

Social Customs and Rituals of Patuas of the District of Paschim Medinipur-A Study

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ABSTRACT: ‘Patuas’ or ‘Chitrakars’ are common words in the district of Paschim Medinipur of West Bengal. They are scroll painters. It is very interesting that those scroll painters are professional artists by caste rather than craftsmen. This art has been practised since thousand years ago. Many old texts (Patanjali’s Mahabhasya, Kautilya’s Arthashastra and Buddhist text Aryamanjushreemulakalpa etc.) or archeological evidences throw lights on the patuas as endogamous community. The evidence of the presence of occupational caste (chitrakars) in Bengal is found in Brahmavaivarta Purana - those were converted into Islam during Pala and Sena periods. In this period the supremacy of Brahmins ostracized many endogamous communities like Patuas. As a result some complex features were found in the lifestyle of patuas and then they were treated as outcaste. It is interesting to say that after independence Government of India has taken many steps for uplifting their social and economic conditions. The Government of India has tried to uplift the position of rural artisan classes all over India through different projects under the Ministry of Handicrafts. Department of Small Scale Industries was also formed in West Bengal in late 1950s. In the district of Paschim Medinipur patuas have been recognised as Other Backward Classes (OBCs). The enlistment of patuas in the list of OBCs seems more a strategy for obtaining certain government benefits than a reflection of how they see themselves. Patuas are considered to be somewhere in between Hindu and Muslim religions. They make Hindu mythological scrolls and their customers are exclusively Hindus. On the other hand, they practise their rites of passage according to the Islamic rules. In this way patuas of the the district of Paschim Medinipur adopt the complex mode of Indian social and cultural patterns and represent themselves exclusive unit of Indian social and cultural heritage.

Keywords: Chitrakars or patuas, social customs, Paschim Medinipur, ostracized

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I. INTRODUCTION

Patuas or Chitrakars of the district of Paschim Medinipur, west Bengal, India observe common type of rituals and customs and festivals of both Hindu and Islamic culture for their daily life. It is important to mention that on account of dereliction of duty the status of chitrakars were downgraded due to the curse of a Brahmin. In the tenth section of *Brahmakhand* of the *Brahmavaibarta Purana* it is also clearly stated that chitrakars were degraded for drawing paintings untraditionally. The words of the Purana is as follows
‘Betikramena chitranang sadyaschitrakarstathaa
Patito brahmasapena brahmananancha kpotah’¹

In the Hindu community the patuas were untouchable and during the reign of Muslims they were used as the propagator of Islam. Then a number of patas Gazirpat, Mohammad Mangala describing the miracles of *Muslim Pirs* were made by them. There is probability that patuas thought that such islamisation would provide them security because they were a small community and got patronage from the Muslim rulers. But such conversion had not refrained them from drawing Hindu mythological pictures which had a good market among the Hindu community. As a result a complex pattern of culture arose among the patuas of Bengal including the district of Paschim Medinipur. They remained midway between the Hindus and the Muslims for a long time. Consequent upon the decline of Muslim rules in Bengal they lost the patronage and tried to enter into the fold of Hindu community. As a result their economic condition deteriorated day by day and link with the Hindu community through this traditional occupation weakened. It also weakened their bondage with the Hindu community. So the Patuas were accepted by neither the Hindu community nor the Muslim community.

¹ Roy Sudhansukumar, *Loksamaskriti Gobeshana*, April-September, 2008, P-16

OBJECTIVES

In my paper I emphasize their mixed cultural (Hindu and Islamic culture mainly) identity in the context of Indian perspective. I also analyse the social customs, rituals and festivals of patuas of the district of Paschim Medinipur in Pre and Post colonial era.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of studies on this subject are found e.g. McCutcheon, David J and Bhowmik Suhrid K., *Patuas and Patua Art in Bengal*, Calcutta, 1999, Sengupta Sankar (ed), *The Patas and Patuas of Bengal*, Indian Publication, Calcutta, 1973 and Bhattacharjee Binoy, *Cultural Oscillation (A Study on Patua Culture)*, Naya Prokash, Kolkata, 1980 and Dutt Gurusaday, *Patua Sangeet*, Calcutta University, Calcutta, 1939 etc.

