



# The culture of storytelling: Richly present in the entire Indian subcontinent

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## Abstract

Audiences with supreme sincerity, good enthusiasm, and appreciation have encouraged these picture showmen of Bengal to develop the habit of developing narrative songs or lyrical storylines that inspire them to make and make longer scrolls up to 30 to 40 feet. Since time immemorial, they have developed innate and hereditary endowment to educate the masses, though they are not school taught. Nevertheless, they have an overwhelming desire to entertain the rural folk. Agrarian societies are busy with farming; they do not have time to read books to learn about myths and epics, storytelling community and their performances make them happy. Patuas may be why, generation-wide, they are practising storytelling culture, which one can often see accompanied by painted scroll panels roaming in villages. They are singing at households' doorsteps, which can be traced through literary evidence to at least the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC and is known to have existed almost all over the subcontinent. However, in all cultures, verbal narrative may exist independently in the form of visual narrative; the specific art practise of the picture showmen of India endeavours to complement the word with the visual image and vice versa. This research paper will focus on the Patachitra tradition as well as audio visual communication with audiences in ancient India.

**Keywords:** Picture showmen, hereditary endowment, agrarian societies, verbal narrative, audio visual communication.

## Introduction

Audiences with supreme sincerity, good enthusiasm, and appreciation have encouraged these picture showmen of Bengal to develop the habit of developing narrative songs or lyrical storylines that inspire them to make and make longer scrolls up to 30 to 40 feet.

This research paper will focus on the *Patachitra* tradition as well as audio visual communication with audiences in ancient India and today.

**Aims and Objectives:** To discuss the *Bhopas* of Pabasar, there are the bards and priests who are engaged for the traditional musical performance on *Pabuji Ki Phad*, which is a religious scroll painting of folk deities. To understand, the *Garodas* are a group of Gujarati traditional storytellers who are well-known for their horoscope paintings in addition to their paintings of legends. To define the purpose of *Chitrakathis*, it is to entertain people and praise the gods as migrating storytellers. It's an almost extinct art form practised by the *Thakar* tribal community of Maharashtra.

To portray *Nakashi*, a style of scroll painting that describes episodes from mythology, folktales, and folklore is made up of panels. To analyse a traditional *Patuas* narrative painting style distinguished by religious and social motifs and images shown in a variety of panels based on epics, local legends, mythology, and current events.

## An outline of the Storytelling Art of India

Narrative scroll painting, or storytelling art, as well as its performative mode of presentation, are still produced in India<sup>1</sup>. *Phad* painting of Rajasthan, *Garoda* painting of Gujarat, *Chitrakathi* painting of Maharashtra, *Nakashi* painting of Telangana, *Pat* painting of Bengal, are narrative folk arts are veritably concerned about the changes taking place in our daily lives; they're following this age-old tradition and educating the masses as well as the audience. Still, this actuality, with its tolerance and its journey, has been part of Bengali culture for more than two thousand years. Over time, the *Patua* artists, or picture showmen have created *pata* paintings on numerous themes. They have painted from the mythology, Ramayana and Mahabharata, local tales, Puranas and folk tales<sup>2</sup>. Also, contemporary incidents like 9/11, 26/11, HIV-AIDS, Dowry System, Tsunami, Titanic Movie, etc. No doubt demands a lot more praise while they depict their best, from the war of Mahabharat in Kurukshetra, other specific themes like *Rass Lila*, *Manase Mangal*, and *Sri Krishna Leela*, to some popular stories of *Savitri-Satyavanpata* or scroll (the notorious occasion of *Savitri* and her husband *Satyavan*). They have painted the stories of *Behula-Lakhindar* in the *Manasa-Mangla* narratives, or the tales of the businessman Dhanapati Saudagar in the popular *Chandi Mangala* lyric etc., substantially choosing their themes<sup>3</sup>. The *Patuas* or *Chitrakars* and *Phad painters*' styles are fluently connected by their monumental characters.

