From 'Folk' to Digital: Transformation of Bengal Paṭacitra Art in the Times of Coronavirus

Sanjukta Das Gupta [1]

Abstract

This article looks at the fortunes of traditional craftsmen, the scroll painters – *citrakar*s or *paṭuyā*s – of Bengal during the novel coronavirus pandemic. It first examines how ideas regarding coronavirus were propagated and represented through *paṭacitra* folk art. Secondly, through an analysis of the *paṭacitra*s of Medinipur and Kālighāt, it seeks to trace the ways *paṭacitra* art has been adapted and reinvented in the digital space, arguing that the pandemic is a milestone in the long history of the transformation of Bengal *paṭacitra*s. Since the last decade of the 20th century, the market for *paṭacitra*s has become increasingly urban and even global, and partly dependent on governmental and NGO support, art fairs and cultural centres. The pandemic opened up *paṭuyā* art to cyberspace: direct contact was established between the village-based scroll painter and a worldwide virtual audience. NGOs with dedicated Facebook pages on popular art and the possibility of live performances effectively transformed a 'rurban' cultural practice into a 'glocal' phenomenon. Finally, the article explores whether this new performance-cum-marketing space will lead to any change in the income-earning capacity of traditional artists.

Keywords: *paṭacitra*, pandemic, *paṭuyā*, Bengal, *Nayā*, *Kālighāt*

Introduction

Listen [to me], oh merciful one,

How do I narrate the story of coronavirus?

It breaks my heart, what can I say?

Grief has overshadowed the earth;

It is there in every household.

A father cries, so does a mother,

A son is there abroad.

Grandmothers cry and ask how they can live.

The virus came from China to the human body.

It spreads from person to person –

Or so I hear again and again.

How could you give birth to such a poisonous virus?

Swarna Chitrakar [2]

A month after the announcement of the first coronavirus lockdown in India on 24 March 2020, Swarna Chitrakar, a *paṭacitra* artist and performer or *paṭuyā*, as they are commonly known, of Nayā village in the Indian state of West Bengal, became an internet sensation through her narrative storytelling with scroll paintings (*paṭs*). The song accompanying the scroll paintings unfolded the story of the turmoil caused by the pandemic, lamenting how a virus that originated in far-off China had come to afflict households worldwide. The

---

2   *Śono śono ogo dayāl*
Tomāy jānābo kemane?
Koronābhāirāser kathā śune
Buk pheṭe yāẏ re
Tomāy jānābo kemane?
Bisba juṛe śoker chāyā
Prati ghare ghare
Kāro bābā kāṃde, mā-o kāṃde
Bideśe āche kāror chele
Ṭhākumārā keṃde bale
Kemon kare bāṃci re?
Tomāy jānābo kemane
Cīn theke elo e bhāirās
Mānuṣer śarīre
Ek'janer theke anyajaner haẏ
Śun'chi bāre bāre
Emon biṣākta bhāirāser janma
Tumi dile keman kare?

The video is uploaded https://www.bengalpatachitra.com/performance/Coronavirus/, accessed on 20 May 2021. Unless stated otherwise, all translations from Bengali are mine.

video, uploaded by the non-governmental organisations HipamsIndia and Banglanatak Dot Com, rapidly became viral on social media, and focused international attention on depictions of the pandemic in folk art. Several other *paṭuyā*s then created social media *paṭacitra* performances that stressed the necessity of the lockdown and the precautionary health measures to be practised.

The pandemic, in fact, featured in a wide variety of folk arts across India. In some cases, non-governmental organisations working with folk artists encouraged the latter to spread awareness about the novel coronavirus through traditional art-forms. At the initiative of Dastkar, one such organisation, *madhubanī* artists of Bihar and *kāvaḍ* painters of Rajasthan produced artwork that stressed the importance of maintaining social distance, wearing facemasks and hand sanitising. Traditional themes were extended and adapted to underline this message. For instance, *phaṛ* painters of Rajasthan, who conventionally depicted royal processions and wars on large cloth panels, took up these new themes while *paṭacitra* painters in Raghurajpur, Odisha, showed characters from Indian mythology and Hindu gods wearing face masks (Tilak 2020). At a more utilitarian level, certain local communities refashioned traditional crafts to create innovative alternatives to personal protective equipment. Lacking both easy access to medical facilities and the means to buy surgical face masks, the Adivāsīs of the Bastar region in central India took the initiative to make their own masks, using leaves from plants with medicinal properties, in an attempt to keep Covid–19 at bay (Dwary 2020; Mehta 2020). Yet another instance of depicting the pandemic in folk/popular art was in the temporary pandals put up during the Durgā Pūjā festivities in the city of Kolkata. Often decorated by traditional artisans to promote folk art among an urban population, many of these pandals sported the theme of the slaying of 'Koronāsura', i.e., coronavirus imagined in the form of a demon or *asura*. In some popular Durgā Pūjā venues, 'Koronāsura' replaced the traditional idol of *Mahiṣāsura*, the buffalo demon slain by the goddess Durgā. [3] Similarly, in the Kasaragod region of northern Kerala, Yakṣagaṇa Bombeyātā puppet-show videos showed the slaying of Koronāsura by Dhanvantarī, the Hindu god of medicine (Poikayil 2020).

