



Contemporary Trends in traditional Patachitra of Odisha

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Abstract

Patachitra, is a popular traditional (folk/tribal) painting of Odisha. This traditional art form however has gone through certain changes over the years. Some essential features of the painting are retained in the contemporary paintings, while some new features are added, along with its new uses in the modern-day artifacts. Certain features like the typical composite animal motifs are still popular, but there is ignorance among many about the stories attached to them. Surprisingly, even few artists who paint these motifs have no idea about their significance. Thus, some pertinent issues raised by the Chitrakaras or artists about the Patachitra painting still remain to be addressed. This paper describes the contemporary trends in Patachitra paintings and the modern-day issues governing this traditional tribal art.

Keywords: colours, chitrakara, motifs

Often while visiting two of my aunts' places, when I was about nine or ten years of age, I was enamoured by the colourful paintings on their home walls. The colours were very bright, resplendent and striking to the mind's eye at that young age. The yellows and the reds were most vibrant and remained in the mind long after I had seen them. My first memory of Patachitra goes back to these gods and goddesses and sometimes strange motifs hanging on the walls of friends and relatives in many Odia homes. But more than the motifs, the vivid colours remain with me. They made a dull surrounding come to life.

At the age of eighteen, when I made my first Nataraja Patachitra painting with striking pinks and yellows, only then I wanted to know what the name meant. 'Patachitra', in simple words, means a painting made on a cloth or a scroll. It took me about three or four months to finish it. My art teacher Pradeep Sahu (based in Cuttack, Odisha) told me that it was a matter of pride to learn something like a Patachitra and every Odia should be proud of it, because it is so much a part of



our Jagannath tradition and folklore. I learnt that traditional paintings of Odisha are of broadly three types- Pothi Chitra (paintings on cloth), Bhatti Chitra (paintings on walls) and Patta Chitra (paintings on scrolls).

The Patachitra painting originated in Odisha and is associated with the Jagannath cult. As the acclaimed writer Jagannath Prasad Das mentions in his book *Puri Paintings* (1982), the oldest Patachitra dates back to the 10th century, thousands of years earlier.

Orissa pat-painting is the visual expression of a cultural movement with roots in a great spiritual upsurge. Orissan painting is not a sudden development unrelated to the life of Utkala, but is the culmination of a spiritual, social and literary revival of the Shree Jagannath cult. (64)

Colour combinations used in Patachitra- then and now

Earlier, Patachitras of bright colours were in demand by people to adorn their houses. However, now the trend is changing. According to Raghurajpur artist Narayan Das, who has been painting for almost two decades now (since 1990), says that gone are those days when people demanded vibrant-coloured Patachitras.



Pic 1: A Patachitra of yesteryears with resplendent colours



Now, the taste is mellowing down to more modest shades. If we compare Pic 1 and Pic 2, we can clearly discern the difference in colour tones. Bright shades of red are being replaced by sober peachy shades of red (as shown in Pic 2 below). Shades like sky blue are being replaced by lighter versions with more of white tints as used in the painting below. The bright yellow of Subhadra's face in the first painting is being used less; rather tints of chrome yellow mixed with shades of white (as can be seen in the chariots in Pic 2) is taking the place of dark, vibrant shades of yellow as used earlier. Earlier, a black background was a dominant factor. However, nowadays, lighter backgrounds are also being painted. But the commonality that we can see is the thick, black borders in the both the paintings. That seems to continue even in the contemporary times.



Pic 2: A modern Patachitra with mellowed hues.

Surprisingly, in some modern Patas (popular name of Patachitras), the colour-combination almost becomes monochromatic. Says Das of Raghurajpur: “Bright colour paintings nowadays are rejected by many people because they seem glaring to their eyes. Modern taste is drifting to sober shades, even to the extent of becoming a black-white one. People from metropolitan cities like



Mumbai seem to prefer these.” In such patas, apart from black and white, shades of cream, light brown and grey are used. Sometimes, colours like dark brown might be used in borders of such paintings. It is a matter of surprise because the very idea of vibrant colours for which a Patachitra from Odisha is known for, is gradually taking on new hues, both literally and figuratively.

Themes in Patachitra- then and now

The themes of Patachitra usually are individual paintings of gods and goddesses, stories related to traditional festivals of Odisha like Balijatra, stories of the Mahabharata and Bhagabata Gita along with Krishna and Ganesha stories. Nowadays, people mostly wish to buy Patachitra with life stories of Krishna and Ganesha.



Pic 3: A monochromatic Patachitra catering to modern tastes.