III. METHODOLOGY

For the study data are collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data are collected by field survey using a semi structural questionnaire and personal interviews etc. Secondary data and information are collected from library books, journals, e-books and websites etc.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

We know that patuas of the district of Paschim Medinipur observe unique type of rituals which reflect mixed culture of Hindu and Muslim. But in which phase of historical evolution they adopt those types of unique culture is required to be discussed. The study of the 12th and 13th century history of Bengal reveals that many artisan castes were ostracised during the reign of Vallal Sen. 'The social history of that period reveals that it was an especially harsh time for the low caste Hindus as casteism and caste hierarchy got especial support and encouragement from the royal court. There are many records pointing to Vallal Sen's pre-occupation with casteism and his unpopularity among the low castes. In 1510 A.D. Anandabhatta composed a book on the life and character of Vallal Sen- *Vallala-Charitra*. It was edited and translated by Mahamahapadhyay Haraprasad Sastri and published by the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1904. The book depicts Vallal Sen as capricious and tyrannical especially in his treatment of some castes. There is a story in that book that once Vallal Sen borrowed a crore of rupees (nishka) from Vallabhananda, the richest merchant in his time for financing an expedition against the king of Udantipura. After repeated reverses in that expedition Vallal asked for a fresh loan of crore and a half of *suvarnas*. Vallabh was ready to give the money but wanted that the revenue of Hara-kiri should be mortgaged against the loan. The enraged Vallal Sen and he forcibly took possession of all the wealth of Vallava, who was the leader of the Baniks (merchant community) along with the wealth of many other merchants and inflicted other hardships on them. There was a series of changes in the caste order. The caste to which Vallava belonged was of course downgraded. So it is not improbable that a number of castes including the Patuas were so treated at this time.'²

In this context it may be said that 'Expulsion of the patuas from the recognized Hindu caste order and stigmatizing them as outcastes forced them to embrace Islam. Another historical compulsion is also said to be responsible for this conversion. Firoj Shah Tughlaq (1351-1389) levied *jizya* (poll-tax) on the non-Muslims in return for which they received protection of their life and property. But in course of time a religious motive was attached to it and ultimately only the Hindus had to bear the tax burden. To escape this inexorable repressive tax the patuas became Muslims. After all, they are in search of patronage and security. With the decline of Muslim rule and the rise of British power in India at about 18th century after the battle of Plassey in 1757, the patuas gradually swung back towards as *pat* was never widely accepted, not so widely accepted, not so widely even the *Gazir pat* depicting miracles of Pirs (saints), among the common Muslims, because Islamic common objection is not to draw human picture. But mosque pictures of Mecca, Madina and Kaba are hung on walls. They are not accepted by the higher echelon of the Hindus and Muslims and as such Patuas live in a state oscillating midway between Mahommedanism and Hinduism like a half Mahommedan and a half Hindu (*dobhanja*).³ So, the practice of Hindu and Muslim rituals and customs are reflected in the life style of patuas of Bengal specially Paschim Medinipur. Some assimilated rituals, customs and festivals are given below.

Marriage: The rituals are strictly followed in the marriage ceremony of the patua community. The observation is started three or five days before the marriage. The bridegroom is anointed with turmeric paste and mustard oil by the women of the patua community only. Then the same turmeric paste and mustard oil are sent to the bride's house for anointing. The dowry system is also in vogue in their society. The marriage ceremony is

²Bhattacharjee Binoy, *Cultural Oscillation (A Study on Patua Culture)*, Naya Prokash, Kolkata, 1980, P-106 &107

³Bhowmik Atul Chandra, *The Indigenous Art Form of the Patuas of West Bengal*, Midya Dipak Kumar (ed.), *Indigenous People in India*, Delhi, 2012, P-46.

performed in the daylight. A feast is given to the neighbours and relatives at the bridegroom's house at night of the day before marriage. In the morning of the marriage day the bridegroom along with his guardian, the headman of the village, relatives and friends set out in a procession for the bride's house at the auspicious moment according to almanac. The Kaji supervises the whole programme of the marriage ceremony. The bride is brought to the bridegroom's house on that very day. But no members of the bride's family accompany the bride.