The varied forms in which the coronavirus pandemic has been portrayed in the artisanal arts and crafts encourage us to re-examine what constitutes folk art today and how traditional mythological themes, the usual subject matter of folk arts, have been expanded

---

3   The Koronāsura was depicted in various forms. In some pandals, the head was made to resemble the Sars-CoV-2 particle, while in others the demon was depicted in green (Ellis-Petersen 2020).

in the context of the pandemic. This also leads to the question of what constitutes a community. The parameters of community identity today have widened to embrace not only regional, but also national and sometimes global dimensions. As Rituparna Basu points out, the 'folk' today has found a new identity as an integral part of elite urban culture (Basu 2008: 6). The urban turn to folk art – partly for aesthetic reasons, partly for survival and partly as the outcome of the search for a national identity – has heralded a new tradition, especially in the context of the contemporary globalised space of unrestrained consumption. Hence, while folk traditions are necessarily embedded within the affective and moral world of a community, the redefinition of the community has resulted in the expansion of the sphere of the 'folk' to cover interests and expressive cultures which were previously outside it, leading to experimentations in the modes of storytelling and expression. For instance, some contemporary folk arts have come to demonstrate the same self-reflexivity that is the characteristic of modern art (Chatterji 2012: 30–31). This transition becomes even more marked when a folk-art form is exhibited within the virtual space.

This article examines these issues with reference to the adaptations of the Bengal *paṭacitra* in the context of the pandemic. The discussion is limited to two forms of *paṭacitra*: those produced in Western Medinipur district of the state of West Bengal, centred around the village of Nayā in Pinglā Block, and the Kālighāt *paṭ*s of Kolkata. It argues that the *paṭuyā*s or *citrakar*s, the 'picture-showmen' (Jain 1998), who had already developed into a 'rurban' community since the last quarter of the 20th century, inhabiting a partly rural, partly urban professional space, have become a 'glocal' community thanks to the pandemic, which further expanded their sphere of activity into the virtual world. I suggest that this should be considered a milestone in the development of this art-form. The digitalisation of the *paṭacitra* further emphasises the individualisation of *paṭacitra* artists/performers who are now increasingly identified by their personal repute, rather than as a community. Not only is the art now exhibited before a global audience, but digitalisation with the help of non-governmental agencies, academic institutions and museums has also opened new income-earning avenues. While this is still in an incipient stage, the introduction to the virtual world may empower the *citrakar*s financially and professionally. These arguments will be discussed in the following sections, which trace the historical trajectory of the evolution of *paṭacitra*s since the early 19th century and analyse the lockdown and pandemic *paṭacitra*s of Nayā and Kālighāt respectively.

Paṭacitra Traditions in Bengal: Evolving Trends

Historically, *paṭuyā*s or *citrakar*s[4] were itinerant picture-storytellers coming from both Hindu and Muslim communities, but predominantly Muslim by faith (Bhowmick 1995: 40). They travelled from village to village within their locality and region, narrating tales based on Hindu and Islamic traditions and tribal folklore along with pictures painted on scrolls. The *paṭ*s had been made of cloth or cheap canvas,[5] but since the late 19th century, *paṭacitra* came to be painted on paper. Bengal *paṭ*s have three formats: the square-shaped *cauka paṭ* (which displays a single picture), the *dīghal* or *jaṛāno paṭ*, and the *āṛelāṭāi paṭ*. The former consists of a series of picture frames, usually ten to fifteen in number, painted vertically and attached to two wooden sticks at either end, while picture frames in the latter are horizontal in nature. The scrolls are unrolled frame-by-frame in accompaniment with the song narrating the illustrated events.

Traditionally, the repertoire of the *paṭuyā*s consisted primarily of stories from Hindu mythology, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Maṅgal'kābya*s – *Manasāmaṅgal*, *Caṇḍīmaṅgal* and *Dharmamaṅgal*, *Kṛṣṇa Līlā* or various episodes from the life of Krishna, and stories of the miracles performed by the Muslim saints Gājī Pīr and Mānik, which were firmly anchored within the moral values of the rural communities. Surviving as they did on the fringes of orthodox rural societies, *paṭuyā*s produced art and performed for both Hindu and Muslim patrons. Hence, they drew upon the social and cultural practices of both communities (Ghosh 2003: 865). The entertainment provided by these morality tales also imparted lessons on ethics and religion.

In the Adivāsī villages of western Bengal, *paṭuyā*s, known as the *jādupaṭiyā*s (the *paṭuyā*s dealing with magic) play a significant role in the mortuary rituals of Santals.[6] The *jādupaṭiyā*s visit households where death has occurred, carrying with them the *cakṣudān paṭ* in which human figures are drawn with the eye left incomplete. It is believed that, lacking eyesight, they roamed about blindly and could not find their way to heaven. The deceased is then identified in the *paṭ* and the bereaved family offers the *jādupaṭiyā*s gifts

---

4   While they are popularly referred to as *paṭuyā*, the picture storytellers identify themselves as *citrakar*, 'the one who paints'. Colonial ethnographers distinguished between *paṭuyā*s/ '*paṭidār*s' and *citrakar*s, believing they constituted distinct caste groups (Hunter 1876: 169–70; Risley 1981: 206), while Gurusaday Dutt believed them to be identical (Dutt 1939). More recently, Beatrix Hauser argues that *paṭuyā*s and *citrakar*s constitute two different categories (Hauser 2002: 107-108).

5   Hence the name *paṭacitra*, from the Sanskrit *paṭṭa*, or cloth.

6   For further details on *jādupaṭiyā*s in contemporary Bengal, see Hadders 2008.

and money, in exchange for which they paint the missing eye of the deceased on the *paṭ*, thus releasing his soul to heaven (Sen Gupta 2012: 68).

