

Folk Culture, Heritage and Community in Patachitra Village Naya

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Abstract

This paper is all about the Bengali folk community, culture, and heritage of Naya in Paschim Medinipur. The village offers the folk culture in the forms of visual painting and oral singing. This paper aims at projecting how the *patua* preserve the document of Bengali culture, language and identity. There are paintings and singing about the indigenous Bengali community also. The *patuas* of Naya with the help of the scroll paintings and oral songs preserve the rich texts of Bengali literature, history and culture. We propose to examine how through this profession an entire community of artisans gains visibility, economic stability and sustainability. The folk practice of Naya attains the different types of Sustainability Goals also. To preserve the intangible folktales of the past the Bengali artists use both the oral and visual methods. I propose to explore how the stories take one to the mythical world of *Manasamangal*, *Radha-Krishna*, *Rasleela* as well as to the Bengali rituals and philosophy related to love, marriage, courtship etc. The indigenous communities establish their identity by expressing themselves through the paintings and songs of *Patachitra*. I examine how *Patachitra* craft of Naya paves the way for presenting the communal identity to the global stage.

Keywords: folk, culture, Heritage, community, indigenous

To explore Naya is to excavate the history of a community and to examine the potential of a community through the rich cultural *patua* craft. *Patachitra gram* of Naya in Paschim Medinipur is unique in its nature of celebrating folk culture, community, heritage and tradition. The community of Naya's *Patachitra Gram* in a form of engagement, participation and co-operation create, re-create and express the beauty of incredible storytelling *patua* culture of Bengal. The inimitable folklores of *Patachitra gram* become the voice of Bengal's art and aesthetics. The community of Naya helps the *Patachitra* craft of Bengal gain a global status by reaching and attracting customers from all over the world. The community of Naya can become tomorrow's prominent cultural hub for cultural exploration with a post-national appeal. The oral storytellers celebrate their national, ethnic, cultural, regional, linguistic, economic, mercantile identity in the post-national scenario of plurality and globalization. Naya's *patuas* restore and imprison the indigenous community woven in the artifacts through their intense passion for life and vibes for positivity. Naya's community can create a new history of Bengal by transporting art across borders. Naya's cultural heritage is a journey of the border-crosser *patua* community. They have every possibility to delimit the rural borders of Naya to receive an

international recognition and standard by reaching the global market. The pictures of the tribal community depicted on potteries, cloth, garments remind one of Keats's "Grecian Urn."

The *patua* community of Naya of West Midnapore stands for the inimitable, incredible folkloric identity of Bengal. Pingla- *Patuas* keep up the tradition of unique storytelling and painting for Generations after generations. The community live through their oral tales. Decades ago when radio, television were not invented, the *patuas* used to sing songs and tell stories for "madhukari" while they described their paintings on scrolls of clothes. The age-old profession of the soulful artists filled in the bower of Bengal's culture. The *patuas* of Naya become synonymous and identical with Bengal's folk identity. The folk rhythm of these innocent community remains an unparalleled as well as unforgettable experience for all. The unfathomable *patua* -self becomes their very essence and identity. That's why all of them are titled as "Chitrakar". Let us explore the intangible heritage world of Khandu Chatrakar, Bapi Chatrakar, Tagar Chirtarakar, Rabeya Chitrakar, Mamoni Chitrakar, Ahed Chitrakar, Jaba Chitrakar, Radha Chitrakar and many more. The very vibes of the Adibasi, tribal culture in the artifacts of the Naya *Patuas* make Bengal pulsating, animating with all the colours of aesthetics; Naya is such a place where the folk community allures you to the densely decorated and passionately painted world of myths and legends of Tusu, Marang Guru, Manasa, Chandi, Laxmi, Behula and many more. Here the community invites to explore the collective lives of the *santals*, tribals.

The practice of scroll painting and oral storytelling unfolds the tale of empowerment. It excavates the history of a community and examines the potential of a community. The traditional craft of *patachitra* celebrates folk culture, community and heritage of incredible storytelling *patua* culture. It represents Bengal's art and aesthetics. It transports art to outside world. Many *patuas* mainly women cross borders to participate in art exhibition organized in other countries. There are several outcomes of community engagement in *Patachitra Craft*. i) Arts Festival and Art market (Pato Maya) held in winter in *Patachitra* village help the artistes in getting into contact with so many art-lovers from all over the state. They exhibit their scroll painting and other artifacts there. Tristi Brownett says "Festivals also stimulate self-efficacy, which facilitates participation, an emotional response, and may lead to a sense of personal wellbeing, with a living legacy for the community" (1). Richard Crane Ings Nikki and Cameron Marsaili (2012), "Be Creative Be Well: Arts, Wellbeing and Local Communities - An Evaluation", say "Arts festival participation can stimulate a sense of ability to succeed and be in control, themed here as 'self-efficacy' (Quoted from Brownett). ii) The world of *Patachitra* village is all about participation, involvement and engagement into folk community of Naya. iii) This practice is all about the wellbeing and sustainability of the folk community. This achieves the goals of social, economic, environmental sustainability. The men and the women are equally engaged in economic advancement here. They increase the social capital also. In *Patachitra* village some folk artists are Muslim by religion, but they paint and sing from the Hindu myths, culture, rituals, festivals without hesitation. They celebrate the values of humanity there. They are the representatives of humanity at large.

