The Art of Survival: Bengali Pats, Patuas and the Evolution of Folk Art in India

Pilar Jefferson

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The Art of Survival: Bengali *Pats, Patuas* and the Evolution of Folk Art in India

Pilar Jefferson
Dr. M. N. Storm
Radhika Gupta, Daricha Foundation
SIT: Study Abroad
India: National Identity and the Arts Program, New Delhi
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Table of Contents

Introduction: Culture, Globalization, and Folk Art 1

Defining Patachitra: The History Behind the Tradition 6

Into the City: The Birth of Kalighat Paintings and Indian Nationalism 9
  Cultural Changes in 19th Century Bengal 9
  The Development of Kalighat Paintings 12

Creating Tradition: Folk Art and Nationalism in the 20th Century 19

Conclusion: Re-Adaptation and the Future of Patachitra 24

Bibliography 30

Recommendations for Further Study 33

Appendices 34

Illustrations 37

Glossary 41
Abstract

The process of becoming a part of a globalized world has made India as a nation worry about what makes it culturally unique. Since the beginning of its relationship with Britain folk artists in particular have been directly connected to cultural preservation efforts in India. The impetus to preserve this uniqueness usually falls on rural folk cultures, whose traditions change more slowly because they have less access to modernizing influences. The problem with idealizing the static nature of folk art is that it keeps the artists from improving their lives, at the risk of abandoning their work to seek out other economic opportunities. Through the historical example of the folk painters of West Bengal, called *patuas*, this paper aims to show how the preservation of folk art depends on striking a balance between adapting to remain relevant and therefore economically viable to a given culture, and preserving a connection to its historical roots. By explaining how *patua* painting, also called *patachitra*, has navigated the cultural shifts of the last two centuries and survived, I hope to demonstrate the complicated relationship India has with its own artistic history, and how folk artists can continue to make their livelihood off of their traditional craft. *Patachitra*, in its many forms, proves that the best hope for folk art is preservation through adaptation.
Acknowledgements

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Dedication

To Sree Sen Gupta, whose networking prowess made my research a success. To Arjo Gupta, for housing me and making sure I didn’t get lost in Kolkata in the heat. To Mangala and Narayan, for feeding me and putting up with my strange American ways and my inability to speak Bengali. To Arjun and Payel, for being my big brother and little sister. To my family, for their love and for finding a good time to Skype. To Steven and Talia, for always understanding. To the HV Club, my other sisters. To my Great Aunt Katherine, whose investment in me made this semester possible. And to my fellow NIA adventurers, for their endless humor and support. Bahut pyar always.
**Introduction: Culture, Globalization and Folk Art**

In a rapidly globalizing world, a great deal of intellectual and political thought is being put into the question, “what defines a culture?” As Bhikhu Parekh puts it in *Defining India’s Identity*,

The definition of personal or national identity has an inescapable pathos. It becomes necessary when the individual or society feels destabilized, unhinged, disoriented. When [people] undergo rapid industrialization, becoming a part of a globalizing world, and find strange people living in their midst and cannot rely on unspoken conventions to regulate their relations with them...they ask themselves who they are, how they are changing and what they wish to become.¹

This fear of losing an essential part of one’s communal identity to incoming cultures is not a new concept. India, which has been under nearly constant siege from outside invaders for one thousand years, and which is made up of 1.2 billion people from a number of cultural groups, is perhaps one of the best examples of a country whose people place a high value on aspects of culture that either separate or unite them.

Visual culture is one of the easiest ways to distinguish one group of people from another. Folk art is a term used primarily to describe hand produced art that has some practical function within a community. It provides a livelihood for its practitioners that has been passed down for generations, linked together by an aesthetic tradition, and can therefore be considered a representative part of a given culture. In India, the

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communities associated with folk art are primarily rural, and therefore have less access to the technologies and media which have drastically modernized the lives of urban citizens. Because of the slower progression of globalization in rural life, the art of rural communities is frequently regarded as a sort of unchanging cultural time capsule, a residual home for cultural uniqueness to assuage the anxiety produced by the idea of losing cultural heritage in globalized urban centers.

The danger of using folk art as a definition of tradition is that this use conveys the false idea that folk culture is temporally fixed. Culture does not exist within a bubble and as circumstances change, people change as well. Yet rural folk artists are finding themselves trapped by the idea that their art must represent tradition. Nandita Palchoudhuri, an independent curator who works primarily with rural artists in West Bengal, talks about this particular issue in much of her work. “It is all well and good to appreciate folk artwork and to retain a sense of tradition, but it is also necessary to understand that these artists are often terribly impoverished, hoping to sell one painting a month to feed their families,” she says. “Upholding the economy of the quaint village, where tourists and other art buyers want to see as much authenticity as possible, keeps rural artists from gaining the basic health and safety improvements and economic support that they desperately need.”¹ When the demand for their work no longer brings in enough money to sustain them, entire villages that have been devoted to

¹ Palchoudhuri, Nandita. Interview by author. Personal interview. Kolkata, West Bengal, India, April 7, 2014.
making the same craft for generations often seek work elsewhere, abandoning their art.