In the course of the 19th century, *paṭuyā* art underwent a significant change with the growth and development of the city of Calcutta, the capital of the British empire in India. Like other rural artisans, *paṭuyā*s migrated to Calcutta in search of a livelihood. They settled near the famous Kālī temple in Kālighāt, where they performed before large crowds of visiting pilgrims. This resulted in a reversal of their role from itinerant storytellers, wandering from village to village in search of patrons, to a sedentary group performing before a mobile audience. The urban environment also brought about other changes in their craft (Banerjee: 1989: 131). With the availability of cheap paper from Serampore from 1800 onwards, *paṭuyā*s gradually replaced canvas for paper scrolls. They used paper to make *cauka paṭ*s to sell to pilgrims as souvenirs, which supplemented their income from live performances. There was also an expansion of their subject matter, which now came to reflect the new morality of the urban landscape. In addition to mythological and religious themes, *paṭuyā*s depicted contemporary themes such as the news and scandals of the times, for instance, the sensational scandal of the affair of Elokeshi and the Tarakeshwar *mahanta*,[7] as well as satiric portrayals of foppish Calcutta *bābu*s. The latter, in fact, served as a sharp critique of the morals of the Calcutta elite as perceived by the city's lower orders. Thus, Kālighāt *paṭ*s, in their reincarnated forms, reflected class and community morality much in the same way as their rural counterparts.

Towards the end of the 19th century, Kālighāt *paṭ*s began to decline in the face of competition from German oleography and photography, both of which enabled the swift and cheap reproduction of pictures. As Sumanta Banerjee has shown, the novel photographic realism weaned away the subaltern and lower-middle-class patrons of Kālighāt *paṭ*s (Banerjee 1989: 134-135). By the early 20th century, most of the noted *paṭuyā*s had migrated to other regions and many had taken up new occupations. In the countryside as well, *paṭacitra* had become a dying craft, as the civil servant and folklorist, Gurusaday Dutt (1882–1941) noted in the early 1930s (Dutt 1939). With the growing influence of modern industries and urban education, rural patrons lost interest in the art-form and *paṭuyā*s took to wage labour to eke out a living. As a Collector posted in

---

7   The *mahanta* or head priest of the Śiva temple at Tarakeshwar seduced a female dev-
     otee, Elokeshi, who was then murdered by her husband, Nabin Chandra Banerjee. A
     highly publicised trial followed, popularly dubbed as the Tarakeshwar murder case of
     1873.

the district of Birbhum in 1930, Dutt embarked on a mission to revive this art-form and established the *Baṅgīya Palli Sampad Rakṣā Samiti* (Bengal Association for Preservation of Rural Resources) in 1931 to foster research in popular culture in the countryside. He also organised the first public exhibition of folk arts and crafts in 1932 at the Indian Society of Oriental Art in Calcutta, followed by a second exhibition in 1934 (Ibid.). Besides a personal collection of scrolls that today are housed at the Gurusaday Museum in Kolkata, Dutt published *Paṭuyā Saṅgīt*, an anthology of *paṭuyā* songs in 1939. Dutt's efforts to attract the attention of the urban elite to popular culture were part of a contemporary intellectual movement that looked to an idealised rural world of the peasants as the basis of an authentic national identity (Korom 1989: 76). The propagation of folk culture, moreover, was intended to raise nationalist awareness among the Bengali middle-class (Hauser 2002: 111) and reinvigorate their moral life by reorienting them towards their rural roots (Basu 2008: 268).

Elite intervention in *paṭuyā* art picked up again in the 1970s through collaborative efforts of governmental and non-governmental agencies such as the West Bengal Crafts Council and the Daricha Foundation, which aimed at the revival and development of the traditional art-form through protective and promotional initiatives. Institutions, such as the Centre for Studies of Folk and Tribal Culture and the Folk Culture Research Society were established to promote research into various folk arts and crafts. Noted artists of the time participated in this project to nurture the artistic talents of *paṭuyā*s. For instance, the sculptor Meera Mukherjee organised visits to Calcutta's Ashutosh Museum to reacquaint some of the skilled *paṭuyā*s with the stylistic finesse of old *paṭacitra* (Hauser 2002: 118). In the following decades, the village of Nayā in West Medinipur district, situated about 60 kilometres from Kolkata, emerged as the most important hub of *paṭuyā* art. In 1986 and 1991, the Handicrafts Board of the Government of West Bengal organised workshops in Nayā to 'retrain' rural artists.

Women in particular were encouraged to attend the training courses. Male *paṭuyā*s did not participate because the stipends offered at the training sessions were meagre and insufficient for their livelihood needs. They sent their wives instead (Hauser 2002: 118), which led to the subsequent proliferation of women *paṭuyā*s in the 1980s. While economic needs drove their initial response, participation in exhibitions and art fairs opened a new cultural space before them. As the woman *paṭuyā*, Manimala Chitrakar stated,

> The scrolls seemed to appeal to foreigners, and I thought that the income
> might help to stabilise my family situation… I couldn't have gone to the
> United States if I hadn't learned this craft. I tell all the young people in
> Nayā to learn this skill if they want to travel and earn a living. My abilities
> have allowed me to develop a broader sense of the world – my life has not
> been restricted to the confines of Nayā.[8]

Several co-operatives were established by and for the *paṭuyā*s of Nayā, including *Nayā Paṭuyā Mahilā Unnayan Samiti* (Nayā Paṭuyā Women's Self-Help Association). The rural artists of Pinglā Block formed the Chitrataru Cluster in West Medinipur to promote the cultural tradition. Its activities include the annual *paṭacitra* festival, Poṭ-Māyā, which promotes, sustains and markets *paṭuyā* art and thereby engenders the general development of their region.[9] The Cluster also got a Geographical Indication (GI) tag for the art-form in 2018.

