaliputta Gosali’s father.”⁵

Patuas have multiple innate groups in their community. They are one of the ancient tribes of India. Patuas like to identify themselves as vagabonds. It is hard to determine whether they are of Aryan origin or not. Dr. Ashutosh Bhattacharyya opined that Patuas are not Aryan descendants.⁶ Which suggests, Patuas are indigenous inhabitants of this soil, living in India from even before the Aryans came here. Their original occupation was to catch snakes. In fact, Patuas are a part of the larger group of tribes known as ‘Bede’ or ‘Bedia’. Many Patuas in Murshidabad district are still seen making a living by catching snakes, selling snakes or selling snake venom. Many of them even earn some money by snake charming. That is why many Patuas do not call themselves painters but introduce themselves as nomadic Bedia.

In *Mudrarakhshash*, a play written by Bishakhadutta, Chitrakars are portrayed as spy, who collect information secretly from all corners of the Mauryan Kingdom and supply it to Chanakya. At one place in the play *Mudrarakhshash* writes:

Tatah: prabishita saha jampaten char: ⁷

That is, the spy entered with a Jampat. Then he (Char) told the householders about the Jam:

Panmaha jamasma chalane king kajjng debeking asmehing.

Eso kokhu asmabhattachanang harai jeeang dharfarantam.⁸

It is also clear that they used to sing showing the Jampats. In one place we can find :

Jab edang gayhang pabisia jampada dangsaanta geeaing gaaing gaami (iti parikramati) (ma)⁹

In *Harshacharit*, written in the first half of the seventh Century by Banbhata, the Poet Laureate of king Harshavardhana of Pushyabhuti dynasty, we can find the mention of Jam Pat and the traders of Jam Pat. Shri Gurusadaya Dutta in his book *Patua Sangeet* translated the Jampat part of *Harshacharit* and wrote:

“Harshavardhana returns to the capital from hunting after hearing about King Prabhakarvardhana’s illness. Harshavardhana entered the city and saw a jampattik or jampat-trader, surrounded by many curious boys, on the way to the shop. He is holding a pat hanging on a long stick in his left hand, showing a picture with a pointing stick in his right hand. Bhishan Mahisharurha Pretanath is the central idol. There are many more idols there. Jampattik sings:

Matapitrisahasrani putrudarshatani cha.

yuge yuge byatitani kasya te kasya ba bhaban.”¹⁰

Patuas of Bengal are also seen exhibiting their Pats in this way. First they pay their regards to the audience and then start showing their Pats. They gently unfold their scroll Pats from the top and sing narrating the images simultaneously. The Viewers get enthralled with the performance. The Patuas hold the stick attached to the upper part of the Pat at a height in one hand and scrolls the Pat down by holding the stick in the lower part with the other hand. The images of the scroll Pats are arranged from top to bottom. So while they sing the story and scroll down the Pats, they rolls up the upper part with the upper hand. The whole process continues till the narrative is told.

Some Patuas also exhibit their Pats by placing the lower part of the Pat on a small bamboo structure. They call this bamboo structure ‘Chowki’.¹¹ I have seen this procedure of showing Patachitras by the Patuas of Murshidabad and Birbhum districts. While singing, the Patuas often points to the concerned image on the Pat with their index finger. Therefore similarities are evident between this process of showing Pats and the way of showing Pats described in the *Harshacharit* by the jampattikas.

The issue of ‘tribe-caste continuum’ also comes to play in the discussion of exploring the source of the Patua community. For example, the ethnic identity of the Patuas of Murshidabad district is that they are Scheduled Tribe. My field surveys and interviews in the Patua neighbourhoods of Murshidabad reveals that they all have S.T. card.¹² But Patuas of many other parts of West Bengal do not belong to the Scheduled Tribes community. In that case what is their actual ethnic identity? For example, Patuas from East and West Midnapore districts identify themselves as O.B.C.¹³ This fact gives air to another debate. In some contexts in the Indian society the boundaries between castes and tribes have got blurred. H.H. Risley has also showed that it is really difficult to draw a clear line between tribes and castes.

In this matter, some ethnographers have spoken of a linear continuum due to a good mutual relationship between castes and tribes. As the famous anthropologist F. G. Bailey has shown, the two distinct opposites of a linear continuum are castes and tribes. Where tribes are organized on the basis of segmentary solidarity, the basis of the caste system is organic solidarity. In the last decade of the nineteenth century, the census commissioners had to face a problem particularly on the question, where the section of tribes ended and where the section

of castes began. Just as both Hindu and Islamic traits are noticeable in the life style of the Patuas, traits of tribes can also be seen in their life style.

