

Bengali Culture: Intermingled With Alpana, Kantha and Pata Art Traditions

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Abstract:

The artist and artisans of Bengal are very much alert about the progressions are taking place in their daily life. Time reveals the truth, the way they are adjusting with these age-old artistic traditions, which is entertaining, inspiring and educating to the mass. Above art and cultural practices still exist with its persistence in Bengali culture, its journey started around two to three thousand years ago. Time immemorial, artists' communities have taken inspiration from history as well, these tangible art forms like *Alpana* diagram, *Kantha* embroidery and *Patachitra* are the assets of Bengal. Gradually its positive impact reflected in other art practices. All those three art forms have given purity to Bengali tradition and culture. *Alpana* motifs are incorporated in *patuas* scroll borders, while *patachitra* artist started his journey in the villages, *patua* used to carry his bagful scroll for display. The *Patua*'s scroll bag is decorated with good design motifs made off with *Kantha* art stitches. These arts of treasure exist in every rural household; where Bengali housewives irrespective of their caste, class, creed or socioeconomic groups are proficiently indulge in their artistic practice. The Bengal embroidery art not only exploring various stitches, but also expresses their creative sensibilities, resourceful and patient craftsmanship. With an inherent union of hereditary skill of the past now contemplating in contemporary trends of design plans. Today, 21st century's Bengal has achieved a synchronization of these three art forms where womenfolk of Bengal enabled to achieve their best. This research paper mainly focuses about these three art forms how deeply are intermingled in Bengali culture.

Keywords: *an age-old artistic tradition, purity to Bengali tradition, the art of treasure, union of hereditary skill, under the limelight.*

Traditional floor art of Bengal: Alpana

A nine days long *Navarathri* festival comprises *Durga Puja*, the worshiping of deity Durga. It is simply just before the particular day of installation of the deity, organizers got busy decorating the floor with *alpana* design, it is a typical floor art of Bengal — depicting of *alpana* done with fine rice paste. The researcher can guess how beautifully the places it would be decorated, once all kinds of decorations are finished. The beginning of *alpana* and its originality, regarding this researcher says it might have started as a folk art form, which is still continuing to be an indispensable art practice which is crucial for all kinds of ritual or cultural festival celebrations in Bengal — like *Pujas*, weddings and birthday celebrations, etc., *alpana* art is regarded as an aesthetic component; this art form is an asset which belongs to a united Bengal province, including West Bengal and Bangladesh. Conventionally, it is supposed to be depicted with rice paste diluted to the consistency similar to thick milk. Household uses a small piece of

fine cotton cloth is dipped within the milky content liquid and drawn by the finger, while cotton cloth piece held in between the first finger as well as thumb finger by pressing it, milky liquid will equally flow conjointly starts to depict the *alpana* diagram through mild pressure of the fingers. Even though it may sound difficult, but it's quite easy and extremely beautiful, and simply just requires a moment of observation and sincerity in practice. *Alpana* — particularly drawn during the occasion of *Pujas* like *Durga Puja*, *Lakshmi Puja*, *Jagadhatrī Puja*, *Annapurna Puja* and *Saraswati Puja*, which is typically depicted in white colour alone, because white is that signifies as the embalmed of purity.

The Alpana: Motif and Theme

The motifs of *alpana* art is additionally depicted a positive symbol — lotus and lotus leaves, ear of paddy, other suggestive motifs of traditional folk arts, those are village granaries and ceremonial *kalasa* (pitcher), arabesque motifs of creepers in simple style, the feet of goddess *Lakshmi*, goddess *Durga* so on, all of that are incorporated into the *alpana* design. As an example, throughout the *Lakshmi puja*, in households Bengali Hindus depicts *alpana* design, they depict the shape of goddess *Lakshmi*'s feet in front of all the rooms; it is indicating that she is stepping into the house. With no account, these feet print to be depicted within the reverse, showing her to be stepping out! That will be a prime sin! According to the occasion there are some specific designs or diagrams in *alpana* art, for *Pujas*, the diagrams of *alpana* are sometimes in circular shape, beginning with a *shankha* or *shankh* or lotus in the centre and so arabesques motifs of the border of lotus leaves or lotus. This kind of basic pattern is extended once more and again till it's as massive as per designer's necessities or needs. The supernatural being is placed on the lotus at the centre. Normally, no rough sketching is finished, because it isn't meant to be geometrical.