*Paṭacitra*s today are largely shorn of their rural roots and have little relevance within the rural milieu, where most entertainment is provided by cinema, television and *yātrā* (traditional theatre). While the government and NGOs have occasionally commissioned *paṭacitra*s on specific themes for propaganda, including spreading awareness on health, hygiene, family planning and women's education (Korom 2011), the rural audience no longer needs to look to *paṭuyā*s for news or information. The foremost purveyors of *paṭuyā* art, therefore, are the urban and the global markets where *paṭacitra*s have been reified as 'authentic folk art'. As a result, the *paṭacitra*s have come to reflect urban sensibilities and international events to a large extent, information for which is provided by outside agents. For instance, we may refer to Moyna Chitrakar's *paṭ*s on the 9/11 bombing of the World Trade Center (Chatterjee 2012: 62–107), as well as Rani and Jamuna Chitrakar's tsunami *paṭ*s of 2005. The artists thus inhabit a 'rurban' space, where they broaden their vision to encompass the moral universe beyond the immediate environment.

---

8   Fruzzetti and Östör 2007, cited in Ponte 2015.

9   For details on *paṭuyā* co-operatives and NGO initiatives in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, see Korom 2006; Ponte 2015; Bhattacharya 2022.

The Art of the Pandemic

Although the urban patronage of *paṭacitra* art did rejuvenate the art-form and popularise it on a national and global scale, the condition of the *paṭuyā* community remains precarious. While *paṭacitra* art is an important source of income for both men and women in Nayā, this in itself is not sufficient to sustain their families. In many cases, the male members of *paṭuyā* families were forced to give up painting scrolls and take to other occupations such as masonry and driving trolley vans. Furthermore, since there is no local demand for the *paṭ*s, a division of labour also developed in the village of Nayā whereby the women painted the *paṭacitra* and did the housework within their village, while the men went out for work and for marketing the products (Chandra 2018: 270–71).

The pandemic further worsened the economic situation of the *paṭuyā* community. The lockdown and the subsequent closure of the urban market, the absence of tourists in Pinglā, and the lack of art fairs, domestic and international exhibitions, and workshops, effectively rendered them incomeless. While NGOs and private patrons made personal loans and donations during the first lockdown of 2020, these dried up during the second wave. In May 2020, the cyclone Amphan destroyed many of their houses and artwork, creating further hardships. Although the West Bengal government provided some rations to low-income groups, these did not suffice for their entire families and, as a result, *paṭuyā*s were forced to borrow for their subsistence needs. Many of the poorer artists gave up painting and returned to farming in the hope of making ends meet (Belanus 2020). Following the coronavirus's second wave in 2021, their financial woes were compounded by the fact that almost every *paṭuyā* had become indebted to moneylenders. 'Almost every artist has taken debt from moneylenders or has bought things on loan. I have a debt of Rs 20,000 … We have to buy vegetables, oil, sugar, fruits so we have to take a loan', said Rahim Chitrakar, who has to support a five-member household (Tripathi 2021).

In this context of an uncertain future, some *paṭacitra* painters created *paṭ*s demonstrating the origin and spread of the coronavirus, the recommended health and hygiene practices, and the need to maintain a lockdown. Swarna Chitrakar,[10] the first artist to create pandemic *paṭ*s and songs, stated, 'I know the lockdown is essential, but so many people have been left without jobs and are being pushed into poverty. So, I thought it was important to highlight why no one should die of hunger while already being scared of the

---

10   Born in 1974 to a family of *paṭuyā*s from the village of Nayā, Swarna Chitrakar learnt scroll painting and *paṭuyā saṅgīt* from her father. An experienced artist, her work has received critical acclaim in India and abroad.

disease' (Das 2020). It is significant that, unlike previously commissioned *paṭacitra*s where themes were suggested by urban clientele, Swarna's pandemic-themed *paṭ*s were conceived and created by the artist herself. These *paṭacitra*s were then promoted on social media by NGOs, particularly by Banglanatak Dot Com, which focused national and international attention on the folk art of the pandemic and created a new virtual space where *paṭacitra* artists could perform, display, market and showcase their *paṭ*s.

It took Swarna fifteen days to write the lyrics, compose the music and paint the coronavirus scroll. An elaborate seven-frame scroll shows the coronavirus in the form of a demon or *rākṣasa* attacking humankind (Fig. 1), a motif that she previously used on her scrolls on HIV-AIDS and tuberculosis. The song, which lasts over seven minutes, highlights that while the virus originated in China, it caused suffering worldwide and bound together all of humanity through shared pain. The second part of the performance draws attention to the precautionary measures that people need to adopt, including initiatives taken by the government to flatten the curve and selfless work by medical professionals, effectively weaving together the shared global and local concerns. Swarna's daughter, Mamoni Chitrakar, likewise depicts the coronavirus as a demon and accompanies her scroll painting with the song, '*Koronābhāirās kathā śune, cokhe dhārā bahe yāy'* (listening to the story of coronavirus, tears start flowing). She eschews the tradition of painting foliage in the scroll margins and chooses instead to fill in the decorative margin with faces and wings of bats as a reminder of the virus's origin. In one synoptic section, the scroll portrays Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announcing the lockdown, with the police with loudspeakers, proffering aid to the needy (Fig. 2).