The indigenous rural art form that has flourished in the art of Patuas is really praiseworthy. Their main occupation is painting Patachitras. However, they have been associated with different other means of livelihood for a long time. Males are involved in veterinary medicine, weaving mats and baskets, catching snakes, snake charming, selling snake venom, skin etc., making idols, making dolls, playing with monkeys, selling flower, farming, masonry, painting, carpentry, practicing black magic etc. and the females weave palm leaves and coconut leaves, make sana, sell fancy goods and glass bangles in the neighbourhood. At present most of the Patuas of West Bengal have left their original profession of showing pats. Now there is no Patua in rural Bengal who makes a living just by showing Pats. Sentu Patua¹⁴ of Amlai village or Jamir Chitrakar¹⁵ of Itagarhia play pats and do other works to support their family. Their family does not survive just by playing Pat.

Now let us come to the context of the grammatical flaws in the art of the Patuas. Although this is a fact that those very grammatical flaws make their art unique. Bharata instructed the use of colour in the images. Dark brown for Shringar, white to express cheerfulness, grey to express compassion, red for sun rays, black to express something terrible. Dark blue to express horror, yellow to express surprise.¹⁶ But the Patuas abandoned all these classical practices long ago. The use of light and shadow, fine craftsmanship, nobility of art, etc. are almost absent in their paintings. Their paintings are a guide to new styles. According to *Puranas*, they were cursed by the angry Brahmins for their paintings which are against the tradition and were expelled from the Hindu society:

“Batikramen chitranang sadyachitrakbastatha
Patite brahma shapena brahmananancha kalpata”¹⁷

Dr. Sri Ashutosh Bhattacharya writes, “First of all, the inclination of their paintings to deviate from the Hindu ideology was so strong that for this they have even accepted the curse of Brahma and the wrath of Brahmins. From this it can be understood that in terms of the subject matter of their paintings, there was an independent trend, void of the acceptance of Hindu society, prevailing among them. What is this independent trend? whatever it may be, but it is easily apprehendable that it could not get Hindu acceptance just because it was a non-Aryan unorthodox trend.”¹⁸

However, the Patuas have never been tied to the arms of any discipline consistently. That is why they have remained unworthy to the Hindu as well as Muslim societies. For a long time, this community of Chitrakars has gone through various ups and downs. Many legends have been formed about their life and livelihood. There has been controversy over their uncertain socio-religious position. Many times their artistic entity and religious entity have taken a contrasting position. In a nutshell, a cultural dilemma has emerged among these ancient tribes of West Bengal, which, despite their uniqueness, is undesirable.

Once upon a time, the main livelihood of the Patua community of Bengal was to display paintings accompanied with Patua songs. Whether they followed Hindu or Muslim rituals in their private lives, their livelihood was to earn money by painting Hindu deities.¹⁹ Today, these

Patua and Chiakar community exist in rural Bengal, but most of them have deviated from their ancestral livelihood. But once the Patidar community was of great importance in rural Bengal as a folk entertainer and folk teacher. It is estimated that Patachitra have been exhibited in India since the 6th century BC.²⁰ According to the famous painter Jamini Roy, this primitive group of artists, after a long struggle, could apprehend the basic truth in the world of painting.²¹ The tradition of Patua and their Patachitra is ancient. Just as the Patachitra is known in the Hindu era, so is the Patachitra of the Muslim era. Oil painting was not practiced in the early Mughal period. They used to draw on the wall, in the book or on the Pat. Scroll paintings were rolled up and opened at special occasions by connoisseurs.²² Now, for the last few years, it has been seen that some of the Patuas in some areas of Bengal, are making a living again by painting Pats. A class of people in the society is buying those paintings. Patuas are not going out to the villages with their paintings, they are going to various fairs and set shops there. Gradually the Patua artists and their medium of art are changing. It seems that this is one of the evolutionary stages of Patachitra and Patua community.