Naya in the district of West Midnapore of West Bengal is all about culture, colour, stories, heritage, folktales, folk painting, resilience and dedication to art. Naya's *patua* community unfolds the Indigenous Bengali culture with all its beauty in the *patachitras* and other art objects. In my research proposal I have emphasized on Naya's *patuas* who with their impeccable artistic sense are trying to overcome all socio-economic obstacles in their life.

Practising folk art, preserving heritage, building up an economically sustainable society, protecting environment and elevating the legacy of Bengal's culture remain their sole aim. I intend to focus on the fact that no matter how ordinary, simple they are, they sustain Bengal culturally and they can turn Naya into an internationally recognized centre of intangible heritage. I intend to show how the border-crosser women artists of Naya bear the legacy of Bengali culture to the European and other first world countries. I have examined how their folk art of storytelling and painting are getting appreciated globally. Through this research, I send my plea to the state and Central governments also to take more initiatives to attract more tourists and art lovers from all over the world. Naya's *chitrakars* deserve to be appreciated for their capability to raise art to a new status. My research will be all about their active roles in leading and sustaining the society and community. Their participation, engagement and collaboration in the preservation of Bengali folk culture which is both oral and visual can turn Naya into an international cultural trade hub. For this purpose they require to be more and more showcased. National and global exposures will be instrumental in spreading this legacy of intangible heritage. The interaction and collaboration between the local and the global will be very vital in the preservation of culture and heritage. I examine how *Patachitra* craft of Naya paves the way for *patuas'* identity formation through preservation of heritage and displaying that to the borderless world. The artists here can be the flagbearers of the postnational approach to art, humanism, and society.

I have gone through Keya Mandal's article titled "Naya-A Village of Scroll Painters: Some Lights on Their Economic Development" in *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)* in 2017. The writer has termed the *patuas* as "professional artists" than mere "craftsmen". They belong to the marginalized and economically challenged group. In the postcolonial period the Government of India has tried to uplift the condition of the *patuas* through different types of projects. Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojna and Self Help Groups are formed to encourage them and improve their socio-economic condition. The author feels that in the face of rapid commercialization, this *patua* art is being endangered. We need to protect this thousand year old art of Naya. The writer has mentioned the names of notable male *patuas* like Dukhushyam Chitrakar, Shyamsundar Chitrakar Manu Chitrakar, Gurupada Chitrakar, Sambhu Chitrakar who have carried the legacy of art to India and abroad. She mentions that *Patua Mahila Unnayan Samity* formed in 1998 became very popular with Swarna Chitrakar, Rani Chitrakar, Ayesha Chitrakar, Yumuna Chitrakar, Moyna Chitrakar, Radha Chitrakar, Manimala Chitrakar, Rubela Chitrakar, Guljan Chitrakar, Snehalata Chitrakar, Meena Chitrakar, Joba Chitrakar, Rukmini Chitrakar and Putul Chitrakar. Among these women artists cum performing artistes Swarna Chitrakar and Rani Chitrakar attained national and international acclaim. The author focuses on the period before the formation of Self Help Groups also when the artists used to sing their *pater gaan* from door to door and collected rice or paddy in return. She observes, As their economic condition was not healthy the *patua* community often turned to other occupations like snake charming, mat-making, rickshaw pulling, harvesting etc. She refers to Gurusaday Dutta's poem entitled "Patua" that was published from Calcutta University Press in 1939. In this poem Gurusaday Dutta expressed his concern over the poverty of the *patua* community, "Patuas people call them, and their calling is the painters' art. Lean are their half-starved bodies, and half-tumbled are their huts. Poorer than e'en their poorest neighbours is their lot" (1-3) (quoted from Mandal). Keya Mandal feels the urgency to protect this inherited tradition of art and culture in an engaging way.