Similar efforts to encourage the artistic depiction of the pandemic through traditional art-forms and thereby create new income opportunities for *paṭuyā*s were undertaken by the Indian Institute of Technology at Kharagpur (Ghosh 2021). The department of Humanities and Social Sciences carried out an outreach programme with a number of Nayā's *paṭuyā*s, including Gurupada Chitrakar,[11] Bahadur Chitrakar, Swarna Chitrakar and others, in order to spread awareness about Covid–19 and to promote hygiene habits among the local people around Kharagpur through *paṭacitra* performances. The songs composed under these auspices are informative in tone and make an earnest appeal to

---

11   Sadly, Gurupada Chitrakar passed away on 29 June 2021 as a result of Covid–19 complications.

people to follow government norms. The following song by Rahim Chitrakar set the leitmotif and reappeared in various forms in subsequent performances:

> We must together be aware, oh people,
> We must together be aware.
> India's government has announced
> A 21-day lockdown is necessary.
> The virus will then not spread.
> We will then defeat it, oh people.
> So we have to be careful,
> All the time, oh people.
> The government doesn't want us to be harmed;
> Give your consent to the lockdown.
> Follow the government's words, oh people ...
> We will all be locked at home,
> No public meetings,
> We will live ourselves, and let others live,
> Take this oath. [12]

Another version of the song, composed by Gurupada Chitrakar calls upon people to obey the lockdown rules and doctors' advice, as there was no effective treatment for the disease.

---

12   *Sabāi mile haba sacetan, o janagaṇ,*
     Sabāi mile haba sacetan
     Kar'la jāri Bhārat sar'kār,
     Ekuś diner lak'ḍāun dar'kār
     Charābe nā bhāirās dedār
     Kar'ba er daman, o janagaṇ
     Sāb'dhānatā tāi abalamban
     Karo sarbakṣaṇ, o janagaṇ
     Sabāi miley haba sacetan
     Sar'kār moder cāẏ nā kṣati
     Lak'ḍāune dāo go mati
     Mene calo śīghragati sar'kārer bacan, o janagaṇ
     Sabāi mile haba sacetan.
     Gṛhabandī haba sabāi
     Bṛthā āḍḍā bandha karo tāi
     Nije bāṃci, par'ke bāṃcāi
     Eiṭi karo paṇ, o janagaṇ.

> Listen [to me] everyone, listen attentively,
> Maintaining the lockdown is necessary for all.
> If you follow the lockdown, oh listen [to me] brothers,
> To save oneself, we have to practice safety.
> This virus has such power, I'm telling you all,
> From one person to four hundred, there is no escape.
> Let's all of us stay at home together, not create problems for others.
> In case of coughs and fever, we'll go to the hospital
> And seek the advice of the doctor-babus.
> The doctor-babus say, oh listen [to me] brothers,
> Repeatedly with soap, we must wash our hands.
> Conducting tests many times, the learned ones say,
> There is no cure at the moment.
> So do take precautions now, oh friends. [13]

The *paṭacitra* displayed in accompaniment to the song portrays medical personnel as the central figures. Significantly, unlike Swarna Chitrakar's compositions, the songs quoted above are more direct in nature and shorn of the customary invocation to divinity, or lamentations on the fate of the hapless man.

It was argued that it would be easier to connect with local people and ensure their compliance if government regulations were presented in local dialects by social peers. How efficacious this was as a means of disseminating and promoting local awareness would seem questionable, given the fact that *paṭacitra* performances rarely have any rural audience

---

13   *Śunen śunen sarbajane, śunen diyā man*
Lak'ḍāun mānā kintu, sabār prayojan
Lak'ḍāun mān'le pare, śunen sabe bhāi
Nijeke bāṃcāte gele, seph'ṭi rākhā cāi
Ei bhāirās jeman śakti, sabāre jānāi
Ek'jan theke cār'śa janer, kono mukti nāi
Tāi binā prayojane ām'rā, bāhirey yāba nā
Thāk'ba ghare sabāi mile, anyer samasyā kar'ba nā
Kāśi jbar haile pare, hās'pātāl yāba
E ḍāktār'bābuder kāche, parāmarṣa neba
Ḍāktār'bāburā bale, śunen sabāi bhāi
Bārey bārey sābān diye, hāt dhowā cāi
Samīkṣā kare bāre bāre, bal'che gyānīguṇī
Kono cikitsā nei ekhuni
Tāi yataṭā pāro sāb'dhāne thāka, ogo bandhugaṇ.