**Rajasthan:** In our country, story-telling art comprises epics, myths, legends, folk tales, etc., but the story-telling tradition of Rajasthan talk about Joshi clan but in Bengali *Patachitra* it includes social issues and contemporary incidents. However, naturally, one can witness its colourful converse with numerous folk forms of united Bengal if one has a keen observation about Bengal's story-telling tradition. Though at this moment Bangladesh is a different country, it was in the early twentieth century that Indian painting first came to be appreciated. Before, British scholars and art lovers paid attention only to Mughal miniature painting. The *Bhopa* people perform as the priest-singers for the regional deities in the Indian state of Rajasthan. The folk deity's narrative is depicted in scenes on a scroll known as a *Phad* (par in Rajasthani), which also acts as a portable temple. The original form of *phad* paintings were portable scrolls on cloth. To bring the stories to life, the *Bhopas* would recite the "*phad kavitas*," which are the lyrics or couplets that go with the *phad* scrolls. The themes of religious and mythical stories are present in such scroll's performance. *Chochu Bhat*, the sequential master of the *Phad* clan and a devotee of Lord *Devnarayana*, arranged the first *Phad* scrolls in the tenth century A.D. People ask the *Bhopas* to perform *phad* in their villages at times of illness and bad luck since it is customary for them to do so. The *phads* are frequently rolled for transport. The *Bhopas* reached a hamlet or town shortly after dusk and set up the *phads* between two poles in a proper public place. The show goes on all night and doesn't conclude until the wee hours of the morning<sup>4</sup>.

**Gujarat:** The *Garoda* painters of Gujarat are also storytelling artists; they paint from local mythology, beliefs, practises, and legends. Gujarati Brahmin priests perform sacred *katha*, called the ceremony of the narration of sacred tales from Puranic stories and epic mythology. They narrate about the local goddess *Bahuchara*, from north Gujarat, she is killing buffalo demon. Also, they paint and narrate from the *Bhagavata Purana*, where legend has it that Krishna quells the snake *Kaliya*, which is called *Naga Nathana Lila*. The ferocious snake *Kaliya* lived in the Yamuna, and after dialogues with Lord Krishna and *Naginis*, the wives of *Kaliya*, they recognise his divinity and entreat him not to kill *Kaliya*. The above-mentioned songs are so deeply woven into the religious and daily lives of the people<sup>5</sup>.

**Maharashtra:** The powerful, stylized characters in painter *Chitrakathi's* scroll painting are suggestive of both mural and miniature paintings. The size was normally 22 cm by 42 cm, although it might vary depending on the community's demands and the audience's size. The two varieties of *Chitrakathi* being practised, *Pinguli* and *Paithan*, are distinct from one another. In contrast to the *Paithan* style, *Pinguli* art displays Maratha-Deccan-Mughal influences. Painter *Chitrakathi*, this kind of art features strong, stylized figures reminiscent of both miniature paintings and mural art. The size was typically 22 cm by 42 cm, but it might be altered according on the needs of the community and the size of the audience. The two varieties of *Chitrakathi* being practice, *Pinguli* and *Paithan*, are distinct from one

another. In contrast to the *Paithan* style, *Pinguli* art displays Maratha-Deccan-Mughal influences. The mediaeval art of *Chitrakathis* its vibrancy. These factors included a "body of people" who toured from village to village and told mythical tales to rural audiences. "The theatre and the theatre, rather than the craft of painting or plastic arts, were the motivation for these works," the author observes<sup>6</sup>.

**Bengal:** Bengali *pata* songs are usually sparse, almost a fast-moving inventory of events. The songs currently being sung seldom last for ten to fifteen minutes but all through the singing the scroll is constantly being handled; gradually new panels are revealed, and old ones are rolled away. The audience visual and narrative interest in the proceedings; that fundamental aspect of listening the scroll narratives- the sense of then? – and then? – is applicable in this case to the mode of visualizing as well. The audience is keen to see what next. Likewise, it has been appreciated that Bengali rural folk artefacts and traditional motifs like *Alpana* and *Kantha* art, which is simultaneous evidence that Indus Valley art and traditional motifs of *Alpana* and Bengali folk art are well connected<sup>7</sup>. Previously, British scholars and art lovers only paid attention to Mughal miniature painting. He was especially fond of Bengal's *Patachitra* culture. He introduced miniature paintings from Rajasthan and *Pahari* to a reputable venue and works from other local courts soon followed. In order to forcefully add a new nuance to the aesthetic evaluation of all forms of Indian art, Anand Kentice Coomaraswamy, a meticulous scholar, the foremost interpreter of Indian culture, and an art critic, forcefully added a fresh nuance to the aesthetic evaluation of all forms of Indian art, and once spent more years searching methodically for the pictorial expression of rural folk and ethnic painters. It's a well-known fact that the 18<sup>th</sup> century's Murshidabad *Patachitra*, or scroll paintings, from the *Ramayana* were created in Rajasthani and Mughal miniature style. At the time, it was a location for poetry, music and painting<sup>8</sup>. It maintained the pleasure, which is the purest, the most elevating, and the most violent, is derived from admiring the beautiful. "In its metaphysical sense, beauty is one of the instantiations of the Absolute Being. Expiring from its harmonious rays of the divine plan, it crosses the intellectual plane to shine formerly again across the natural plane, where it darkens into matter"<sup>9</sup>.