Birth Rites: On the 6th day after delivery of baby *Chotti* or *Sentra* is held among the patua community of the district of Paschim Medinipur. On that day the barber comes and cuts hair of the baby. *Ekuish* is performed on the twenty first day. On that day barber cuts hair and pares nails of the mother and the baby. At the end of six months of the birth of baby *Bhojni* or *Onnoprashon*⁴ is held. On the day just before the observance of the programme the goddess of Sasthi is performed. During *Bhojni* or *Onnoprashon* the baby is dressed with a new wear and fed payes⁵ or khir⁶. The eldest member of the family gives *sinni* collected from the mosque to the baby. Some families of the patua community of the district of Paschim Medinipur perform *Milat* in this occasion. Neighbours are also invited and served with foods according to family's ability. Influence of Hindu culture is found in these rituals.

Khatna: The initiation ceremony among the Patuas is known as *Khatna*-circumcision⁷. It is observed at eight or nine years of age of male child. He is anointed with turmeric paste on three or four days before the observance of the ceremony. A feast for the neighbours is also arranged according to family's ability. Khalifa performs *khatna* rite. On the day of ceremony the male child is dressed with a new gamacha⁸ and khalifa cuts the skin of top of genital of the child. Khalifa is given as remuneration for the service gamacha worn by the child and money according to the family's ability.

Birth day celebration: Birthday of most of the boys and girls are also observed in the patua or chitrakar community of Paschim Medinipur. About 15 to 16 years ago in this occasion the holy mark with sandal-paste is given on the forehead of the boys and girls. But nowadays *payes*⁹ is served only.

Bhaiphnota: On this occasion a special feast is held among the members of patua families. But at present the holy mark with sandal-paste is not given on the forehead of brothers.

Jamaisasthi: Like Hindus they also perform *jamaisasthi*. *Jamai*¹⁰ comes to his in-law's house and a feast is held in this occasion. But the holy mark of the sandal paste is not given on the forehead of the jamai at present.

Death Rites: Patuas of Paschim Medinipur follow rites of Muslim in the funeral of the dead body. Maulvi is called for the purpose. At first they bath the dead body and dress it with a new one. Then 'they sprinkle *golap jal* and *atar* profusely over the dead body..... The bier is then carried to the western side of the Idgar- a Muslim prayer place by the side of burial ground where *janaja* or last prayer is performed. The prayer is conducted by a Maulvi. All the persons who joined the funeral procession perform the prayer. Previously the female relatives also used to follow the funeral procession but nowadays no female takes part in the funeral procession. Although the bier is carried only by the members of the patua community, they allow the members of the Muslim community to join the funeral procession. The Muslim neighbours visit patua houses on such occasions, help them, follow the procession and take part at the *jajna*.'¹¹ Then having kept the head and face in the northwards and west wards respectively the corpse is placed in the grave and covered with bamboo, straw and earth.

Patuas take bath before going to the burial ground. After the completion of bury patuas take *chire* soaked with water & molasses and return home. The mourning period lasts forty days. After four days of death *Chola Poda* has been held in presence of Maulavi. Women are not allowed to participate to the programme. 10-15 patuas sit around a big pot containing grams soaked with water on a mat. Everybody take a handful of grams and pray with his own ritual activities and keep those on the mat. The whole of the process is repeated seven to eleven times. Blessing is prayed for the dead. At the end *sinni* is made meshing those grams and then eaten by all. The same event is held again after forty days of death (According to Dukhushyam Chitrakar, Naya, Pingla, Paschim Medinipur).

⁴First rice taking ceremony

⁵A sweet dish prepared by boiling rice in milk with sugar and other ingredients

⁶Milk condensed and sweetened by boiling

⁷A muslim term and every muslim must do it.