See the video here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xk-PG0Oea7U.

today. However, the *paṭacitra* performances appeared to be fairly successful in attracting the attention of local spectators and fellow community members who had gathered to collect relief materials. Gurupada Chitrakar observed,

> When we came to IIT Kharagpur and stood in a line arranging our *paṭ*s, people wondered what we were up to. But when we started singing, gradually people listened carefully and wanted to see the pictures and listen to the songs. Those waiting in the queue began to pay attention to whether they were standing too close or lowering their masks even though they know about Covid already. [14]

The *paṭuyā*s also started public awareness performances on their own initiative. Both Gurupada Chitrakar and Anwar Chitrakar [15] played a significant role in this respect. Initially, they put up pandemic-themed *paṭ*s, like banners, on either side of the street in the neighbourhood, to educate the local people about preventive measures. With the permission and encouragement from local police and the Block Development Officer of Pinglā, Anwar organised small groups of 10 to 12 *paṭuyā*s to stress the necessity of maintaining social distancing by displaying the social awareness *paṭacitra*s. The Chitrataru Cluster set up the *Koronā Mokābilā Sacetanatā Bartā* (Awareness Campaign to Combat the Coronavirus) which arranged programmes at the marketplace at Nayā to raise public consciousness about hygiene and social distancing. Several *paṭacitra*s and songs were composed for this purpose, most of which begin with the traditional lamentation. One song, for instance, states that,

> A silent torment is going on throughout the world.
> [One's] heart breaks, but there are no words,
> Such is the sorrow. [16]

---

14   Gurudpada Chitrakar's interview, reported in Ghosh 2021.

15   The son of the *paṭuyā* Amar Chitrakar, Anwar Chitrakar was born in 1980. He paints on diverse themes ranging from depictions of Radha and Krishna to contemporary concerns such as environmental degradation, political corruption, Maoist insurgency, HIV, child marriage and surrogate motherhood. He has held exhibitions in Kolkata, Delhi, Mumbai and Chennai. He is the recipient of the West Bengal State Award (2002) and the National Award (2006).

16   *Sārā biśbe cal'che śudhu nīrab yantraṇā*
      Buk phāṭe to mukh phote nā,
      Eki bedanā.

Another song declares,

> O residents of this world,
> I present [before you] the tale of the coronavirus;
> Lakhs of people are dying.
> No one has the time to take count. [17]

These songs appear to be variations on earlier compositions but are inferior in artistic merit. Some of the songs were set to the music of popular folk songs recorded by well-known professional urban artists, probably to attract the attention of passers-by. That the *paṭuyā*s took this seriously can be seen from the innovative means they adopted to drive home the message to the audience. The recitals were followed by a quiz on the coronavirus and a prize was given to the highest scorer. [18] In order to reach a national viewership, some of the *paṭuyā*s also composed and sang songs in Hindi, instead of Bengali. [19]

A few songs also gave an account of the countries affected by the pandemic. Rahim Chitrakar, for instance, composed and performed a song that traces the spread of the virus from China to America and to India.

> Corona took birth in the land of China, oh listen everyone,
> The game started in China and corona spread everywhere in the country.
> So many people died in China, oh listen everyone.
> Corona killed people in America, the government was perturbed.
> Alas, hundreds and hundreds were infected, oh listen everyone,
> The American government worried about when the cure for corona would be found.
> Both doctors and the government worried continuously, oh listen everyone,
> The coronavirus reached India and first attacked people of Kerala …
> Mamatadidi is thinking, if this lockdown continues
> How will village people earn their living?

---

17   *Ogo biśbabāsī go*
     Koronābhāiraser kathā kari nibedan
     Lakṣe lakṣe mar'che mānuṣ bhāi
     Hisāb nikāś karār mato kāror samay nāi.

18   See the video here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RSXJgoZVwmI.

19   See the video here: https://youtu.be/Zv10_RfnyJo.

> Didi announced on tv and the internet that everyone will get rations of rice and flour,
> It will be given free to all people. [20]

The song quoted above drives home the point that the Chief Minister of the state of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, popularly referred to as 'Didi' (elder sister), was doing all she could to ameliorate the living conditions of those affected by the lockdown, in particular the rural poor, through provisions of free food rations. This leads to the speculation that the *paṭuyā* programme of mass information was not entirely free of political patronage.

Like Swarna, Anwar had created *paṭacitra*s on the Covid–19 crisis. He explained this as being true to his calling, since the *paṭuyā* traditionally performed the task of disseminating information among people, especially during times of crisis. Like Rahim and Gurupada Chitrakar, Anwar dispenses with traditional invocations and appeals directly to the people: 'Listen to me everyone, listen to me with attention, I will narrate the tale of this epidemic disease'. [21] Anwar also painted several *cauka paṭ*s in the Kālighāt style, which were notable for their humorous tone and particular style of amalgamating tradition with modernity. A series of 13 *paṭ*s on the lockdown were displayed in the online solo exhibition 'Tales of our Times' on the Emami Art Gallery website in July 2020 (Chitrakar 2020). In one *paṭacitra* entitled '*Mukhor dhārī*' (Muzzle-clad), Anwar transposes cow heads onto human bodies and vice versa. Cow-headed humans wearing muzzles look at the human-headed cows, indicating altered perspectives (Fig. 3). Another *paṭ* entitled '*Śakti rūpe*' (Goddess of power), more serious in nature, depicts a nurse in the form of goddess Durgā vanquishing the coronavirus demon (Fig. 4). Yet another satirical *paṭ* shows a Bengali *bābu* dancing with a wine bottle that serves a dual purpose as a hand sanitiser.

---

20   *Cīn deśete koronār janam, śono sarbajan*
Cīn deśete khelā halo, koronā sārā deś chaṛiye gelo
Cīner mānuṣ mar'la kato, ogo janagaṇ, śono sarbajan
Koronā Āmerikāy mānuṣ mare, sar'kār'bābu cintā kare
Ākrānta haycehe śaye śaye, hāyre āmār man, śono sarbajan
Āmerikār sar'kār kare cintā, koronār auṣadh ās'be kon din'ṭā
Ḍāktār sar'kār, ubhayjanā, bhābe sarbakṣaṇ, śuno sarbajan
Koronābhāirās Bhārat'barṣe pauṃche gelo, prathame Kerālār mānuṣ ākrānta halo
Mamatādidi cintā kare lak'ḍāun cal'le pare
Grāmer mānuṣ roj'gār kar'be keman?
Didi ṭibhi neṭ-e kar'la ghoṣaṇā reśane āṭā chāl pābe pratijanā
Bine paysāy pābe mānuṣ'jan.
21   See the video here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ay73TG665vE.