MYTH AND NARRATIVE



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However, certain hybrid animal motifs in Patachitra like Nava Gunjara, Ek Pada Vairaba, Agala Bagala, Gaja Brusava, Ganda Bhairaba, Kamadhenu, Surabi, Ardhha Nariswara, Jodi Hansa, Ganda Veranda, Manava Brikasha, Krishna-Vishnu, Aswapati, Kabandha, Dharma Brushava and Chaturbhangi Mriga continue to remain popular. These composite animal motifs, according to the acclaimed writer J.P Das, especially ideas like Nava gunjara, date back to Sarala Das's Mahabharata around post 15th century. These composite animal figures have been used in Patachitra since its inception and even in contemporary times, paintings with these motifs are in high demand, says national award winner, Patachitra artist Biswananth Swain.

The composite animal figures used in Pic 4 are the most popular motifs that have started with the beginning of Patachitra paintings and continue to be popular even today. But often we see these fanciful mythological figures occur along with the main story/event in the painting. For example: in the above painting, the central box tells the story of Boitabandhana. It was a tradition in ancient Odisha that women performed to see off and pray for the well-being of traders of Kalinga (ancient name for Odisha) when they went to distant lands for trade. Men, women and children dressed up in traditional costumes for this occasion to launch tiny boats made from banana peels, paper or solapitha with lighted lamps inside, and Odia women performed the rite.



Pic 4: Contemporary Patachitra with composite animal forms.



Description of fanciful forms/hybrid animals in Patachitra

Many animals, birds, flowers, festivals and stories from the Puranas are painted as the themes of Patachitra. However, they are not so important. The important ones are elephant, horse, deer, parrot, peacock, lion, tiger, Kadamba tree, Ashoka tree, mango leaves, green coconuts. “At times, the human qualities are expressed in these animals, birds, trees and creepers. Sometimes, the pictures of Yaskya, other gods and goddesses are painted having the limbs of birds and animals. For example, Narasingha, Gajanana, Hayagriva and Naga Kanya are important.” (Das 64) Other such composite creatures include Durga Madhaba, Kandarpa Rath, Kamakunjar, Kamakusuma etc.

Some commonly used hybrid mythical creatures in Patachitra tradition are described below:

1.Navagunjara

Navagunjara, as the name indicates, is a creature of nine animal body parts. It has three feet- one of an elephant, another of a tiger, third one of a deer or horse and the fourth limb is generally of a human being holding a wheel or a lotus. The creature has the waist of a lion and tail of a serpent. Its neck and face resemble a peacock.

Navagunjara appears in the Odia Mahabharata by Sarala Das. Legend indicates that when Arjuna was doing penance, Vishnu appears in the form of navagunjara in front of him. Awestruck by the presence of such a mighty and weird beast, Arjuna raises his bow to shoot it. However, at that moment he realizes it is none but Lord Vishnu. He leaves his bow and arrow, and stoops in reverence.



Pic 5: Navagunjara

The Nila Chakra in Jagannath temple at Puri has eight navagunjaras. This motif is very popular in Patachitra.

2.Ek Pada Vairaba

Ek Pada Vairabha is a form of Shiva depicting him standing on one foot. Ekapada form shows Shiva as the supreme power from whom other deities emerged or got created. Such motifs are usually found in the temples of Orissa and South India.