There are three main elements to folk art; it must have a common use within the community, it must rely on an aesthetic tradition, and for the most part it comprises the livelihood of the artisan. It is easy to mourn the loss of folk art practices as one of the evils of modernity, but the real challenge of sustaining folk art is a modern day ethical puzzle; for a folk art tradition to continue it also has to adapt to cultural changes to continue being economically viable to the people who produce it. At the same time folk art must retain an aesthetic link to its own history, because without paying homage to its own past it cannot be used to define a culture. Therefore a delicate balance must be struck between adaptation and truth to tradition, so that the art retains its roots.

Bengali folk painting’s morphing identity is a notable journey that can be used to exemplify the challenges, past and present, facing folk artists and also the progression of globalization in India. It is speculated that patuas, the historical name for folk painters from Bengal, have been painting for generations, possibly since as early as the 13th century. Today patuas, whose paintings are called pats and whose work is therefore referred to as patachitra, which roughly translates to “pat painting,” are still practicing in the rural districts of West Bengal. The ways in which patachitra has changed over the last century and a half expose the resilience of folk art and its relevance in a country that continues to struggle with the definition of its own culture.

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*Patachitra*, in its many forms, proves that the best hope for folk art is preservation through adaptation. In the mid-19th century, near the beginnings of what we call globalization today, Calcutta, now Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal, became a central destination for immigrants searching for economic opportunities, many *patuas* amongst them. The birth of Kalighat painting, an adapted version of *patachitra*, which evolved as a culture of cosmopolitanism grew in Calcutta, was a natural development as the artists reacted to the new values of their society. Eminent art historian Jyotindra Jain qualified the Kalighat *patuas* as, “the first Moderns,” for the unprecedented way in which their work responded to the new.\(^4\) Kalighat *pats* proved that folk artists could adapt without losing their artistic roots in rural culture. From then on, reactions to *patuas* and their work, from British merchants and travelers to Bengali intellectuals and Modern artists, evidence the changing attitudes towards folk art in Indian culture.

In the early 20th century, Indian folk art preservation came through a dual effort, where artists adapted to new circumstances while politicians and organizations tried to re-instill the value of folk art in Indian culture. The ideals of folk culture were closely tied to India’s fight for independence through the Swadeshi movement. Swadeshi literally means “of one’s own country”.\(^5\) As Western industrialization started to hurt rural craft caste artisans, Mohandas Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore, a Bengali


intellectual and political figure, took up the mantle of rural education and tried to re-instate the value placed by Indians on locally produced products. However, the problem with upper and middle class organizations taking charge of folk initiatives is that they put their own ideologies above the needs and authenticity of the artisans, establishing the commercialization of folk art.

The echoes of their work are still felt in today’s efforts to preserve patachitra by NGOs such as Banglanatak(dot)com and the Crafts Council of West Bengal. Economic gain has always been closely associated with folk art but Kalighat pats serve as an example that despite adapting to a commercial society folk art can still retain its roots, if it is left to the devices of the artists themselves. In the 21st century, patuas are using their entrepreneurial spirit to respond to globalization in a way that reflects their Kalighat predecessors, and show continued innovation in their dynamic work, straddling the boundaries between ancient and modern, primitive and sophisticated, keeping their art from slipping into obsolescence and providing a model for present day folk art.

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Defining *Patachitra*: The History Behind the Tradition

Before delving into the development of *patachitra*, I will explain what is definitive about the lives and work of *patuas*, past and present, to provide the groundwork for the complex history of their art. Before British colonialism, before Islamic invasion, there were practicing *patuas* in the villages of West Bengal. This paper covers the last one hundred and eighty years in which scholars and politicians, both Indian and foreign, have written and discussed Indian folk art. But before them, the practice of the *patuas*, as far as scholars know, had remained relatively unchanged for centuries.

*Patuas* traditionally worked by traveling from village to village with paintings of epic stories done on scrolls. In each village, they would sing songs narrating the stories on the canvas while unfurling their work at the same time, creating a dynamic oral tradition enhanced by visual art. The majority of their subjects were religious in nature and both Hindu and Muslim tales were depicted, the most famous being parts of the Ramayana and the lives of popular Islamic saints.\(^7\) Their objective was not to sell their artwork. Instead they made their living from donations for their performances, often making appearances at local fairs where people came from many villages, increasing their audience base.\(^8\) Often a family or individual singer had a single *pat* which they would perform. Though the stories that were painted were repeated from artist to artist,

\(^7\) Sinha, Suhashini, and Professor C. Panda. *Kalighat Paintings*.

\(^8\) Bose, Ratnaboli. "Patachitra." Daricha Foundation.
each singer wrote their own melody to create a signature style.\textsuperscript{9}

The two religions depicted in their work expressed themselves in the lives and culture of the patuas as well. A recent anthropological case study on the self-identification of patuas found that many of them identify as Muslim, though when asked about their religious practice, they professed to celebrating an equal number of Muslim and Hindu religious holidays.\textsuperscript{10} This dual identity is not uncommon in West Bengal where as early as the 12th century, rural people were influenced by the influx of Muslim invaders from the West. For patuas this means that while they identify as Muslim many of them have the last name Chitrakar, identifying them historically with the caste of folk painters, a move that some scholars think may have been socioeconomic in nature, to gain more respect in the Hindu community.\textsuperscript{11}

Though much of a patuas work depends on regional and personal preference, similarities of style and subject matter have and do exist throughout the patua community. First of all, there are two main types of pats: jadano or scroll pats, which can be painted horizontally or vertically, and chouko pats which are generally single square

\textsuperscript{9} For a description of another regional style of patachitra see Appendix A, page 33.