Unlike in Nayā, *paṭacitra* artists are rarely found today in Kālighāt, as most have given up their traditional craft to pursue other occupations. Bhaskar Chitrakar, who over the years experimented with the traditional Kālighāt *paṭacitra* to create a distinctive style of his own, is the sole surviving Kālighāt *paṭuẏā*.[22] His *paṭ*s feature the symbols of modernity, but true to tradition, his subject matter remains the Bengali *bābu*. Bhaskar has painted a series of *cauka paṭ*s on the *bābu's* domestic life during lockdown (Fig. 5). The coronavirus is shown to mutate in shape and colour and grow in size with the progression of the quarantine. In one of the *paṭ*s, the goddess Kālī destroys the fully developed coronavirus with her divine light (Fig. 6). Unlike the *paṭacitra*s of Nayā, Bhaskar injects gentle satire and a sense of frolic in his *paṭ*s instead of focusing on tragedy and human suffering.

These artistic depictions of Covid–19 focused media attention on the *paṭuẏā* community and their art. Some established artists, including Swarna and Gurupada Chitrakar were invited to conduct workshops and live performances. For the poorer, struggling *paṭuẏā*s, however, the market has remained restricted to the traditional channels. Despite this, *paṭuẏā*s in general, have become adept at using social media, particularly WhatsApp and Facebook, to establish contact with new clients and display their artwork. Whereas earlier they had been resistant to the idea of performing on digital platforms, the lockdown induced them to turn to it for survival.

Concluding Remarks

The long-term evolution of *paṭacitra* art in Bengal since the 19th century includes two distinct trends. While the 19th and 20th centuries witnessed the transformation from a performative to a visual art (Hauser 2002), since the 1990s there was a gradual move to reclaim performative oral tradition. The initiative came from the *paṭuẏā* community itself. As Manimala Chitrakar recalls, her grandfather, the senior artist Dukhushyam Chitrakar,[23] was dissatisfied with the selling of *paṭacitra* solely as an item of visual art which he feared would lead to the extinction of the age-old tradition of *paṭer gān* or *paṭuẏā saṅgīt*.[24] Despite this, the main function of *paṭuẏā* art remained largely decorative, restricted

---

22   Bhaskar and Anwar Chitrakar are among the few *paṭuẏā*s who add their signature to their art. Author's interview with Bhaskar Chitrakar, 23 August 2021.

23   A master *paṭuẏā* at Nayā, Dukhushyam Chitrakar was one of the most respected *paṭacitra* artists of Medinipur. He held exhibitions in Italy, Australia, Bangladesh and all over India. He passed away on 9 March 2022.

24   Fruzzetti and Östör 2007, cited in Ponte 2015.

within the limited spheres of workshops, museums and exhibitions, often dictated by the sensibilities of a largely urban and often international clientele.

The coronavirus pandemic and the ensuing lockdowns forced *paṭuyā*s to think anew. Through innovative measures, they widened the audience base for their performative art. On the one hand, consonant with their traditional role, they appealed to local audiences on local issues, such as precautionary health and hygiene measures. On the other, through their reinvention in the digital space, they reached out to the larger global community on the universal issues of shared suffering. Thus, the pandemic *paṭacitra*s convey a contemporary moral message much in the same way as the older pre-modern *paṭacitra*s reflected the moral universe of their times. By overcoming the restrictions of distance, digitalisation not only widened the *paṭuyā*s' sense of belonging to a global community, but also imparted a degree of longevity to their performances. Will this lead to the erasure of spontaneity and reification of their performance art? Perhaps, but it is more likely that their innovative skills will enable *paṭuyā*s to adapt and adjust their art to emerging technologies. Thus, the coronavirus *paṭacitra*s have strengthened the trend of anchoring global concerns within local sensibilities and folk metaphors and, in this sense, constitute a milestone in the evolution of this art-form.

Will digitalisation improve the economic status of *paṭuyā*s, or will it increase the control of new brokers and middlemen? As of now, despite their financial precarity, new technology has enabled *paṭuyā*s to reach out to a global market and combat the challenge posed by fake *paṭacitra* that currently flood the online markets. Publicity through social media has undoubtedly widened their viewership. Only time can tell if the virtual space leads to further sustainability.

Figure 1: Swarna Chitrakar with her coronavirus paṭ.
Photo credit: bengalpatachitra.com.

Figure 2: Mamoni Chitrakar's coronavirus paṭ.
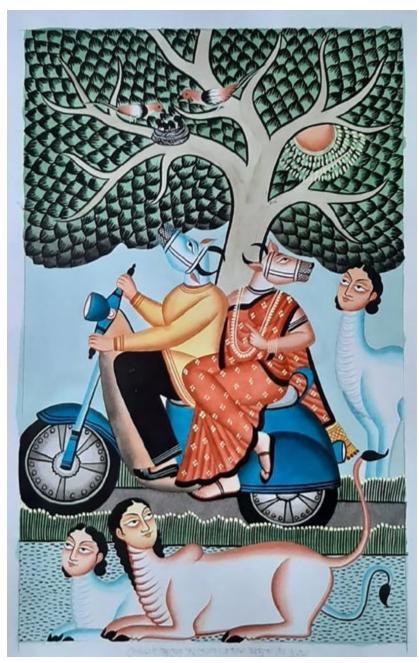*Photo credit: bengalpatachitra.com.*

Figure 3: Mukhor dhārī.
Photo credit: Anwar Chitrakar and Emami Art Gallery.