In the article titled "The Chitrakars in Naya: Emotion and the Ways of Remembrance" (2018) in *Journal of the International Oral History Association* the writer Reeti Basu examines memory, oral history, lineage of the *patua* community of Naya. The first section of the article titled "Space, time and authority" is all about the settlement of the community in Naya and the second part titled "Lineage, time and identity" is preoccupied with the attainment of the surname "Chitrakar" by the *patuas*. The author shows how the *patuas* have reconstructed their past through memory. She documents the experiences of Dukhusyam Chitrakar, one of the oldest *patuas* of the village. She notices how some other veteran artists like Nanigopal Chitrakar, Ananda Chitrakar, Meena Chitrakar also claim that they came to Naya first during 1950s- 1960s. According to her, "Other sorts of the accounts hold that the Chitrakars had their roots in a primitive age, when people were unable to speak and they used painting as a means of communication. It was much before human beings became civilized" (12).

All the previous articles uphold the creative potential of Naya. Still what I feel to be lacking is the sufficient focus on the women power in transforming a rural village into an advanced cultural centre of heritage preservation. The women of Naya are capable of earning International recognition for *patua* art and craft. The previous researchers have not unearthed the fact that the local women-artists can build a sustainable, resilient society which is one of the major aims of *Viksit Bharat* also. *Viksit Bharat* has a special focus on the power of the women and their capabilities of leading a society intellectually, culturally and economically. There is no such special and sufficient focus exclusively on the sector of the women *patuas* in Naya who bear the cultural and linguistic roots of a civilization in them. The women artists have engaged themselves in portrayal and singing of the colonial past of the Indigo movement as well as the latest Covid affected world. The scholars have not examined the significant role of Naya's women in documenting social reality. Since time immemorial the women have been the associates and helpers of running their family, forming a sustainable society and developing as well as sustaining a country like Bharat along with the other male members in their community. The rural women with the little scope of exposure have been most modern in their outlook. There are some brilliant veteran female painters cum artistes in Naya whose stories are less explored. Naya is outstanding with its extraordinary women *patuas* who can be the national and international cultural icons and ambassadors. Naya can be a centre of creative excellence with the women who have overcome all hurdles with their determined creative spirit. What I feel necessary is to showcase them, share their stories from the perspective of women. Naya is rich in artists like swarna Chitrkar who have travelled, China, England, France, Germany, Sweden Australia, and the United States, Rani Chitrakar a much travelled artist, Tagar Chitrakar, Jaba Chitrakar, Sabek Chitrakar, Sonali Chitrakar, Mamoni Chitrakar and many more. The present generation of women *patuas* need to be explored to understand the rich lineage and hereditary and intergenerational transmission of the craft. Through my research I propose to promote the art of the rural folk women also in the urban setting to help them step out of their rural and local limits. I request for more and more initiatives from the Government to showcase and project these highly talented and creative women artists in the international space. In order to project Bharat globally, Governments should rely on the capabilities of the local women *patuas*. I propose to analyse their experience and perspectives through the intersectional theoretical issues of gender, cultural identity, folk art, sustainability and wellbeing which I feel were not done aptly before. In this age of artificial intelligence when Ghibli art moves people we need to get back to the folk art originating with human touch and human voice. In order to gain rich, experience based, contextual experience of women artists I need to conduct an in-depth, theory-

based research on the said topic. The research is qualitative and ethnographic by nature. Field Study is of immense importance here as I need to collect their experiences. It is of utmost importance to unfurl the stories of these exceptionally creative though economically backward women artists to understand their perspective and their bold steps to empower society. No research article has theoretically analysed them in a broader, wider space.