⁸A napkin

⁹Payes is prepared by boiling rice in milk with sugar

¹⁰Husband of daughter

¹¹Bhattacharjee Binoy, *Cultural Oscillation (A Study on Patua Culture)*, Naya Prokash, Kolkata, 1980, P-87 & 88

Visva-Karma Puja: ‘According to the legend, the Patuas are the descendents of Visvakarma, the celestial architect and Ghrithachi-the celestial nymph’¹². On the last day of the month of Bhadra, the fifth month of Hindu calendar, the patuas observe *Visvakarma Puja* in their own style. On that day they do not draw ant pata. They get all the instruments with which they work *bathed* with water and *dried* under the sun. Then they keep all in a container and mark both the instruments & container with vermilion. Respect for the Lord Visvakarma is noticed among all patuas of Paschim Medinipur.

Muharram: The patuas of the district of Paschim Medinipur do not observe this festival of Muslims.

ID-UZ-JOHA: Like Muslims, the patuas of Paschim Medinipur observe Ramzan-fasting throughout the day in the holy month of Ramjan. They also observe the day of *Id-uz-zoha* as a festival and perform special namaj in the mosque. It is found that very few of them actually observe fasting. They have an explanation for this. They say that they are to move from one place to other for their work. This work is tiring and it is very difficult for them to work for the whole day without a drop of water.’

SAB-E-BARAT: It is observed at night. The patuas of the village cook rice and meat at home and then assemble with those in the holy place of the village. Having kept food in a common place they ceremonially offer those to the ancestors. But no namaj is performed on that occasion. At the end food is served among the assembled patuas.

Nabanna or Dak Samkranti: Patuas of Paschim Medinipur do not observe Nabanna or Dak Samkranti¹³.

Assimilated nature is reflected in their traditional occupational craft works (making pata painting or scroll painting and patua songs): Patuas of the district of Paschim Medinipur are mainly folk painters. They make patas or scrolls with the story or narrative in the form of songs which are called patua songs. They inherit their skills from their ancestors. Nowadays patua songs of Bengal including the district of Paschim Medinipur play an important role in the world of oral, traditional folk music and painting. Patuas or Chitrakars are common words in the district of Purba Medinipur of West Bengal. During the reigns of Pala and Sena the folk painters (Chitrakars) did not follow the traditional method of painting (Shastriya riti). As a result of that they were enlisted in the group of *Nabasakh*¹⁴. During the period of Turk- Afghan social and political exploitation by the Brahminical society forced them to take Islam. They created *Gaazipat*¹⁵ for the spread of Islam. So, they assimilated both Hindu and Islamic culture for their life and livelihood. In this context some patua songs are given below.

‘Gazi Pat (The Story of Gazi)

In the Medieval period, that or Moghul rule, there was a tendency towards establishing a relationship between the Hindu and Muslim religions. Songs were composed by the Patuas to make Muslim deities popular in Hindu and Muslim society. The structure of the stories imitated the *Brata* or *Mangal Kabyas*.

Narrative Song :

‘The victory of gazi sahib, the incarnation of kindness-
Riding on the back of the tiger he has been the best rider,
There is no definite description of his form,
But he does have a topee and a long beard.
And he has at least the following forms,
Saisatol, Gazi and *Badai Manic*.
He’s known as Lord Narayan among the Hindus and
Pir among the Muslims.

He has appeared to receive worship from both the communities.’¹⁶

Again, while exhibiting *patas* relating the stories of Satyanarayana¹⁷ or Satyapir¹⁸, the *patuas* of Medinipur sing the following verses. This story was composed in *Mangal Kavya* style. It shows how an attempt was made to unite Hindus and Muslims in India.

¹²ibid 11, P-100

¹³The meaning of the word ‘dak’ is invocation or cry and the word ‘samkranti’ means transit from one zodiacal sign to another, as well as the last day of the month of Asvin (October). The belief goes that Lakshmi –the goddess of wealth hovers through the paddy field on that night.

¹⁴The nine caste-guilds are: a)The Sutradharas, b)The Karmakaras, c)The Tantubayas, d)The Kumbhakar, e)The Kangsakar, f)The Swarnakar, g)The Sankhakar, h)The Chitrakar, i)The Malakar.

¹⁵Pata on Gazipir-Gazipatas are very popular among Santhals, Bhumis & Bedias of the districts of undivided Medinipur, Purulia & Bankura. It is also in vogue among the Muslims of Kumilla, Faridpur & Barisaal in Bangladesh. Many supernatural incidents of two Muslim pirs *Satyapir* & *Kalugazi* have been depicted in Gazipata.