## Themes of storytelling scrolls

The traditions of storytelling performances in India, often accompanied by register or scroll panels, can be traced back through literary evidence to at least the second century BC and are known to have existed almost all over the Indian subcontinent. Though in all cultures these may be verbal narratives that exist independently of visual narratives, they may be defined as the art of storytelling communities or the art of picture showmen. The storytelling community in our country endeavours to complement the word with a visual character or image, and vice versa. In many cases, the composite narrative of the word and painted figure is amplified by the performance,

which may be facial expression with bodily postures as well as gestures, singing with or without the accompaniment of musical instruments, dance performance, theatrical rendering of scenes, or even audience participation. From the ancient to the present scenario, there may be various narrative folk forms from Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Bengal. Literally means "telling the stories of ancient texts to the common people in a thorough manner." The animated performer recounts, portrays, and offers commentary on scenes and themes from Indian mythology.

The tales are heroic ballads and legends, and they serve as a vehicle for social welfare campaigns like those that raise awareness of AIDS, family planning, Communal Harmony, 9/11, and 26/11 as well as election-related issues. In local languages, each region of India has created its unique storytelling style and tradition. Epics, mythology, folklore, and puranas—ancient, Sanskrit tales of knowledge—are the types of stories that are prevalent throughout most of the world. The storyteller can narrate amusing themes from scroll panels according to various themes and incidents for the current generation. Besides these descriptions of their story telling performances, it also includes insights into the lives of traditional performing communities and their families, as well as all-round efforts to sustain these art forms in the face of dwindling patronage.

### The witness of past memory

The author as well as the researcher can recall a summer day when his mother, drew a beautiful *alpana* with rice paste in the Pooja Room and close to the Tulsi Bedi and drew the footprint of the Goddess Laxmi from the Tulsi Bedi to the Pooja Room. She then finished her Laxmi puja, her hair was still wet, and she was wearing a red border saree with some floral motifs printed on it. When her puja was finished, the men returned from their work, and she made plans for a midday meal. Rural homes were quiet during the summer afternoons when men rested after eating lunch, and mangoes were hung (from *aamshakha*) from stocks i.e., from the branches of mango trees. The cuckoo, a thirsty bird also called as *Chatak* whistling with a note while it waits for rain to relieve its thirst, may be the pied crested cuckoo, the Jacobin cuckoo, appealing for *Phatik Jal* (fresh water)<sup>10</sup>. They appear in Bengal's climate just before the rainy Season. It is a partially migratory bird, and in India, it has been considered a harbinger of the monsoon rains. During that quiet, drowsy summer day, researcher's mother, aunt and grandmother did not fall asleep, in that silence and lethargic summer afternoon; instead, they used their free time to stitch kantha on the balcony floor.

The researcher was not feeling drowsy, so I also woke up and got out of bed. Donate yarn thread from abandoned saree borders to help them. One high-pitched voice suddenly broke the calm and came to our ears. Two men in their mid- to late-50s assured us to show *Pater Khela's* or *Pater Naach's*

performance at our *Naach Dwar* (main entryway)<sup>11</sup>. They pulled out a *pata* from their bag that featured *Yama Raja Pata* and numerous demon figures and tortured victims in *Yama Loka* (Hell) for the sins they did while they were still alive. In the meantime, the high-pitched voice of the *pata* artist roused our family members, including papa, uncle, and grandfather, so, in the late afternoon, people sat on the veranda to listen to *Patua's* song, and all were enjoying *Patua's* performances. While women were busy with *kantha* stitching, the drapery was spread on the balcony floor with some weights on the four borders. All four borders are sewn with three or four rows of big and predominantly white thread using successive rows of speedy running stitch to keep the *kantha* drapery concurrently intact according to Paine, S., and Paine, I.<sup>12</sup>. The *Kantha* of the poor people rarely featured motifs, but later on, the decorative *Kantha* trend dubbed *Nakshi Kantha* was created<sup>13</sup>. The *kantha* quilt has reached a satisfactory position and is ready to be folded and stitched. The remaining work must be completed while they are taking a break.