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3. Sen, Kshitimohan, (1407). *Bharate Hindu-Musalmaner Jukta Sadhana*, Visva-Bharati Granthana Vibhag, p. 34.
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11. a) **Interview:** Anu Patua; Age: 45; Occupation: Labourer, Sings Patua songs; Educational Qualification: Illiterate; Financial Status: Low income; Address: Village: Karbelia, P.O. Kantur, P.S. Barwan, District: Murshidabad, PIN-742132; Date: 28.10.16; Place: Kantur.
- b) **Interview:** Laltu Patua; Age: 43; Occupation: Playing Pat; Educational Qualification:

Illiterate; Financial Status: Low income; Address: Village: Karbelia, P.O. Kantur, P.S. Barwan, District: Murshidabad, PIN-742132; Date: 28.10.16; Place: Kantur.

12. a) **Interview:** Sujoy Patua; Age: 38; Occupation: Clerk at School (Bharatpur Alia High School); Educational Qualification: Graduate; Financial Status: Low income; Address: Raja Dighir Par, Chatinakandi, P.O. Kandi, District: Murshidabad, PIN-742137; Date: 21.10.16; Place: Chatinakandi.
- b) **Interview:** Anita Patua; Age: 43; Housewife; Educational Qualification: Upto Class 4; Financial Status: Low income; Address: Augram, P.O. Debiparulia, P.S. Khargram, District: Murshidabad, PIN-731244; Date: 28.10.16; Place: Augram.
- c) **Interview:** Naim Patua; Age: 49; Occupation: Veterinary treatment; Educational Qualification: Illiterate; Financial Status: Low income; Address: Raja Dighir Par, Chatinakandi, P.O. Kandi, District: Murshidabad, PIN-742137; Date: 21.10.16; Place: Chatinakandi.
13. a) **Interview:** Tapan Chitrakar; Age: 48; Occupation: Patachitra artist, Sells Patachitras at fairs; Educational Qualification: Illiterate; Financial Status: Lower middle class; Address: VIL+P.O. Naya, P.S. Pingla, District: Paschim Medinipur, PIN-721140; Date: 31.12.16; Place: West Bengal State Handicraft Fair (2016-17), Mela ground, Krishnagar Government College.
- b) **Interview:** Sukumar Chitrakar; Age: 35; Occupation: Patachitra artist, Sells Patachitras at fairs; Educational Qualification: Upto Class 4; Financial Status: Lower middle class; Address: Habichak, P.O. Nandapur, P.S. Chandipur, District: Purba Medinipur, PIN-721656; Date: 31.12.16; Place: West Bengal State Handicraft Fair (2016-17), Mela ground, Krishnagar Government College.
- c) **Interview:** Moina Chitrakar; Age: 43; Occupation: Patachitra artist, Sells Patachitras at fairs; Educational Qualification: Upto Class 4; Financial Status: Lower middle class; Address: Habichak, P.O. Nandapur, P.S. Chandipur, District: Purba Medinipur, PIN-721656; Date: 31.12.16; Place: West Bengal State Handicraft Fair (2016-17), Mela ground, Krishnagar Government College.
14. **Interview:** Sentu Patua; Age: 33; Occupation: Playing Pat, works as a painter; Educational Qualification: Upto Class 4; Financial Status: Low income; Address: Amlai Paschim para, P.O. Amlai, P.S. Bharatpur, District: Murshidabad, PIN-742301; Date: 29.10.16; Place: Amlai.
15. **Interview:** Jamir Chitrkar; Age: 32; Occupation: Earns a living by showing pats; Educational Qualification: Illiterate; Financial Status: Low income; Address: Itagaria, P.O. Itagaria, P.S. Suri, District: Birbhum, PIN-731103; Date: 23.10.16; Place: Panchthupi, Murshidabad.
16. Maiti, Chittaranjan, (2001). *op.cit.*, p. 38.
17. *Ibid.*

18. Bhattacharya, Ashutosh, (1962). *op.cit.*, p. 233.
19. H.H. Risley wrote about the Patuas, "Patua, Patu, Pota, Pote, Potva, Patudar, a class of people, both Hindu and Mahomedan, whose profession is painting Hindu deities."
Risley, H.H. (2014). *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, (Vol-II), Firma KLM, p. 172.
20. Dinesh Chandra Sen has shown pictures of Patidars from the time of Buddha to spread education among the people. With the rise of Buddhism, the use of anecdotes related to religion became more and more prevalent. Pictures were the mainstay of this propaganda work, where no words could be conveyed by language.
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21. Jamini Roy writes, To know what is the main secret of art, one has to analyze the prehistoric pictures of any country or especially the Prakrit Patua pictures of Bangladesh; Because the search for the original truth of the picture came here.
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