My research is important for multiple reasons. The crucial issues of Indigenous culture, folk art, heritage, decolonization of art, sustainability, language, cross-border engagement, environmentalism are addressed by the *chitrakars* through their unique storytelling art. It showcases *patua* community and their capability in the dynamic development and evolution of a society. The local artists of grassroot levels are trying to uphold the cultural assets of our nation to a wider world. These adorable *patuas* can be the befitting representatives of the *Viksit Bharat*. Their absolutely artistic perception will usher in a new age of progress and prosperity in India. Though they are underrepresented, they will break through all challenges with their indomitable spirit of struggle. Their life stories will inspire innumerable ordinary artists to be economically and emotionally self-dependent. The gender issue in the preservation of art and heritage is prioritized in my issue. The assertion of womanhood will play the key role in the formation of *Viksit Bharat*. The dedicated women artists of Naya set the perfect examples of work-life balance. Indian civilization has always emphasized on the preservation of nature. The women artists celebrate their colourful world of art with the help of homemade colours. Their unparalleled artistic, aesthetic and ethical sense prevent them from using any kind of chemicals in their *Patachitras*. They weave their colourful oral stories with the ethics of preserving indigenous Bengali culture. The warmth of mirth and merrymaking of the *Adivasis* are never missing in their *patua*. My research shows how they are restoring indigenous culture in the *patachitras* to reclaim Indian tradition and decolonize art and heritage from the foreign dominance. My research will explore the re-reconstruction of indigenous identity through the folk artists of Naya and formation of self-sufficient marginalized women's identity also. This heritage of Naya not only unfolds the cultural history of the indigenous community but also the very beliefs, values, ethics and experiences of the *patua* women also. The *patachitra* craft stands for their rootedness, belongingness, and financial and cultural sufficiency. Even in the age of artificial intelligence when Ghibli art has a tremendous rate of followers, we do feel the need of human painters pulsating with true emotion, true feelings and creating lives on the canvas. In the age of rapid globalization, the *patuas* of Naya need to be more and more showcased globally to open up new avenues of international trade market and tourism. During my survey in Naya I met such gifted *patuas* who despite the traditional roles of a woman, have surprised the world with their art. This research emphasizes the necessity of giving focus on the astounding art of painting and storytelling of the women of Naya. They need to be explored to re-construct India's cultural identity also. Through my research I share their stories with the borderless world. We should take every effort to revive our indigenous past, heritage nurtured by *patuas* of Naya lest it gets marginalized.

The themes of folk songs and painting are quite fascinating. Each painting has a story in it. The marriage of the fish, the marriage of birds, *Manasamangal*, *Ramer Banabas*, *Krishnaleela*, *Chandimangal*, *Tusu*, *Poush-Parban*, *Nabanna* all bear the documents of Bengali culture and community in them. The very painting of *Chaksudan* is all about the indigenous belief where the family of a deceased pays the artist to give the eyes to dead in order to travel peacefully in after

life. The portrait of the dead one remains without eyeballs first. After *Chaksudan* ritual it gains sight.



Figure 1 Chaksudan: tribal ritual

During *Nabanna*, the indigenous community used to store the corns to their granary. They used to engage in merrymaking and rejoicing in time of their affluence. In the picture below one can identify the indigenous community in the mood of dancing beside the granary. In the first picture we can see the tribals are busy in bearing the bridegroom in a palanquin to their home. This is the celebration of marriage. The third and the fourth patachitras also are all about their engagements into festivals and merrymaking.

The *patua* community of Naya of West Midnapore stands for the inimitable, incredible folkloric identity of Bengal. Pingla- *Patuas* keep up the tradition of unique storytelling and painting for Generations after generations. The community live through their oral tales. Decades ago when radio, television were not invented, the *patuas* used to sing songs and tell stories for “madhukari” while they described their paintings on scrolls of clothes. The age-old profession of the soulful artists filled in the bower of Bengal’s culture. The *patuas* of Naya become synonymous and identical with Bengal’s folk identity. The folk rhythm of these innocent community remains an unparalleled as well as unforgettable experience for all. The unfathomable *patua* -self becomes their very essence and identity. That’s why all of them are titled as “Chitrakar”. Let us explore the intangible heritage world of Khandu Chatrakar, Bapi Chatrakar, Tagar Chirtarakar, Rabeya Chitrakar, Mamoni Chitrakar, Ahed Chitrakar, Jaba Chitrakar, Radha Chitrakar and many more. The very vibes of the Adibasi, tribal culture in the artifacts of the Naya *Patuas* make Bengal pulsating, animating with all the colours of aesthetics. There are 155 families in *Patachitra* gram of Naya. Each and every member of each family practice this art of oral storytelling and folk painting. This is something unique. Even the each house, wall, doors of the village bear this mark of folk identity. The houses in this mesmerizing village are all painted with various art forms bearing the semblance of folk identity. One can see paintings everywhere in Naya. Naya is such a place where the folk community allures you to the densely decorated and passionately painted world of myths and legends of Tusu, Marang

Guru, Manasa, Chandi, Laxmi, Behula and many more. Here the community invites to explore the collective lives of the *santals*, tribals. Please have a look at the Chitrakars' world.

Santal janmokatha is a captivating tale of the first parents of the tribals i.e. prichukha and Pirchubai. The gripping tale of the marriage of the seven sisters and seven brothers, the marriage ceremony, rituals of the drinking *tari* and the very act of preparing it, dancing and merrymaking, the harvesting scenes during *Nabanna* and *Poush-Parban* are amazingly and flawlessly captured on scroll painting, pot-painting and vessel painting. The *patuas* of Naya are gifted artists. The human forms painted everywhere are reminiscent of Greek art or Hellenic art where the painters and the sculptors explored themselves through the rich communal, social life painted on art-objects. In that sense, we can say that the very *patachitras* of Naya's *patuas* have a post-national appeal. They do resemble the human figures painted on Ajanta cave.