### Scroll painting inseparable entities in Bengal

The genre of Bengali folk traditions with distinctive characteristics has been an integral part of Bengali culture, though it gives it artistic diversity. Talking about tradition, a rich culture creates a greater impact on heritage and strengthens various folk elements of this state. *Kantha* and *alpana* are undoubtedly products of the household, but *pata* was developed by the *Patua* community. However, the *Patua* community is inspired by the essence of *kantha* or *alpana*. Flower motifs in *alpana* are used to adorn *pata* borders. The linearity of *kantha* has a favourable effect on *Patau's* development of images, forms and characters. The *Patuas* artists are inspired by the local folklore. If one looks closely, one can see a connection between all three creative disciplines. The essence of Bengali culture is presented there. Although it adds creative diversity, the genre of distinctively Bengali folk traditions has long been a vital aspect of Bengali culture. When it comes to tradition, a strong culture has a bigger impact on the state's folk heritage and reinforces them.

### Issues that such communities of storytellers are currently facing

Audio-visual artists sacrificed themselves for social needs. They used to be the mass entertainers; they were the narrative scroll painters. Their powerful words or lines were so comforting that they were able to ease the audience's tension. Oral and visual storytelling are dwindling in India. However, according to Shaguna, it experienced a renaissance in Europe as early as the 1980s<sup>14</sup>. Polish storyteller Michal Malinowski presented tales from his native country. His performance required the audience to sit in the rain while he performed; some were clutching umbrellas, and some were not. Renowned music composer Shantanu Moitra brought tales from the Himalayas. His narration made a big deal of the coexistence of humans and animals.

Shree Lal Joshi is a well-known *Phad* artist; he preserved the art form. Some noted *Phad* artists include Shree Lal Joshi; he kept the art form alive and received many national as well as international awards like the Padma Shree and the *Shilpguru* award. Pradip Mukherjee is another eminent artist who has managed to revive this art form to a great extent. Presently, people and society are experiencing various modes of entertainment. Not giving importance to this artist community that is dedicated to these hereditary practises for mass entertainment. NGOs and government organisations need to be more cautious to sustain and continue these invaluable folk-art practises. Science's advancements have allowed us to enjoy a variety of entertainment options, but not at the expense of the ancient storytelling art form.

## Discussion

This Bengali storytelling tradition incorporates societal issues and contemporary events, which is unusual in a place like India where story-telling art comprises epics, myths, legends, folktales, fairy tales, etc. If one is able to pay close attention to Bengal's oral storytelling culture, they will unavoidably encounter its rich dialect and other folk features that make up the then-unified Bengal. *Alpana* and *Kantha*, as well as other aesthetic and figurative elements, support Bengali tradition and culture. Three are in wonderful synchronicity here. The expectations of the public are fully developed. The Bengali way of life adheres to all three of these principles. A. K. Coomaraswamy<sup>8</sup> valued Bengal's rural folk traditions of *Alpana*, *Kantha* and *Patachitra*, which carried the proof that the art of the Indus valley and the traditional motifs of *Alpana* and Bengal folk art are interrelated. Previously, British scholars and art lovers only paid attention to Mughal paintings. He also admired the Bengali *Patachitra* tradition, displayed miniature paintings from Rajasthan and Pahari in a respectable setting, and other provincial courts soon followed. As a researcher and art critic, Anand Kentice Coomaraswamy<sup>8</sup> firmly introduced a new subtlety to the aesthetic appraisal of all types of Indian art, and a novel perspective.

## Conclusion

In Bengali culture, there are many festivals like *Baroyaary Kali Puja*, *Baroyaary Durga Puja* (the name comes from a proverb that describes twelve thoughts congregating), *Vishwakarma Puja*, and *Saraswati Puja* flow around Bengali life and support one another in terms of obligation. These artefacts are accepted wholeheartedly as authentic folk elements by the Bengali audience. With elaborate setups in the grounds (known as pandals), crowds assembling in various regions of the state, and people purchasing new clothes, accessories, and artwork from respective stalls specifically for this time of year, organising any festival in a prolific manner is a great affair for Bengalis as well as for their lifestyle. Women frequently wear gorgeous *Kantha* stitch sarees, which adorn them with a spectacular allure. They make the celebration grounds beautiful by using beautifully

drawn *alpana* designs. The setting of the grounds becomes lovely, which gives it a marvellous shine. Viewers congregate at the narrative folk-art stand when *Patuas* are permitted to present their creations there. At that point, *Patuas* starts singing in a high or low voice on a thematic scroll. They enthrall the audience or viewer. The audience, or art enthusiasts, seem to be in a dream right now and are entirely lost. There are various types of folk singing as well; the *baul* singer is also invited to the *puja* or festival grounds, similarly to *Patua's* scroll, which attracts visitors to the stall. Overall, it offers the audience and viewers a better impression.

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