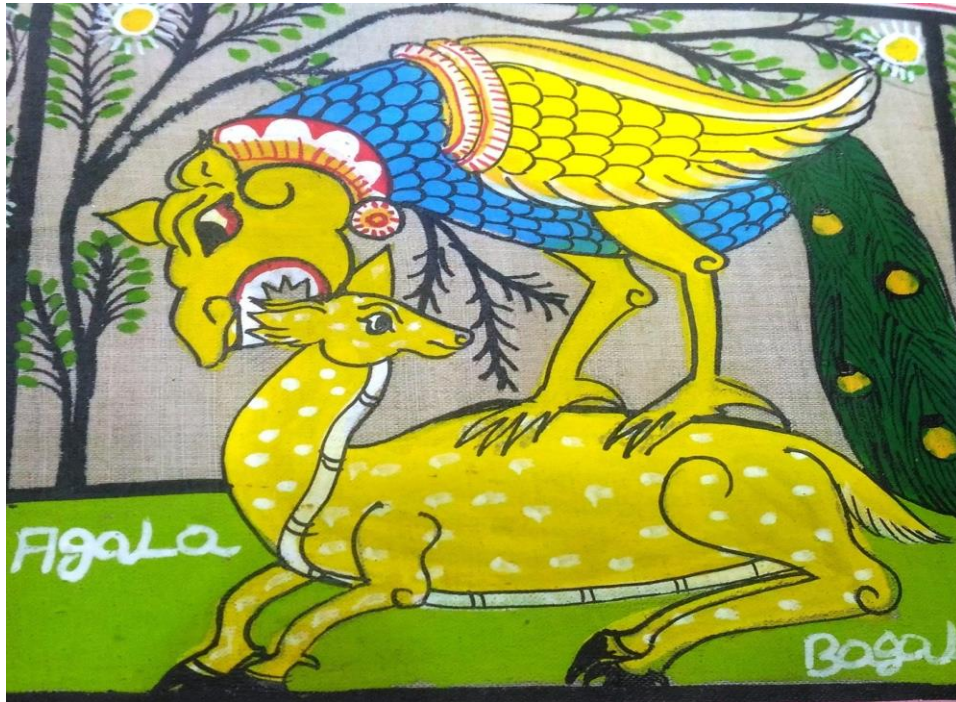


3. Agala Bagala

Agala Bagala is again a composite beast comprising of a tiger head, tail of a peacock, holding a deer in its talons and mouth. According to JP Das: “The fantasy of the Chitrakara [artist] is not limited to the Navagunjara figure only.” On the ceiling of the Jhulana-kunja in the Jagannatha temple, the Chitrakaras paint pictures of birds and animals, many of which stem from the artists’ fantasies. (Das 129)



Pic 6: Ek Pada Vairaba



Pic 7: Agala Bagala

4.Ganda Veranda

The Ganda Veranda is a form of Naramsinha, an incarnation of Vishnu. He assumed the form to destroy the vain king Hiranyakashyapa. Generally, it is shown to swallow two elephants. In Hindu mythology, the hybrid creature is said to possess magical powers. Generally, it is depicted by two heads. However, in the painting shown, it is represented by three demonical heads.



Pic 8: Ganda Veranda

Pic 8 above is a version of Ganda Veranda- which demonstrates the creative liberty of the artist. The original Ganda Veranda has beaks of immense strength. This form seems to have slain Sharaba, a form of Shiva, and itself got killed in the process.

5. Kamadhenu/Surabi

Kamadhenu/Suravi is represented by a creature having the body of a white cow and face of a woman. Kamadhenu/Suravi is said to be the magical cow or the “cow of plenty”. Mythology says she was the cow of sage Vashisth. She provided not only milk, but also produced warriors whenever he needed for his protection. In Hinduism, cows are generally worshipped to revere Kamadhenu/Suravi. She is said to have been produced by the churning of oceans.



Pic 9 : Kamadhenu/Suravi

6.Ardhha Nariswara

Ardhha Nariswara is again another common theme in Patachitra paintings. It is said to symbolize the “all-pervasive nature” of Shiva. It is a motif in which the male and the female form is carried in the same body. Usually, the male is on the left and the female on the right. Mythology says it indicates that the female form (Shakti) is inseparable from the male form (Shiva).



Pic 10: Arddha Nariswara



7. Kabandha



Pic 11 : Kabandha

Kabandha is a creature that appears in both the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. He is actually a ‘Gandharva’ (a celestial being) who has been cursed into an ugly demon by Indra, the king of all gods in heaven. In a fight with Rama when he cuts off the arms of Kabandha and attempts to kill it, he reverts to his original gandharva form. It is then that he suggests Rama to form a friendship with Sugreeva, the monkey-king. Rama does and eventually it is Sugreeva who helps Rama in



rescuing his wife Sita from the clutches of the demon-king Ravana. Thus, in this manner, Kabandha helps Rama.

Possible origins of hybrid animal motifs in Patachitra

Though the origin of such composite animals/human creatures cannot be specifically known, perhaps they are inspired from Greek legendary mythological creatures that date back to 3000 B.C. Such creatures such as Griffin, Chimera, Lamassu, Sphinx etc. that existed much before such creatures came into Indian mythology or Orissa paintings might have set the imagination of the earliest Odissan artists rolling, but it cannot be said for certainty.

Modern day Patachitra artifacts

Today, a Patachitra painting is not limited to a scroll or cloth as the name tells us. We can find Patachitra paintings on mobile phone covers, sarees, dress materials, lamp stands, lamp shades, coconut shells, empty bottles and cushion covers. A lot of these products can be seen at the art and craft village of Raghurajpur, and also at other shops in Odisha. Earlier, till around the early 20th century, Pata paintings were seen on dowry boxes, masks, wooden toys, wood carvings, chariots, wooden covers, leather shields and Parsuma handi (ordinary earthen pot on which layers of cloth are pasted and then painted in a pata style)



Pic 12: Pata paintings on Mobile cover



Pic 13: Patachitra on coconut shells



These days, government handloom shops in Odisha and many boutiques in the state are promoting Patachitra in a big way. Sharda Parameswaran, a designer from Odisha on a visit to the Jagannath temple in Odisha got inspired from Patachitra paintings on the temple walls and decided to showcase it all over the world by using it on garments. She started her work in Odisha and gradually promoted this artwork all over India and abroad, by participating in national and international trade fairs.