Besides this, some specialist *alpana* designers try to manage all requirements on the spot and they try to finish it, in one go while not having to depict something different, the artist can also adhere in mind as his mother, aunts and elder sisters depicting it along with him — somebody taking care of the central part and alternative way another artist concentrating on the additional parts. More or less all are doing some extra bits — till the ground of the whole floor of the room was coated with fantastic patterns or diagrams. Artist or designer chooses patterns as per the specific ceremony or occasions like *annaprashanas*, weddings, naming ceremony, etc., color is also usually used, sometimes yellow and red and generally inexperienced for the leaves. However, they never use black, because it is meant to be inauspicious. As per changing time new generation artist while depicting diagram of *alpana*, they principally used chalk paste, zinc oxides and paint with painting brushes rather than rice paste and finger and cotton cloths because it was easier to cope up with the situation and surface and easier to create designs. For them drawing *alpana* with the finger might be painful unless the ground was extremely smooth.

Particularly a rice-paste painted conventional *alpana* design led by Bengali girls; it is common in Bengali culture. Depicting *alpana* is must in Bengali festivals like the very first day of Baisakh called as *Poheila Baisakh* or *Poila Baisakh* is the Bengali new year day, Bengali

people call it in some other name, such as *Shubha Naba Barso*, other festivals are there, it is must to depict *alpana - Nag-Panchami*, *Makar Sankranti* in the month of *Pousa* (January)...Bengali people perform *Lakshmi Puja*, three consecutive days they have a good time in abundance, and *Vasanta Panchami* in the month of *Magh*, each cultural organization and institutes like schools, colleges and universities organize *Saraswati Puja*, she is the goddess of knowledge and all cultural practices, these are very unique days in Bengalis life they're following the fashion to depict this folk as well as traditional design *alpana* since so many years, *alpana* is famous because it is related to each auspicious occasion and rituals in Bengal and is neighbouring regions, even though they may be celebrating *Durga Puja*, *Jagadhatri Puja* and *Kali Puja*.

Kantha Art: Folk Embroidery of Bengal

The throat chakra signifies a cloth which is coiled around the neck. The myth is that during the churning of the ocean as per *Vishnu Purana* and *Mahabharata*, and *Bhagavata Purana* mountain *Mandara* was utilise as a churning rod as per Lord Shiva's advice king of snakes *Vasuki* he came down from the Lord Shiva's neck became a churning rope. During *Samudra Manthanam*, the churning of the Ocean *Vasuki* vomited lethal *hala-hala*, no gods or no demons are ready to accept, that poison could demolish the *dharitri* or *shrishti* means the living beings of the *Daritri's* is about to die, Lord Vishnu and *Devaraja Indra* requested Lord Shiva to take the requisite and save the *Dharitri* means earth. The entire poison drank by Lord Shiva and then Shiva lost his control due to immense pain in the neck. Shiva pronounces the sentence save me Mother towards *Devi Parvati*, thought Shiva will not die, but *Parvati* could not stay away from Her Lord as well as consort, so immediately she took the head of her Lord's on her lap, started nourishing and to reducing Shiva's severe pain. *Parvati*, tightly hold her hands on the Lord's neck to stop the poison at Shiva neck; she tied a cloth around the Shiva's *kantha* or throat to ease him from the pain of poison, that cloth is called as *Kantha*. That day itself Lord Shiva became *Neela Kantha*.

The derivation of *Kantha* follows its history for a period at least for a thousand years ago. Their picture reaches back to considerably prior sources, of the post Vedic era. A few symbols, for example, the twirling universe, and the sun are taken from the primitive art. The later impact of Hinduism, really taking shape of *kanthas* for religious ceremonies, *Pujas*, weddings and births, gave the craftsmanship its place as a vehicle of noteworthy social significance.