\textsuperscript{11} Hauser, Beatrix. "From Oral Tradition to "Folk Art": Reevaluating Bengali Scroll Paintings."\textit{Asian Folklore Studies} 61 (2002): 105-122.
panels with an individual scene or deity depicted on them.\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Patachitra} is distinguishable by the sinuous and bold black outlines of major figures then filled in with bright colors with ornamentation and details done in black or white paint. This combination creates a two dimensional effect with the figures pressed up against the picture plane. Traditionally, all of the \textit{patuas} paints were handmade from naturally occurring sources such as indigo, tumeric and other plants, and many rural \textit{patuas} continue to make their own paints to this day.\textsuperscript{13} Some of the earliest \textit{pats} were painted on palm leaves, though pre-19th century \textit{patuas} also produced their own scrolls in a process connecting strips of paper end to end to achieve the length of the scroll necessary, taking up to a week to finish.\textsuperscript{14}

Today the majority of \textit{patuas} come from the districts of Medinipur and Birbhum in West Bengal, though historically there were also \textit{patua} villages in Bankura, Howrah, Murshidabad and Bardhaman districts.\textsuperscript{15} Slight differences in style exist from district to district and it is also easy to tell the hand of one painter from another when \textit{pats} are compared side by side. Because traditionally \textit{pats} were not sold, to this day many of them are not signed, and the identity of the artist is recognizable only by their style.

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Bose} Bose, Ratnaboli. "Patachitra." Daricha Foundation.
\bibitem{Dutt} Dutt, Gurusaday. \textit{Gurusaday Dutt: Folk Arts and Crafts of Bengal}
\bibitem{Dutt1} Dutt, Gurusaday. \textit{Gurusaday Dutt: Folk Arts and Crafts of Bengal}
\bibitem{Bose1} Bose, Ratnaboli. "Patachitra." Daricha Foundation.
\end{thebibliography}
In this way, *patachitra* is a primary example of folk art that has as much to do with the individual talent and vision of the artist as it does with the tradition that it honors. We need to understand that *patachitra* is both the living work of modern day artists and also a way of serving a historical precedent. The evolution of the form and the fight to keep it alive throughout time are ways of sustaining the livelihood of individual artists and also the culture of their community.

**Into the City: The Birth of Kalighat Paintings and Indian Nationalism**

The catalyst for *patachitra’s* fight for survival and its existence as a symbol of Indian culture was the arrival of the British, and in particular their socioeconomic influence on India. Without the introduction of exported products, urbanization and the subsequent push back that became the Indian freedom movement, *patachitra* may have continued as a completely rural art form, and the innovative offshoot that is Kalighat painting may never have existed. However, the coexistence of British colonial power and Bengali *patuas* in 19th century Calcutta set in motion the evolving relationship between folk culture and Indian nationalism that exists to this day today.

**Cultural Changes in 19th Century Bengal**

The city of Calcutta itself was created for the purposes of the British trading enterprise the East India Trading Company, as a prime location among the rich natural resources of India and a stopping place for incoming ships from both the East and the
West. In 1690, Job Charnock and his crew sailed up the river Hooghly and consolidated the few small villages that existed at this particular bend in the river as a port and trading post, establishing the beginnings of the city. As a trade city, Calcutta became a conglomeration of people from all over the world, rich British merchants and the height of the Bengali aristocracy, sailors from France, China and America and the poorest of immigrants looking for opportunities in the growing economy the city provided.

Because of the international atmosphere, it is perhaps not surprising that Bengal was the site of some of the first concerns with Indian identity in relation to modernizing outside influences. The already established Bengali aristocracy realized early on in their dealings with British traders that to benefit economically from such a relationship they had to be able to speak the same language. In 1817, Hindu College in Calcutta was opened as an English speaking university for the Bengali elite. Bengalis were the first


indigenous community of people outside of Europe to officially use English in school and at work.20

While the decision to adopt English made sense economically, it also caused the Bengali intellectuals to establish the beginnings of a nationalist sentiment against the British. British-educated Bengalis were introduced to scientific and philosophical ideas from the European enlightenment, causing them to become one of the most politically progressive and secularized groups of people in India. The nineteenth century is often referred to as the Bengal Renaissance in which there was a burst of social and political writing spurred on by the increase of cheap printing and creating a culture of intellectual debate.21 As was the case in Europe, much of the writing produced dealt with how to improve the lives of everyday citizens. This inspired a critical view amongst some of the colonial powers that controlled the city. Intellectuals began to chafe at British rule, though they owed much of their wealth and their educational opportunities to the East India Company.22

Amongst lower class citizens facing the negative influences of British rule, the combination of Eastern and Western culture in the upper class inspired in them a subtle

20 Sengupta, Jayanta. Interview by author. Personal interview. Victoria Memorial Hall, Kolkata, West Bengal, India, April 10, 2014.


resistance movement, most of it expressed through satirical folk music and art forms.

The opportunities afforded by a growing urban center caused thousands of Indians to move from the countryside into Calcutta in search of economic opportunities at the center of British rule and trade. In Sumanta Bannerjee’s book, The Parlour and the Streets, he discusses how rural people turned urban working class brought with them much of the folk culture that had defined Bengal for centuries. Satire, already common in the humorous folk rhymes and songs, became a means through which workers could respond to the overwhelming influence of the West which was more oppressive for them than the upper class whose livelihoods were not made up of physically serving the British.