The chitrakars of Pingla have travelled far and wide. The women community of this place are a host enlightened, empowered women who have travelled to USA, Germany, Norway and many more countries for reaching a global market. A community is engaged in protecting the environment and maintaining its sustainability. The community of Naya are eco-friendly. They try to protect its purity by using all natural organic colours. They aim at developing a sustainable environment through their art. The folk art of *Patachitra* painting and singing is instrumental to the sustainable development of Naya's *patua* community.

The *patua* community of Paschim Medinipur's Naya are unique from every aspect. This art deserves the status of intangible cultural heritage. With the help of this status the Bengali art, culture and literature will draw the attention of more global audience. We can project this as one of the major cultural hubs of India. UNESCO has visited the place. It is our responsibility to struggle for its heritage status. More and more workshops are to be organized. The export of art-objects should be more easy and more smooth. More and more initiatives should be taken so that the artists can travel far and wide to sell their products and promote the folk culture of Bengal to a global stage. Bengali philosophy and Hellenistic philosophy have a striking similarity. Hellenistic art was realistic as well as dynamic. Hellenistic art featured subjects, such as scenes from ordinary life the pictures on the pottery often depicted heroic and tragic stories of gods and human beings. The Greek painters were Humanists, So are the chitrakars of Naya. The very style of painting is reminiscent of that of Jamini Roy. This research work raises voice for a sustainable society, sustainable community and sustainable environment. The sustainability goals of Naya align with United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The relevant sustainable goals are SDG 1 No Poverty and SDG 2 Zero Hunger : Naya's *patuas* strive towards no poverty and zero hunger.

SDG 5 Gender Equality : *Patachitra* art and craft of Naya paves way for gender equality. Women are equally participating with the male members to earn. They are equally collaborating like their male members to produce something meaning. The women of Naya are the bold examples of women empowerment. The women with their little scope try to expose themselves in splendid folk art. These women are trying to be empowered socially, culturally, and economically. They are trying to build both individual and collective identity. The documentation will spread their tales of all conquering spirit everywhere. Their stories will be an asset for the society. The women play the role of leadership when they transmit their oral and pictorial folk art to the future generations.

SDG 8 Decent work and economic growth : The more the local artists get an access into the European and other First World countries to share their oral tales and paintings is better for India's economic growth. The research lays emphasis on the setting up of internationally acknowledged cultural trade centre at Naya also. Economic sustainability is gained through the practice of folk art. This art promotes entrepreneurship and other small business. The workshops conducted here encourage the young practitioners in this field. The women of Naya lead to economic sustainability for the whole society.

SDG 9 Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure : Naya is all about tradition and innovation. The *patuas* experiment the production of various cross-cultural products by mixing their art with other artistic style. There are archives in Naya. New art- industries with modern technology and infrastructure should be formed here to help the women engage in new experiments.

SDG 11 Sustainable cities and communities : The artisan- community of Naya is all about collaboration, involvement, participation in the workforce. All of them are very particular about work-life compatibility. The integrity of the community is conspicuous during the festival, exhibition, or the visit of dignified visitors. The women maintain all their household duties like cooking, sweeping, child rearing and their other engagement like farming. Through the patachitra world one gets the opportunity of meeting and greeting a sustainable self-reliant and self-dependent community. There will be detailed discussion based on the interviews and case studies.

SDG 13 Climate action : The women of Naya paint and sing folk stories based on climate issues. Like the ecofeminists they promote pro-environment awareness. Painting and songs on climate.

SDG 16 Peace, justice and strong institutions : The women call for a peaceful, harmonious, inclusive sustainable society. Many *patuas* are Muslim by religion. Still they are comfortable with working on Hindu epics.

SDG 17 Partnerships for the goals : National and international partnerships are encouraged here for global trade and tourism.

Last but not the least, I invite all of you to West Midnapore, to Naya to soothe your eyes with the breathtaking beauty of folkloric Bengal as expressed through the participation , engagement and co-operation of a the whole of *patua*-community of Naya.

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She has conducted the internship programme of 4th SEM students of English department of her college on art, heritage and culture.

Priyanka Maity, Puja Bhowmik and *Priya Das* had completed their summer internship programme under Dr. Aditi Jana's guidance. Currently, they are the 6th Semester students pursuing English Honours in the Department of English at Shahid Matangini Hazra Government General Degree College for Women.