Figure 4: Śakti Rūpe. Photo credit: Anwar Chitrakar and Emami Art Gallery.

Figure 5: The bābu, the bibi and the coronavirus. Photo credit: Bhaskar Chitrakar.

Figure 6: Goddess Kālī vanquishing the coronavirus. Photo credit: Bhaskar Chitrakar.

References

Banerjee, Sumanta (1998) *The Parlour and the Street: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth-century Calcutta*. Calcutta: Seagull Books.

Basu, Rituparna (2008) The rediscovery of folk arts and crafts of Bengal: A reappraisal of a twentieth century endeavor. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Calcutta.

Bhattacharya, Monolina (2022) Simple minds, powerful voices: Tradition and transformation in the paṭacitras of Bengal. In: Alankar Kaushik and Abir Suchiang (eds) *Narratives and New Voices in India: Cases of Community Development for Social Change*. Singapore: Springer Nature.

Bhowmick, A.C. (1995) Bengal pat and patuas – A case study. *Indian Anthropologist*, 25 (1) 39–46.

Chandra, S. (2018) Women folk painters empowered: A revolution in a rural setting. *International Journal of Gender Studies in Developing Societies*, 2 (4) 263–78.

Chatterji, Roma (2012) *Speaking with Pictures: Folk Arts and the Narrative Tradition in India*. New Delhi: Routledge.

Dutt, Gurusaday (1939) *Paṭuyā saṅgīt* [Paṭuyā songs], Calcutta: University of Calcutta.

Ghosh, Pika (2003) Unrolling a Narrative Scroll: Artistic Practice and Identity in Late-Nineteenth-century Bengal. *Journal of Asian Studies* 62 (3) 835–71.

Hadders, Hans (2008) Marginal mendicants: Jadopatias of Bengal. In: Marine Carrin and Harald Tambs-Lyche (eds) *People of the Jangal: Reformulating Identitites and Adaptations in Crisis*. Delhi: Manohar.

Hauser, Beatrix (2002) From oral tradition to folk art. *Asian Folklore Studies* 61 (1) 105–22.

Hunter, W.W. (1876) *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, Vol. III. London: Trübner and Co.

Jain, Jyotindra (1998) Picture showmen: Insights into the narrative tradition in Indian art. *Marg* 49 (3) 22–31.

Korom, Frank J. (1989) Inventing traditions: Folklore and nationalism as historical process in Bengal. In: Dunja Rihtman-Augustin, et al. (eds) *Folklore and Historical Process*. Zagreb: Institute of Folklore Research, 57–83.

——— (2006) *Village of Painters: Narrative Scrolls from West Bengal*: Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press.

——— (2011) Civil ritual, NGOs, and rural mobilization in Medinipur District, West Bengal. *Asian Ethnology* 70 (2) 181–195.

Ponte, Inês (2015) Cosmopolitan impressions from a contemporary Bengali Patachitra painting museum collection in Portugal. *Atelier's d'Anthropologie* 41.

Risley, H.H. (1981 [1891]) *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, Vols. 1 and 2. Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay.

Sen Gupta, Amitabha (2012) *Scroll Paintings of Bengal: Art in the Village*. Bloomington (IN), Author House.

Online resources (all accessed in May 2021)

Agarwal, Aarushi (2020) Anwar Chitrakar, a folk artist from Bengal, captures vignettes of locked down lives through traditional art. *Firstpost*, 24 August.

banglanatak dot com.

Belanus, Betty (2020) Painting the pandemic: Coronavirus *patachitra* scrolls in West Bengal, India. *Folklife*, 9 November.

Bengal Patachitra.

Chitrakar, Anwar (2020) Tales of our times. Online art exhibition hosted by Emani Art Gallery, July.

Das, Shreya (2020) From Bengal, a *patachitra* that narrates the story of the fight against Coronavirus goes viral. *The Indian Express*, 25 April.

Dwary, Anurag (2020) Tribals in Bastar make masks from palm leaves, stay in to fight Covid–19. *NDTV*, 26 March..

Ellis-Petersen, Hannah (2020) Corona demons tower over India's Durga Puja festival. *The Guardian*, 22 October.

Ganguly, Ritika (2020) Community transmission: Coronavirus enters Bengal's folk-art form. *The Wire*, 26 April.

Ghosh, Shreyashi (2021) IIT Kharagpur spreading health awareness through live folk art performance. *KGP Chronicle*, March 19.

HIPAMSIndia.

Mehta, Sulogna (2020) Masks made of leaves saved forest-dwellers from virus. *Times of India*, 5 August.

Poikayil, George (2020) Covid–19 awareness: Yakshagana experts come together to show how to slay Coronasura. *The New Indian Express*, 15 July.

Tilak, Sudha G. (2020) Gods in face masks: India's folk artists take on Covid–19. *BBC News*, 2 May.

Tripathi, Shailaja (2021) West Bengal: No end to Patua artists' financial woes as Covid–19 rages. *The Wire*, 12 May.