The Development of Kalighat Paintings

Among these immigrants were many patuas whose religious painting provided them with a means to settle around the Kalighat temple. Kalighat, dedicated to the goddess Kali, was and is a large pilgrimage site in South Calcutta, Kali being a patron goddess for the region and the city. Seated along the banks of the river Hooghly, mythologically sacred to Kali, the temple was rebuilt in 1809 after it was destroyed in


24 Bannerjee, Sumanta. The Parlour and the Streets.


the late 18th century and was at the center of spiritual life in Calcutta. Starting as early as the 1830s, visitors to Kalighat, tourist and pilgrim alike, looked for souvenirs to take back with them to their homes. They encountered the *patuas* and bought their work, which rapidly evolved to fit the new sedentary nature of its practitioners. While in the past, temple visitors had purchased small wooden idols carved by other itinerant folk artisans, *patua* paintings became popular because of their ease of transport.

Instead of traveling from village to village, at Kalighat the travelers came to the *patuas*, a reversal of circumstances that had a major impact on their *pats*. First and foremost, their business was no longer to entertain the audience but to sell physical copies of their work. Because of this change and selling to a larger audience, the format of scrolls was no longer efficient. With so many customers, *patuas* started separating scenes from popular myths into individual panels and painting solitary portraits of gods and goddesses, reminiscent of the *chouko* or square *pats* from their rural days. In Calcutta, *patuas* were introduced to cheap factory-produced folio paper from the British missionaries’ printing presses and to watercolor paints imported from Europe, saving them both time and energy. The oral element of *pats* diminished, for without scrolls, scroll singers had little need for their oral tradition.

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27 Many western visitors to Calcutta collected Kalighat *pats*. See Appendix B, page 34.

Stylistically, *pats* changed as well. The work of *patuas* had always been defined by bold black lines delineating the bodies of figures and bright predominantly primary colors. But to produce paintings quickly, they perfected the technique of sketching figures in pencil and then painting outlines in single strokes, leaving out the black borders and some of the more intricate details of their pre-1830 work. The rapidity with which they painted augmented the fluidity of their style. Other artistic influences to which they were exposed in the city also crept into their work. European style shading, which Jyotindra Jain describes as a sort of bold chiaroscuro, began to highlight the three dimensionality of the figures, while the European proscenium theater of Calcutta influenced the composition of paintings, some of which even had theater curtains hanging in the background. Generally, backgrounds of Kalighat paintings were entirely blank with the image focused solely on the central figure or scene. When backgrounds were painted, they consisted of the interiors of urban spaces, the lavish apartments of the rich or the public spaces of temples.

The most significant way in which *patuas* adapted to urban culture was the change in subject matter of their *pats*, which became relevant to the entire population by capturing current events while also participating in the mocking of upper class Bengali culture, raising critical questions about the effects of the British on India. Kalighat paintings, because of their affordability and tongue in cheek commentary on daily city life.

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life, held the unusual place of being a bridge between the upper and lower Bengali classes, uniting them in a cautious new common culture and signaling the beginnings of their nationalist importance. Later on in the 20th century, Gurusaday Dutt would comment in his essays on the inferiority of Kalighat *pats* in comparison to rural *patachitra* because of their commercial nature, abandoning religion and tradition.\(^30\)

However, the innovations that came with Kalighat painting, instead of abandoning tradition, used traditional folk idioms to interpret what was “worshipped” in the city. Rural Bengalis used religion as a form of ritual entertainment whereas urban Calcuttans had new stimuli to respond to. And in fact Kalighat paintings can be seen as serving as a warning against immoral behavior. *Patuas* brought to light under their paintbrushes the private misconduct of the rich and powerful, a scathing triumph of rural ethics over urban debauchery.

The folk traditions and morals of the rural immigrants clashed with the increasing influence of a European lifestyle on the rich residents of the city. A babu is defined in *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* as, “a native Hindoo gentleman; also a native clerk who writes English; occasionally used of a Bengali, with superficial English education.”\(^31\) Indeed the culture of those English educated Bengalis was defined as babu culture. What the above definition fails to pick up on is the disparagement with

\(^{30}\) Dutt, Gurusaday. *Gurusaday Dutt: Folk Arts and Crafts of Bengal*.

which the term was used by Bengalis and Europeans alike. While the first generation of elite Bengalis who made their fortunes working with the East India traders comprised undoubtedly hard working and innovative individuals, their descendants, born into the newfound bourgeois lap of luxury, embodied a British pretension that the lower classes looked on with humor and disdain.32

Babu culture was satirized in *pats* because of the ways in which the European airs put on by babus were so disjointed from traditional Bengali culture. Babus had a reputation for drinking and smoking heavily, speaking and dressing as the English did, and carousing with courtesans. Kalighat paintings quickly began to capture the images of these and other urban caricatures, feeding into the issues within the culture of urban Calcutta. The second most popular image from the city was that of the corrupt brahmin, caught eating meat, taking bribes or seducing the women who came to worship at his temple.