¹⁶This song was collected by David J McCutchion (in tape) translated by Suhrid Kr. Bhowmik

¹⁷A syncretic characteristic was infused in them when following historical demands, the Puranic Narayans, the Buddhist Sunya and the Islamic Pir perged into the icon of Satyanarayan.

Ar Kothai acho Satyanarayan lailam smaran
Toma bina keba kare lajjba nibaran
Hindu kule Narayan Muslim kule Pir
Dui kule pap (?) kheyeh jahir
Namer nahi lekhajokha lamba lamba kesh
Nandike kata murti dhare nana besh
Narayan bale ami satya nam haba
Amar puja dekhe prachar kariba

(Collected from Shyamsundar Chitrakar, Naya, Pingla, Paschim Medinipur, 23rd January, 2012)

English :

O Satyanarayan ! where you are? We seek your protection; none can save us except you. You are Narayana to the Hindus and Pir to the Muslims. You have exposed yourself after absorbing the vices (?) of the Hindus and the Muslims. No where i.e., Brahmanical text your name (Satyapir) has been written; you possess long hair, you appear (before us) in various forms dressed differently at different times. You say that you alone are right and you will preach your worship.

In the *Chandimangal*¹⁹ the goddess Chandi takes on the form of the Puranic deity Mahisasuramardini (Durga) before the startled eyes of the hunter Kalketu and his wife.

‘Durge durge toraao naa go dukho bilaasini
Oyi durgaa dokshine kaali raajndini
Dos haat chondi maayer dos dik saaje
Oi trinoy n jolche vaalo kopaaleer maajhe
Lokshi baame sorosoti kaartik gonesh
Singho osur joy bijoyaa chole maayer sone
Ekdin durgaa maayer hoyechilo doayaa
Daalim tolaay giye dilo dekhaaiyaa
Daalim tolaay giye kaalketu pelo
Gujraater bon kete nogor bosaalo
Vaar bnedhe kaalketu niye gelo ghore
Khullonaa sundori dekhe dekhe knudaare duyaare’

(Collected from Shyamsundar Chitrakar, Naya, Pingla, Paschim Medinipur 23rd January, 2012)

English:

Jai Ma Chandi (Durga). Please save me. I always want to place myself at your feet. Kindly save me. Kindly save me. You know that I am a sinner (noradhom). I am entangled in worldly desires (maya). Ma Chandi, you have ten arms and three eyes (trinayans). Lakshmi, Saroswati, Kartik, Ganesh, lion, demon (osur), joy, bijoy- all go with you.

The patuas have also painted patas and composed songs on the humanitarian *Lalon*. The comedy, the cruelty of Hindus and humanitarianism of *Siraj Snaai* are clearly depicted in their patas. Lalon has to face many attacks which have come from his wife, relatives and the society also. But he has forgiven everybody.

‘Laalon thaakur premer thaakur baaul gaaner guru
Siraj Snaai fokir chilo laaloneroi guru
Jaatpaat maanena taaraa, mane naako dhorm
Jogotbaasike gaan shonaano chilo laloner kormo’²⁰

From the aforesaid discussion it is clear that the patuas of the district of Paschim Medinipur represent the excellence of art (pata-painting/ scroll painting and patua songs) and unique social customs and rituals which reflect the true sense of Indian cultural heritage.

V. CONCLUSION

From this discussion it is clear that patuas of Paschim Medinipur is a poor and marginal community in the context of Indian society. Still now, their social status remains unchanged. They live at the outside of the Hindu hamlet. Though their religion is Islam, they are not allowed to use the mosques of the Muslims in most of the cases. But they still practice common cultural heritage of both Hindu and Muslim. Their life style and their creative occupational craft work is a unique example of cultural assimilation and they represent true nature of Indian nationalism in the communal conflict.

¹⁸A deity common to both the Hindus and the Muslims

¹⁹Written by the Bengali Poet Mukundarama Chakravarti, known as Kavikankana

²⁰Collected by me from Ananda Chitrakar, Naya, Pingla, Paschim Medinipur in 2014

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