The making of *Kantha* is a "women's art". Their supreme patience with deep concentration reflects from *Kantha* embroidering executed for her husband's initials on his handkerchief to sewing pieces of discarded cloth with colourful threads to make a *kantha*, with the help of the verities of the needle. A book called '*Sri Chaitanya Charitamrita*', author *Krishnadas Kaviraj*, written around five hundred years ago. There the poet says, *Shachi mata*, the mother of *Sri Chaitanya*, dispatched a self-made *kantha* to her son at *Puri* through a few pilgrims. This indistinguishable *kantha* as well as antique artifacts' product can be viewed in the *gambhira*, as it is displayed in a glass case, in *Puri*, *Orissa*.

The Classifications of Bengal Kantha Art:

Besides administration duty IAS, G S Dutt, took self initiatives to revive neglected folk arts, artifacts. Folk embroidery of Bengal, he roamed in interior villages to find dying artifacts, the Guraday Dutt folk Museum is preserving his all collections. While he has experience the artistic quality of *kantha* art and its intuitive stitches, he thought of classifying those invaluable art work according to working pattern, simultaneously he encouraged the women artisans to keep it continue. Same time he classified *Kantha* art and artifacts.

a. Classifications of Bengal *Kantha* Art: As per uses

1. *Nakshi kantha*, 2. *Rumal* or Handkerchief, 3. *Durjani* or Wallets, 4. Bayton or Wrappers, 5. *Sujni kanthas* or bed spreads.

While discussing about the stitch one can see Various Types of *Kantha* Stitch.

b. Classifications of Various Types of Stitches: Thread handling

1. Running stitch in *kanthas*, 2. *Lahori* stitch in *kanthas*, 3. Lik or *anarasi* stitch in *kanthas*, 4. Cross Stitch or carpet stitch in *kanthas*, 5. *Sujni* or fine running *Kantha* stitch.

Patuas: Itinerant Bard of Bengal

The state Bengal, located in the Eastern Region of India extending from the northern range of the Himalayas and up to the sea Bay of Bengal, is the land a traditional storytelling community of artists; they called *pata* painter paint colourful scrolls to accompany songs which they sing to relate history, Contemporary issues religious and cultural events to their audiences. These itinerant bards /singers are part of a long ancestry that has passed the convention down for ages. *Patuas* travelled a long distance to perform in small villages, singing the songs and unrolling the scroll panel by panel to accompany the narrative in exchange for food, clothes and coins. *Pata* art painters are the storytelling artist; their artworks have been recognized by art galleries, museums and universities around the globe, though the artists are still struggling to compete with the changing scenario.

This state is demonstrating its strong and superlative hegemony in the field of scroll narrative art. Throughout time the artists have created repertoires of scrolls and melodies that keep on continue to engage their audiences. To fascinate twenty first century's audiences today they are covering topics such as 9/11, 26/11, the movie "The Titanic," the tsunami in Indonesia, Thailand, Andaman, and South Indian states and how to use a condom to prevent the spread of the potentially fatal disease like HIV and AIDS. Many of the scrolls have a moral or lesson which relates to the story. Story telling community's art always has been dynamic, changing to meet the needs and interests of their audiences. Additionally, they also have the credibility to act as composer of easy songs, which is related to the olden and present day sociological certainties. *Pata* painters were well known in the vicinity as *Patidars* or *Patikars* signifying as scroll painters by virtue of their resourcefulness in painting scenes from stories and epic exhibiting to the viewer or audience with narrative, that includes a position belongs historical evidences or gods or goddesses like avatar, Krishna, Shiva, Durga, Lakshmi, and Saraswati and various legends.

Some other scroll themes are *Rass Lila*, *Manasa Mangal*, *Sri Krishna Lila* to some popular stories of *Savitri-Satyavan*, (the famous episode of *Savitri* and her husband *Satyavan*), the '*Kurukshetra-war*', the stories of Behula-Lakhindar, taken from *Manasa-Mangla* narrative poem or the tales of the merchant Dhanapati Saudagar, written in the popular Chandi Mangala poem etc. Vice versa, researchers could observe that *Patuas* are terribly sensitive towards chronological trends of civilization or social issues of contemporary society, such as, child marriage, *Briksha Ropan* (tree plantation), intoxications, air pollution, misuse of water, girls' harassment, political corruption

Impact of Scroll narratives and its Interrelationships with all festivals:

Bengal is famous for many cultural festivals. Without any doubt many cultural celebrations influenced the folk tradition as well as the scroll narrative art trend time to time. All kinds of cultural practices, festivals, *pujas*, *melas* etc., are all moving around the Bengali lives throughout the year. Same kind of truths reflecting in the *Baro Mashaya* Scroll, in this scroll narration what are the festivals celebrating round the year in 12 months are profoundly executed. To come out from the monotonous life style, Bengali people always plan for something different. Naturally, *pujas* of many gods and goddess, various *melas* and festivals always becomes a part of cultural celebration in Bengali life. Rabindra sangeet or Nazarul Geeti, every Bengali household involves with the execution of *Kantha* embroidery, still younger generations may be club members or households performs *Tusu*, *Itu* and *Bhadu Puja*, still *Ghatu puja* culture is alive in rural Bengal, besides *Gajan*, *Charak*, *Neel puja*, *Manasa Bhasa*, *Naga Panchami puja*, *Dassahora puja*, *Arandhan* and *Bhatre Dwitiya* rituals they perform with full galore. Naturally, any holy rituals or a festival gets more purity while it comes in contact of art and aesthetic sensibilities, when beautiful artistic *alpana* patterns drawn on the premises.

Patachitra Performance Technique Tools: People Encouragement

These artisans have very little sense, of formal art training and opted to approach their subject matter in a simple and, non-scientific composition and perspectives that is usually a literal interpretation of their subject done in a flat, non-perspective approach and involves the use energetic and bright colour on a flat surface.

It is a traditional folk art form characterised by religious and social motifs and imageries. *Pata* is a Bangla or Bengali word evolved from the Sanskrit *patta* meaning cloth. An artwork drawn on a piece of silk or cotton or jute (*Paat*) or any other fabric portraying traditional motifs of religion and society is called Scroll art or *Pata* art. As an art form, scroll is very ancient. Today it is much weakened under the impact of modernity, and much more disturbed by Cinema, Television and Inter-net, Whatsaap, Instagram, though this art form is still practiced by self motivated and peer transmits skillful rural artists and still in demand in the folk society. *Patachitra* tradition has regarded as a folk art, its vital element of Bengal cultural heritage. The stylistic quality of scroll painters varies from place to place and group to group. Generally scroll painters like to depict monumental figures of deities to provide allegoric character to the gods or goddess, with rich embellishment in brilliant and profound colours with the intention of making an immediate and long-lasting impact on the Bengal scroll art tradition.

Making of Scrolls: Ground Preparations

1st Process:

- a. Filtered (filtering process done through cotton cloth) semi liquid chalk, means well purified chalk-powered they poured in a container, and then mixed it well with liquid and sticky tamarind gum. (See-gum preparation process).
- b. Above mixtures skillfully have to be sprouted on long fabric.
- c. Once it is dry then they will rub the scroll surface by fine paper weight (glass) or smooth rounded stone piece to make smooth the surface after that nice scroll surface is ready to draw images.

2nd Process:

- a. Purified White ink (a kind of earthen pigment- another name *Kaat Khadi*) powder to be collected after many time water processing; finally a fine white clay slit can be obtained.
- b. White clay slit to be mixed with well filtered cow dung then liquid sticky tamarind glue will be added to that mixture all together to be sprouted on fabric for layers to create leather like surface
- c. Once the surface is dried up, then *patuas* have to make it smooth by rubbing with rounded stone or by fine glass paperweights.

3rd Process:

- a. Well purified *Ghusum* soil, this soil they collect from the deep underground, good quality *ghusum* soil like marvel white colour.
- b. *Patuas* prepares slits of this soil a liquid type, then added cow dung with it.
- c. With the mixture of soil and cow dung they added gum into it; this is tamarind gum all the three elements mixed well.
- d. After stirring well they filter it with a cotton cloth. Residue part thrown it out, filtrate part skillfully applied on the scroll ground surface.
- e. Once scroll surface dried up, the fabric becomes strong, but flexible enough to sustain the stroke of the artist's brush.
- f. On the dried ground surface *patuas* have to make it smooth by rubbing with rounded stone or by fine glass paperweights.

4th Process:

- a. According to the length of the scroll *patuas* will sew the mill made drawing papers one after another to make a long or a lengthy scroll about 15-40 feet.
- b. After that they will have to give support from the back, they will paste cloth or used sari by starch of cooked white rice. (Rice obtained from white rice availed from the non -steamed paddy cooked rice otherwise gum made from tamarind seeds).
- c. If it is commission work, then they will stitch Canson sheet otherwise they will use cheap drawing sheet prices Rs. 8 per piece.

