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## From Oral to Folk Art: New Identity after Reformation of Patua Scroll Painting of Bengal

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### **Abstract:**

Oral tradition is always considered as the mode of instruction. Oral communication unites people in groups. In the earliest human society, human lived, people created stories, sometimes to entertain themselves, sometimes to educate others, and for several other purposes. Before the introduction of the writing system, such stories were transmitted orally from generation to generation. In this modernized world, on one hand we are detaching from our rooted cultures while on other, there are few communities or group of people who are engaged to revive it. For instance, Patua, a kind of storytelling tradition of Bengal, India but through pictures/paintings, to impart knowledge religious, philosophical or making awareness related to education/environmental issues. Gurusaday Dutt revived this form after a lot of efforts. After revival, this Patua tradition is remained as a folk art.

**Keywords:** Oral tradition, Patua scroll painting, Communities, Gurusaday Dutt, Revival, and Folk art etc.

### **Introduction**

The Patua tradition is a kind of scroll painting that is accompanied with an oral narrative. This form is prevalent in the Bengal region. In Bengali language, "Pat" means "scroll" and "Patua" or "chitrakar" means "Painter". In this tradition, the Patua (performer) squats on the floor to narrate the story by showing the pictures from his bundle. In their narration the storytellers also use rhymes and songs to create melody. The narration proceeds by the Patua opening a large picture and then telling the story attached to the visual. About three to four scrolls are used in each performance. The stories pertain to Radha and Krishna, maybe an episode from the *Ramayana* or about Chaitanya. The paintings are brightly colored containing images of characters from the stories as well as depiction of nature and are usually homemade.

When it comes to the history of the Patua, it is supposed that the performers may belong to a particular tribe that probably had a very low social status in the nineteenth century. The Patua tradition was then started as a way to generate income by traveling from one village to another, narrating these stories, and gaining a gift of alms. At times Patuas have also been considered as beggars. People practicing the Patua tradition belongs to certain sociology-economically underprivileged caste groups and come under the administrative category of SC. Patuas interestingly identify both as Hindus and Muslims. In 1891 Risley, an ideologist described in *The*

*Tribes and Caste of Bengal* “An endogenous class of low Mohammedans, who paint pictures illustrating Hindu mythology and hawk them from door to door with songs”). This "class" overlaps with a professional group of painters called "Patua" (also known as patu, pota, putua, patudar) distinguished them from the Chitrakars, "a profession followed by acharji, ganak, sutradhar, and other low castes." (qtd. in Hauser “From Oral Tradition” 107)

Gurusaday Dutt (1882-1941) who belonged to an open minded Zamindar family, gave a great contribution to revive this art form in around 1905s when he came back to Bengal from England after law studies. He took advantage of his position as a civil servant to collect different objects of folk art and craft from different areas. When he became district magistrate of Birbhum in Bengal in 1930s, he was already a devotee of Bengali folklore so he decided to mobilize people towards this art, at whatever cost.

Dutt’s revival of this art form was motivated by several ideas: he wanted to promote this scroll painting and allowed it to gain national as well as international recognition. He was perturbed by the western techniques of painting that were being taught in the schools. To create the consciousness towards Patua tradition in the people, Dutt organized the first public exhibition of scrolls at the Indian society of Oriental art in Calcutta in 1932 which was followed by a second one in Shantiniketan in 1934. He also published many articles and books on Patua tradition in which many songs were transcribed and recorded. He considered this Patua scroll tradition as “undoubtedly in a state of decline” tried to revive it by motivating Patuas to copy scenes from scroll paintings into single square pictures. He classified the scroll painters as successors of the ancient Chitrakars, to encourage new Patuas' to work, rather than identify them as a pan-Indian painter caste. Dutt stated that the word Chitrakar has been borrowed from classical Sanskrit. Patua’s identity as Chitrakar in contemporary period was a new development. After revival, this Patua tradition was recognized as a folk art which was also second movement of idea of reform.

Dutt’s story of reviving Patua is significant for this paper. It is significant to note, nevertheless, that the revival of Patua was also related to academic interests that emerged in the form of folklore studies and has its impetus in the colonial context of India. The revival is also associated with the need to go back to one’s roots and in a sense rediscover the “folk” traditions. The British interest in reviving traditional art forms was also a way of looking for new meanings in old symbols.

The state government also became involved in the revival of the Patua tradition. In 1981 and 1991 the Handicrafts Board of West Bengal organized and financed a training course to impart the technique of painting to Patuas in the village of Naya in Bengal where the Patua got stipends of meagre amount. More workshops were organized by the crafts council as well. During this period of the revival, the subjects of the paintings and then narratives expanded to include newer themes. Social issues also became part of the subject matter. The size of the scrolls reduced and the kinds of paints used by the traditional artists, made of natural colour pigments, so more recent kinds of art material began to be used. The performance underwent changes as

well with the focus being more on the visuals than on the narration.

### **Conclusion:**

The historical approach of this storytelling tradition, it concludes that Oral tradition was existed in early time but oral form which came forward in contemporary time through transmitting by one generation to other generation. During this transformation period, oral performance was also transformed either in a manuscript or any painting like Patua scroll tradition. Due to these changes, few of them (oral traditional art forms) got revival but adopted some changes either in narrative style, form, content, material or social status of performers. Now, Patua scroll painting is remained as folk art of specific locality. On one hand, Indian people are more modernized and lost their own cultures and traditions while foreigners are still attached with these types of rooted cultures. In India, where most of Foreigners come to see remained cultures and traditions as in the term of “Indian Folk cultures”. Therefore, the stories may be separated but performers connected these phases by a thread like dialogue and, they transferred the knowledge between the worlds of the dead and living.

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