Often these images also had to do with growing female empowerment and the supposed emasculation that went along with the infiltration of European morals. Bibis were the female equivalent of babus and were depicted wearing hybrid Anglo-Indian dress and, more often than not, chastising their lovers and husbands. Paintings of babus worshipping at the feet of their bibi lovers, or of babus as sheep being pulled along on a string by their wives were common. Bibis were also depicted beating their unfaithful

32 Gupta, R.P. "Baboons, Bibis and Bhadramahila."
husbands with brooms, displaying the satirical fear of their growing dominance in upper class Bengali society.\textsuperscript{33} In contrast to the bibis were courtesan paintings which were often variations on poses in which goddesses were typically depicted. A painting of a seated courtesan with a violin imitated the pose in which Saraswati, goddess of learning and knowledge, was traditionally depicted. In this way, urban innovation increased the popularity of Kalighat paintings while still staying true to its religious folk origins.

Kalighat paintings were a vital source of news as well and popular headlines became subjects of new \textit{pats}. The Elokeshi scandal, in which a Bengali housewife named Elokeshi was seduced by a brahmin and subsequently killed by her jealous husband, Nabin, was used as creative fodder across popular media. The \textit{pat} of the grisly scene in which Nabin stabs his wife was especially sought after; the composition was based on a dramatic adaptation of the scandal that was staged at the time of the murder trial.\textsuperscript{34} In this sense, Kalighat \textit{patuas} achieved the significant feat of adapting folk art to make it not only economically viable for the artists but wildly popular in a context outside of its original purpose, a vital force contributing to the social discourse in mid-century Calcutta. In fact, in his reminiscences about Calcutta, artist and writer Mukul Dey

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\item Kalighat Painting. DVD. Directed by Siddharta Tagore. New Delhi: Siddharta Tagore, 2011.
\item Sinha, Suhashini, and Professor C. Panda. \textit{Kalighat Paintings}.
\end{thebibliography}
nostalgically describes the shops of Kalighat painters as being “more or less ‘news bureaus’ of the country.”

The decline of Kalighat painting is related in large part to its inability to continue to adapt and compete with incoming forms of cheap urban entertainment. In the early 20th century, German oleographic printing techniques reached India and printmakers were swiftly able to out produce Kalighat painters. Calcuttans were seduced by the photorealistic quality of print images, another value instilled by the influx of European art. By the 1930s, there were few if any patuas still near the Kalighat temple. The majority sought work elsewhere or returned to the villages from whence they had come.

Westernization also had a negative effect on the appreciation of Indian folk art in general. Its subtle influence put in place an artistic hierarchy in the minds of educated Bengalis, with European art at the top, distancing them from the work of their countrymen. During the next phase in the transformation of patachitra, those who felt the fear of losing Indian culture to British influence and rule would soon use folk art as a tool for elite nationalistic self-determination, setting in motion the culture of patronage that would both support and confine folk art into the 21st century.


36 Sinha, Suhashini, and Professor C. Panda. *Kalighat Paintings*.

To understand the conundrum of sustaining *patachitra* that is being puzzled over in the 21st century, it is first necessary to understand why other folk arts, instead of *patachitra*, flourished in the 20th century. Kalighat paintings proved that with the proper audience, *patuas* could adapt their work to new contexts. But *patachitra* was not the kind of art that politicians and upper class intellectuals were looking for in the early 20th century. Up to this point, besides Kalighat *pats*, rural *patuas* were in the habit of traveling and presenting their work, not selling it. Therefore within the self-sustaining economy that was fundamental to the Swadeshi movement, there was no place for *patuas*. However, the way in which the intellectual elite marketed other handicrafts to the public set up a model for the 21st century craft market. In the meantime *patachitra* slipped back into rural obscurity amongst the general public. If it were not for Gurusaday Dutt, whose collection of *pats* became a part of his Bengali folk art museum, and to a lesser part modern artist, Jamini Roy, they might have been forgotten entirely in the urban consciousness.

Meanwhile, Mohandas Gandhi and Rabindrinath Tagore were wholeheartedly promoting the popularity of traditional Indian craft art to the entire population of India. In some ways it is a blessing that *patachitra* was left out of the pre-Independence handicraft movement. Mass production and marketing of folk crafts diluted the

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38 To understand more about Tagore and the development of Swadeshi see Appendix C, page 35.
traditions upon which they were based. I have been arguing that adaptation is necessary, but when folk art loses sight of its origins entirely it risks becoming purely commercial. Folk art at its core is made up of two elements, practical use and aesthetic tradition, which implies a deeper meaning to the community in which it exists. Lose one or the other entirely and the art form is stripped of its historical integrity. In the case of Kalighat painting *patachitra* changed to reflect a new society, without losing its uniqueness, hanging on to the humorous folk idioms and cultural values it already had. A balance must be struck between adaptation and remaining true to precedence. The same people who were fighting for Indian independence economically were inadvertently risking the loss of their cultural uniqueness by using a Western production model to boost the insular Indian craft market.

In 1921, Tagore, already a celebrated Bengali writer, founded a university in Shantiniketan, a smaller city north of Calcutta, which he called Visva-Bharati, or “a world university.” Rebecca M. Brown writes that Visva-Bharati “had as its core project the development of literary and artistic aesthetics connecting to India’s past and folk heritage.” Tagore was worried about the loss of historical perspective in Indian universities to British influence. In the mid 19th century, the top Indian artists were trained at regional schools established in major cities: the Bombay School, the Calcutta

\[39\] Das Gupta, Uma. "In Pursuit of a Different Freedom".

\[40\] Brown, Rebecca M.. *Art for a Modern India, 1947-1980.*
School, the Madras School. The styles taught at these schools were based on the standard of linear perspective and realism imported from the British Royal Academy. Visva-Bharti contained within it a school of fine arts, the Kala Bhavana, which was the brainchild of Tagore and the school’s director, Nandalal Bose. Their objective was to dissolve the barrier between craftsman and fine artist, instilling in their students an appreciation of India’s artistic heritage.