Pic 14: Patachitra and Tribal art on empty bottles

Due to her efforts, Patachitra sarees have been showcased in Italy, Singapore, China, London, America, Spain, Syria, Bangladesh and Australia. Describing the craze for Patachitra in the contemporary times, Sharda stated: “Today, the demand for Patachitra sarees is rising like never before, not only in Odisha but all over India and the world. In different parts of India, people are metamorphosing Patachitra patterns into their traditional and even western outfits. For example: In Southern India Patachitra patterns on Kasavus, Kanjeevarams, Uppadda silks are in demand and



in Pune, Patachitra kurti with jeans. Even bridal lehenga with Patachitra motifs are now being explored.”

We find most handlooms in Odisha with Patachitra motifs sporting dancers, basically Odissi dancers. A possible reason might be the association of dance and Patas, as described by Dinanath Pathy:

Pata painting and Odissi dance are treated as twin arts, in consideration of their phases of revival in the 1950s. It is also striking how the re-establishment of both the forms took place along the coastal districts of Odisha. Before the revival, the younger generation from the Chitrakara (painter) families was employed either as dancers in the theatre parties, or as labourers in the betel leaf gardens. (Pathy 7)



Pic15: A Patachitra Bridal Lehenga by designer Sharda Parameswaran



Contemporary concerns of Patachitra

The artist, Biswanath Swain, expressed the need for more advertisement on various forums for Patachitra paintings across India and the world, not just commercially but culturally as well. Though he stated that the demand of Patachitra paintings is on the rise, his point of concern is that many people who buy these paintings do not know their relevance. Most people outside the state do not know the stories depicted in these paintings. Swain said that artists should be given a chance to conduct workshops creating awareness about the significance of stories of folklore painted in the Patachitra, which talks about the rich historical traditions of Odisha. Merely buying the paintings does not propagate the culture, he added. Swain is associated with a voluntary organization called Parampara for preservation and promotion of art, craft and culture in India. He is more worried about the promotion, rather than the preservation because he expressed that he does not feel Patachitra is a dying art now. There was a time, Swain feels, in the past when Patas were not so much in demand or known. But it was revived post 1952 after the visit of a Polish-American couple Philip and Halina Zealey. They had come to Orissa, encouraged the Chitrakarars to become more quality conscious of their paintings. Helle Bundgard quotes Halina in her *Indian Worlds in Contention- local, regional and national discourses* on Orissan Patta painting (chapter: The 'revival' of Pata paintings):

The painters have learnt that we like good quality and a variety of subjects with decorative motifs. They learnt too, that we will pay a fair price, but are not fools, either, and prefer to have the proper price at once and not after 30 to 45 minutes of bargaining. ..When they realised the awakened interest in their work, the new paintings became more and more interesting and, after our continuous insistence on quality, more and more fine in execution ... (Bundgaard 35)

Swain also talked about the composite animal figure stories that have been and continue to be popular in Patachitra stories. These fanciful creations are mythical ones, whose history is steeped in our culture. However, people buying these paintings sadly do not know the stories related to these unique creations. Swain also explained that people should be educated to appreciate



patachitra as a religious artifact in the sense that it is also used for worship. Dinananath Pathy too conforms to this idea in his volume on *Traditional Paintings of Orissa*:

The paintings [pata] play a major role in the rituals of the Jagannatha temple. ..there are instances of proxies being worshipped in absentia of the main idol inside the temple. These substitute images are generally smaller in stature than the main idols of the shrine. These are taken in processions where the main idol is too heavy or inconvenient to be carried. These substitute images, in most cases, are brass statues. It is quite interesting to note that the pata painting serves the purpose of such substitute idols in the Jagannatha temple at Puri and elsewhere in Orissa.” (Pathy 72)

People should realize the sanctity of such creations and know where to hang them or keep them. There should be a scope for artists to go abroad to explain these dimensions of the Patas.

Conclusion

Though there is revival of the Patachitra tradition in Odisha post 1952, there is still a dearth of aesthetic affiliation among the artisans of Patachitra painting, and also among the buyers of the paintings. There is a lack of general awareness behind the understanding of this art, the motifs on it and its religious importance. Surprisingly, when I went to Raghurajpur for my research to write this article, many artists were unable to explain many folklores and traditions which had inspired these paintings. The artists or Chitrakaras have kept alive this tradition more as a means of livelihood, than as a concern for heritage and tradition. However, young people in Odisha are increasingly titling towards the Patachitra motifs in handlooms and artifacts, and these recent trends in fashion which uses ethnic motifs help in preserving the cultural tradition. Along with governmental support and the awareness created in the artists and artisans to preserve their art and tradition, patachitras possibly have a brighter future.

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