- d. For commission based work, then they will paste new Markin cloth from back to make a long-lasting scroll. If For commission work they will paste new Markin cloth from back for long-lasting scrolls. If they use rice starch, then crystals of copper sulphate (Blue Vitriols) to be mixed to save the scrolls from insects bite.

Bengali culture well expressed through audio-visual expression.

One can still hear sometimes in the afternoon *pata* artist singing on *patachitra* at the village people's door step. From time immemorial *Patuas* impressed people's heart with their poetic, lyrical and musical genius. *Patuas* talent it is like swan character, they can filter genuine one out of many haphazard things. Sincere efforts always there to make his or her scroll tradition rich what to extract out of many elements and how to incorporate into his/her *pata* painting areas they are very much alert. They watch keenly what people practicing till date. That is why as a basic tool of mass communication, scroll narrative tradition still blinking in the form of audio-visual elements; still it has been educating people since the ancient time. Many club or Baroyaari committee members nurtured a profound respects to organise *Bhajan*, *Keertan*, *Fakiri*, *Tarja*, *Jhumur*, *Kabigaan* and *Jatra* performances during *Kali*, *Seelata*, *Siddheswari* or *Shiva puja*. The soul-stirring strains of the *baul*, *keertan* and *bhatiyali* singers always fascinate them during the *Saradiya* festivals.

Discussion

In the country like India, where story telling art includes with epics, myths, legends, folk tales and fairy tales, etc., but this Bengali story telling tradition includes social problems and modern incidents. If one can have a keen observation concerning Bengal's story telling tradition, naturally one will experience its varied discourse with many folk elements are comprised of the then united Bengal. Other aesthetics and visual components like *Alpana* and *Kantha* also strengthening the Bengali tradition and culture. It is the marvelous synchronization of three. People expectations are well formulated. All those three elements are adhered with the Bengali life style. Earlier, British scholar and art lovers paid attention solely to Mughal paintings, but A. K. Coomaraswamy appreciated Bengal's rural folk tradition *Alpana* and *Kantha* art, here carried the proof that the art of the Indus valley, traditional motifs of *alpana* and Bengal folk art is interrelated, he also appreciated *Pata-chitra* tradition of Bengal, he brought Rajasthani and *Pahari* Miniatures paintings to a respectable forum, and paintings from other provincial courts followed suit. Anand Kentice Coomaraswamy as a scholar and an art critic firmly added a fresh nuance to the aesthetic evaluation of all forms of Indian art and a beginning was thus made in the search for pictorial expressions of rural folk and tribal painters in a systematic manner. Bengal *pata* art got mixed with Rajasthani, *Pahari* and *Kalighat* style.

Conclusion

In Bengali culture round the clock festivals are on the move around the Bengali life, responsibility wise, they are supported by each other, like *Baroyaary Kali puja*, *Baroyaary Durga Puja*, (it is a proverb - where twelve minds are flocking together called *Baroyaary*)

Vishwakarma *Puja or Saraswati Puja* . The Audience of Bengal is a heart fully accepting these art and artefacts as a pure folk element from their viewpoint. Organising any festival in a prolific manner, it's a great affair for the Bengalis, as well as to their lifestyle with elaborate arrangements in the premises (known as pandals), people gathering up in different parts of the state and people buying new clothes and accessories, artworks from respective stalls exclusively for this time of the year. They make the festival premises beautiful by beautiful drawn *alpana* design, women regularly wear beautiful *Kantha* stitch *saree* which adores them with a fabulous allure, the setting of the premises become beautiful which gives marvellous shining when *patuas* are welcome to display their works of art in a stall in front of the pandals, viewer are accumulated in the narrative folk art stall, then *patua* began singing on a thematic scroll in high pitch or low pitch voice. The Viewer or audiences fascinated by them. The audience or art lovers completely lost at the moment- as though they are in a dream. There are other forms of folk singing too, alike *patua*'s stall, *baul* singer also gets invited to the *puja* or festival premises overall it gives a superior inclination to the audience as well as viewers.

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