But the goal of artists united through nationalist pride, regardless of class background, was not to be. Instead the divide between the upper and lower class artists became even greater, with each side losing sight of one part of the foundations of the folk art tradition that was at the heart of Tagore’s intentions, either its aesthetic heritage or its practical use. Silpa Bhavana, another school within the university, was started by Tagore and his daughter-in-law in 1922 for training rural adults and children in crafts and industries for professional development purposes. These people were not from hereditary artist families and had to be trained from the ground up.

In turn, the products that they made were designed to please the upper and middle class aesthetic taste, the new market to whom folk art could be sold as support for a national cause, a substitute for imported goods. According to K.G. Subramanyan, a

41 Purohit, Vinayak. *Arts of Transitional India Twentieth Century.*


professor of painting at Kala Bhavana, “the distinctive ‘Art Nouveau’ flavor discernible in the aesthetics of the Tagores reconciling East with West, art with craft, personal creativity with mass production…seeped into the Silpa Bhavana products… and struck a sympathetic chord in the sensibilities of the cultivated elite of that time.” In this way, Tagore’s efforts betrayed the authenticity of the art, with their designers shaping the products to fit an urban ideal as opposed to the impetus coming from traditional folk artists themselves. Silpa Bhavana products pandered to the tastes of Indian urbanites losing its traditional aesthetics.

Meanwhile on the Kala Bhavana end, upper and middle class artists were retaining the aesthetic but losing the history behind it. As a continued rebellion against strict European painting, young artists in India, just like young artists in Europe, were looking for a new “primitive” aesthetic for inspiration. But where Picasso and his fellows found African masks, Indians began to uncover their own roots. This is what essentially separates Indian modernism from its European counterpart. Instead of reacting to the proverbial “other,” they were looking back in on themselves.

Subramanyan criticizes these early Visva-Bharati students for using folk idioms shallowly, for their aesthetic beauty only, missing the practical application element that


is at the heart of folk. This trend extended beyond the university and became a popular way for modern Indian artists to access the “primitive”. It is important to understand the economic privilege that they held in this situation. Jamini Roy, one of the most celebrated Modern painters in India, is a prime example of an urban artist who was able to use folk idioms for his own artistic vision. Trained in European painting in Calcutta in the late 19th century, he became bored with his work until he discovered Kalighat painting in the 1930s and used it as inspiration for some of his most celebrated paintings of subjects from both Christian and Hindu mythology. But again, his work has been criticized for not having enough folk grounding beyond aesthetic appeal. Subramanyan describes Roy’s Kalighat style paintings as being “without the earthiness and verve or the sly humor of its close folk prototypes.”

This is the economic world into which Bengali *patachitra* made its reappearance in the 1970s. When attention was finally paid to the folk painters of West Bengal again, their art was in a dismal decline. Ruby Palchoudhuri, one of the founding members of the Crafts Council of West Bengal, remembers taking *patuas*, or at least people from families that historically produced *patachitra*, to the Gurusaday Dutt Museum in Calcutta, showing them the work that their forefathers had done, which none of them

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48 Sen, Arup Kumar. "A Discourse on Nineteenth Century Bengal."
were familiar with. Their lack of knowledge about their own history was not unusual given the circumstances. With the influx of television and movies into rural life, fewer and fewer people wanted to watch *patuas* performing stories from the Hindu epics. Many families had given up their art to move to more profitable professions. Others had stopped teaching their children the practice even if they continued it themselves. This brings up the third crucial element to the definition of folk art: more often than not a craft is the only job that an artisan has, it is all or nothing. Clearly it was time for *patachitra* to make another adaptive move to survive, with the risk of traveling down the road to commercialization, like other folk arts before it.

**Conclusion: Re-Adaptation and the Future of Patachitra**

In the last 40 years *patachitra* has changed more than it had since the days of Kalighat. When looking at these changes again it is important to keep the three tenants of folk art in mind: practical use, aesthetic tradition and the livelihood of the artisan. With folk art disappearing from India at an alarming rate in the past 30 years, the number of recorded artisans dropping roughly 30% in that time, and with globalization becoming a greater and greater cause of concern, the 20th century anxiety of

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49 Palchoudhuri, Ruby. Interview by author. Personal interview. Kolkata, West Bengal, India, April 8, 2014.

50 Hauser, Beatrix. "From Oral Tradition to "Folk Art"
nationalism has morphed into a 21st century fight for cultural preservation. The Crafts Council was the first organization to begin the rehabilitation of *patuas* but many others have subsequently joined in. By looking at the ways that these groups frame their work it is easy to see what good has been done for the revival of *patachitra* and what questions still need to be answered. Luckily, all of these organizations, the Crafts Council, Banglanatak(dot)com, the Daricha Foundation and the independent work of Nandita Palchoudhuri, agree in one respect: for *patachitra* to be a viable career in the present day it has to become relevant to the culture in which it exists, the way that folk art has always sustained itself.

One of the earliest and most popular ways of doing this has in some ways followed the old Kalighat model, introducing new subject matter to the old style. Nandita Palchoudhuri was part of an effort with David Gere from UCLA to help improve the health of rural Indians through the arts. She facilitated workshops in which doctors and *patuas* worked together to create *pats* about the realities and tragedy of HIV in rural communities, a disease that is still so highly misunderstood that its sufferers are often ostracized. In this way, Palchoudhuri hoped to revive not only the use of scroll *pats* but also the oral tradition that goes with it, both raising awareness and creating business for *patuas* by increasing their relevance to their communities. But public

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52 Palchoudhuri, Nandita. Interview by author. Personal interview. Kolkata, West Bengal, India, April 7, 2014.
awareness projects can only do so much to provide an artist’s livelihood because they are often short term, a problem that Palchoudhuri herself pointed out.53

The other prevalent business model of these organizations commercialization to create more sustained work for 

patuas. Both the Crafts Council and Banglanatak are involved with this method in different ways. The Crafts Council has a store in downtown Kolkata, Artisana, in which patachitra as well as a host of other folk arts are sold. Banglanatak has taken the opposite approach, bringing the customers to the products. They create contracts with village painters in Naya and Pingla, two centers of patachitra, to sell their work. Ananya Bhattacharya, the president of Banglanatak, says that their goal is to make these villages tourist attractions, bringing in visitors to participate in workshops and visit the homes of modern day patuas.54 In addition, Banglanatak unites fashion designers and patuas who make patterns in the patachitra style to be printed on a host of products from t-shirts to wallets and umbrellas. But caution must be taken with this approach, in case the mistakes of Silpa Bhavana repeat themselves, leaving patuas with a lost sense of tradition, beholden to the fashion tastes of contemporary urbanites and tourists.

The Daricha Foundation’s strategy attempts to address this issue; instead of trying to make patachitra more profitable, its aim is to reintroduce the value of patachitra

54 Bhattacharya, Ananya. Interview by author. Personal interview. Kolkata, West Bengal, India, April 10, 2014.
in its traditional form to increase public awareness and appreciation. Ratnaboli Bose, the founder of Daricha, explains that her goal for the organization is to be an intermediary between the public and Bengali folk artists. Her website, daricha.org, is the first of its kind in West Bengal, outlining the principles and history of a host of folk arts. “I created Daricha,” she says, “because I wanted to know more about folk art and found that there was nothing on the internet about it. And all of the art I saw was becoming so commercial it was hard to recognize the tradition.”

Instead of devising business schemes for them she wants to put the power back into the hands of the artists, serving only as a way of connecting artists and organizations interested in their work. It is then their prerogative to use modern society as inspiration as they see fit. And indeed many patuas are doing just that. Manu Chitrakar, a contemporary patua, painted a scroll on the events of 9/11 saying about it, "An artist has a social responsibility. I was deeply moved by the 9/11 attack and created a scroll depicting the evils of terrorism.” Other artists, such as Kalam Patua, have also reinvented Kalighat painting. Patua paints scenes satirizing the modern day urban environment. In his painting entitled Krishna Came to Early he uses the popular device of Radha and Krishna from Hindu mythology. Radha is a modern day woman in a scandalously draped sari, preparing for a night out, while Krishna is seen in the

55 Bose, Ratnaboli. Interview by author. Personal interview. Kolkata, West Bengal, India, April 7, 2014.

background, waiting outside behind the wheel of a red car watching her through the window. Radha and Krishna were also often used as a metaphor in Kalighat paintings for trips on pleasure boats on the Hooghly where babus took sexual liberties with nautch dancer girls.57

These are only a few examples of how patuas are finding ways to revitalize themselves and their art in the 21st century. By re-learning their own pasts they are embracing tradition and using it as inspiration to fuel their work for the future. And by continuing to adapt to the culture in which they live they are honoring the patuas who came before them. As globalization in India progresses, the balance between reflection on the past and questioning the future will be crucial in keeping folk art alive.

But, in the end folk art is tied to more than just the cultural heritage of a community. It is also about the health and economic solvency of rural artisans. Perhaps that is the key to keeping folk art from succumbing to commercialization, finding a way to make sure that artisans can provide for their families without it jeopardizing the integrity of their work. Or, on the other hand, perhaps that is the very reason that folk art changes in the first place, because it exists to serve the needs of the community. In that respect who can judge the choices that craftspeople make to feed their families?

And of course, there are more questions that need to be addressed as well. If patuas are selling art then what will happen to the oral tradition of patachitra? And can

patachitra, and folk art in general, exist in the future without having to economically sustain the artisans? Luckily there are people, Indians and non-Indians alike, from both within and without the folk artist community, who are devoted to answering those questions and others. For now, it is enough to appreciate the adaptive spirit of the patuas as they continue to work within the reflective culture of India as a nation, ensuring the future of their art.
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**Recommendations for Further Study**

Future ISP researchers working on patachitra should first and foremost get in contact with the Gurusaday Dutt Museum in Kolkata, they have the most extensive and accessible collection of pats. Also contact Ratnaboli Bose at the Daricha Foundation for her expertise and network of contacts. Patachitra because of its long history is incredibly multifaceted and each section of this paper could have easily been an ISP in and of itself. Therefore there are two recommendations I would give. First, a more in depth study of Gurusaday Dutt and his legacy as an advocate for folk art in 20th century Bengal. On a contemporary note, the work being done by the Daricha Foundation and Banglanatak(dot)com could also be a fascinating look at the relationship between NGOs and folk artists.

Gurusaday Museum

website: http://www.gurusadaymuseum.org/

phone: +91-33-2453-5972 (Executive Secretary)

Daricha Foundation

website: daricha.org

phone: +91-33-2453-5972

email: darichafoundation@gmail.com
Appendix A - Another Patachitra Style

Another altogether different style that fits under the heading of patachitra is the work of the Jadu patuas from the Santal tribe, the largest tribal community in India who mainly inhabit the eastern states of the country. Jadu pats are also painted on scrolls but lack the vibrant color of other pats, in addition, the figures are depicted with less graceful lines and seem static in comparison to their artistic cousins. There are commonly no background details in Jadu pats and the figures float in pictorial space. Subject wise, Jadu pats commonly depict tribal origin stories as well as scenes from daily village life as opposed to Hindu or Muslim religious matters. Jadu patuas are also incredibly important to the spiritual life of the community beyond being story tellers. A subdivision of their work is called chokkuhudaan or the gifting of eyes. When a member of the community would die a Jadu patua would arrive at the house of the departed with a painting of them with every detail but the eyes filled in. The patua would ask for donations to paint the eyes in or the deceased would not be able to see in order to find their way to heaven.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{58} Bose, Ratnaboli. "Patachitra." Daricha Foundation.
Appendix B - Kalighat Paintings in Western Collections

Because of their accessibility Kalighat paintings were popular across social boundaries and appealed to everyone from poor Bengalis to the British elite. Western collectors purchased them as a way of possessing the authenticity of the East. Maxwell Sommerville, an American from Philadelphia who made his money in publishing and traveled extensively in the 1860s, collected 57 Kalighat paintings most of which were of Hindu deities which he then took upon himself to identify, mistakenly in some cases.\(^{59}\) He wrote names and descriptions of the gods directly on the images as a sort of encyclopedic way of organizing his knowledge of Hinduism, like his fellow Western traveler W.J. Wilkins who used Kalighat paintings as illustrations in his book, *A Handbook of Hindu Mythology*.\(^ {60}\) Kalighat paintings also ended up in the collection of Lockwood Kipling, the father of famous author Rudyard Kipling, who donated his father’s collection to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London following his death.\(^{61}\) The fervor with which Westerners collected Kalighat paintings is best exemplified by the fact that the V & A Museum has the largest collection of them in the world.\(^{62}\)

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\(^{60}\) Ghosh, Pika. "Kalighat Paintings from Nineteenth Century Calcutta..."  

\(^{61}\) Ghosh, Pika. "Kalighat Paintings from Nineteenth Century Calcutta..."  

\(^{62}\) Sinha, Suhashini, and Professor C. Panda. *Kalighat Paintings*. 

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Appendix C - Tagore and Swadeshi

In 1903, Lord Curzon, the British Viceroy, announced the partition of Bengal. He hoped that by splitting up the region, he could curb growing political unrest and regain control of the population. As a response to this, Tagore, a wealthy and influential author from one of the most politically and intellectually active Bengali families, and others instigated the Swadeshi movement. This movement was essentially a boycott of British goods, the basis of which was a belief in the possibility of Indian self-sufficiency. However, it quickly became clear to Tagore that the mounting extremism of Swadeshi was not for him. His belief in a future for India, united by democracy and pride in India’s great history was incredibly strong. “It is regrettable of course,” he wrote in 1913, “that we have lost the power of appreciating our own culture, and therefore did not know how to assign western culture its right place.” This comment belies the foundation of Tagore’s educational and artistic philosophy which tried to embrace the commonality amongst men, established in the traditions of the past. Above all, Tagore was a humanist and held a firm belief in the unity of all people through enlightened creativity.

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Illustrations

Unknown Artist, *Untitled*, 21st Century, Chandipur, West Midnapore, West Bengal

courtesy of banglanatak.com
Unknown Artist, *The Fatal Blow*, 1890, Calcutta, West Bengal

courtesy of The Victoria and Albert Museum
Swarna Chitrakar and her patachitra at a craft’s fair in Mumbai, 2012

Courtesy of Radhika Gupta
Kalam Patua, *Untitled*, 2013, Chandpara, West Bengal

Courtesy of Gallery Espace, New Delhi
Glossary

**Babu** - a pejorative 19th century term for a bourgeois Bengali man with the affectations of British culture, often caught in immoral acts.

**Bibi** - the female equivalent of a babu, a bourgeois Bengali woman, often highly educated and satirically dominant in a relationship.

**Chouko pat** - a square painting, often of a scene from a famous Hindu story, or a portrait of a Hindu deity.

**Jadano pat** - a scroll painting, depicting a story separated into individual panels for each scene, telling a popular Hindu or Islamic myth.

**Kali** - the Hindu goddess of destruction, particularly favored in Bengal.

**Kalighat** - a famous Hindu temple in South Calcutta dedicated to Kali along the banks of the Hooghly River which is especially sacred to the goddess.

**Nautch** - a type of female dancer who, in the 19th century, would often perform for babus at parties. Many nautch dancers were also courtesans.

**Pat** - a singular painting of the folk Bengali style.

**Patachitra** - the Bengali name for their native folk painting. Translates to pat painting.

**Patua** - an artist who paints pats, and also sings the stories of popular myths, traveling from village to village in West Bengal.