Art as Storyteller: Scroll Paintings of Naya Village as Mnemonics of Cultural Memory and the Changing Modes in Digital Proliferation

Soutik Chakraborty

Introduction

The scroll painting or patachitra of Bengal is one of the most cherished cultural heritages of our time. The artefacts convey the unique Bengali identity, which puts on display its own literature embedded with its hereditary flowing folk art. Through the painting, accompanied by a song, the scroll painters narrate the myths and legends of the land along with stories from religious texts and Epics. From time immemorial, it has disseminated those intangible aspects that shaped the 'culture' among the masses through its performance of the myths and legends. The patachitra or the scroll paintings are such interfaces between the culture and the recipient of the culture, which helps in the realisation and further propagation of the cultural memory. The artists rely on memory to paint the stock themes and sing the songs that accompany the theme. For centuries, the storytelling art form has travelled orally and thus provides a good site for the study of such memories at a business that is iterated and produced infinite times. The article interrogates the textuality of memory and the political function of such a memory-based art.

In recent times, the patachitras have been digitised and are proliferating in the electronic medium. In this new media, bereft of the original significance and meaning, the art form has taken a new course. The storytelling aspect of patachitra is getting more obscure in the new electronic shift. The essay also analyses the future of this traditional art form in the new media.

Patachitra – The Minstrel Now Settled

Patachitra is a narrative art form carried out by a sect of artists called *patua* (also known as chitrakar) who take it as a hereditary profession. These painters use cloth or *pata* (from Sanskrit) as a canvas to paint the pictures or *chitra* with all the homemade natural colours. Generally, the themes are chosen from mythology, folklore, Puranas, and Epics. The *patua* narrates his painting by singing before his audience, thereby making his characters come to life. As the paintings are primarily done to narrate a story, a patachitra includes the key moments of such a selected story from the stock of mythologies. A patachitra thus becomes a long scroll where the events are drawn one after another in a vertical order. Once the painting is complete, the artist takes it to different villages and shows it to onlookers. He starts narrating the story through his song. As his song goes, the scroll is unrolled, and the audience gets to see a picture of the story that is being sung. When the song is finished, the scroll reaches its end, and the amazed audience gives alms to the artists. Patachitra art thus includes both painting and a performance. In recent days, the number of such *patuas* who roam the villages and sing songs has decreased. This generation of *patuas* has settled in different parts of Bengal, and one such concentration is in Naya village, which falls in the Pingla subdivision of Paschim Medinipur district of West Bengal. *Patuas* in Naya village nowadays do not visit different villages. Visitors come to their village to buy patachitras, and performances are done if requested. The village has turned out to be a cultural trip where every home of the *patua* puts their paintings and other decoration items on sale. Different fairs and exhibitions are organised both in and out of their village, and people visit to buy those collectibles. Apart from long scrolls, single-page drawings are also made for the customers. Along with religious stories, secular themes concerning social problems and current affairs are also chosen for the patachitra.

The Process

A patachitra is made by using natural elements. The canvas is prepared from a used saree or dhuti by applying the gum of wood apple (*Aegle marmelos*) over it. Once dried, more layers of cloth are applied over it to make the canvas more durable. After polishing the cloth with a chalkstone, the canvas is ready. The colours are accordingly made from leaves, certain fruits, flowers, and soot. This lengthy process behind such work involves a combined effort of all the family members.

At the turn of the century, single-page drawing gained popularity over the long scrolls. Single-page patachitras or *chouko pats* do not accompany a song recitation and present a particular moment of the story or a portrait of the gods and goddesses. The Pingla *patuas* nowadays do not make scrolls very often. The art has transcended to other surfaces like wall mats, coasters, tableware, umbrellas, apparel, and a lot of other products. Buyers love to acquire these artefacts primarily because of the aesthetic value of the art.

Themes

The traditional themes of painting at Pingla include stories from *Ramayan*, *Mahabharat*, and *Mangal Kavya*. It often includes different stories related to the exploits of Krishna and various tales of goddess Durga with her children. Apart from divine beings, it also includes important religious figures like Sri Chaitanya and Ramkrishna. Secular themes incorporate a variety of social issues like AIDS, tsunami, the 11 September attack on the World Trade Center in America, women's rights, child rights, and so on. It is not necessary that a song must accompany each and every painting. When a scroll is made, a song is usually composed for it. In the case of a single picture or *chouko pats*, there is never any song.

Patachitra: In the Past and Today

Patachitra has always been at the centre of various forms of rural entertainment in the past. Various references to patachitra in Bengali literature have been proof of it. In the post-colonial transitory phase, the intelligentsia, in its quest to become more 'modern', left out the indigenous cultural forms. In the early twentieth century, Indian episteme in all branches of knowledge was kept aside as 'traditional', and in that place, Western knowledge promised hopes of walking at par with Europeans. Published in 1958, Mulk Raj Anand, in his book *Kama Kala*, writes that the Indians getting English education "became thoroughly anglicised, adopting the alien pruderies as the hallmark of culture, thus remaining ignorant of the heritage of their own lands" (8). Patachitra, as a traditional art, was pushed into obscurity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which kept itself feebly alive in rural areas at the hands of the previous generation of chitrakars.

It is from the middle half of the twentieth century that an increasing awareness of one's own identity has permeated Indian society. Academics have also been concerned about the injuries done by colonial enterprises on indigenous branches of knowledge and have been trying to reweave the torn fabric of Indian knowledge systems. The renewed interest in patachitra is primarily because of the cultural significance which is tethered to it. Patachitra presents rural folk art that is original to Bengal and has a long and diverse history. The renewed reception of patachitra plays a crucial part in making patachitra a mnemonic device, which will be discussed later in the article.

In certain places in Bengal, *patuas* with paintings of gods and singing of gods were highly revered. These bards used to educate the village folk with the moral stories from the *Puranas*. The older generation of such chitrakars used to show plaques of Yam Raj and present moral fables to his audience. "Buddhist, Brahmanical, and Jaina literature contains abundant references to the art of painted scrolls (*pata chitras)* which were exhibited in ancient

times to educate and entertain the people" (Jain 15). The valiant get rewarded, and the evil go to hell and receive punishment from Yam Raj. In the Birbhum region of Bengal, didactic patachitras, known as *yam pattis*, which showed the suffering of evil characters in hell at the end of the scroll, were popular. In Bengal, a majority of the patachitras were made on the episodes from the three *Mangal Kavyas* that were composed roughly after the fifteenth century. *Manasa Mangal*, *Chandi Mangal*, and *Dharma Mangal* present stories of non-Vedic deities worshipped by all the people residing in Bengal, irrespective of caste and class. These storytellers used to explain through their stories how gods can be propitiated and blessings can be earned. The Behula Lakshindar story from *Manasa Mangal* showed the significance and glory of the snake god, Manasha. Similar stories from the *Chandi Mangal* and *Dharma Mangal* disbursed the glory of these folk gods and goddesses. Apart from this, the exploits of young Krishna as a kid and Krishna *leela* are favourite themes, still now in Naya village.

The most surprising part of this age-old tradition is the fact that there has been no written manual for the guidance of this craft. Not even its songs are ever written anywhere by these artists. The tradition continues orally, entirely based on memory. For generations, the craft, the song, and the story had travelled from the elders to the young ones through repetitions and several iterations. For the chitrakars, the song is never a static one with fixed lyrics. The melody is somewhat similar to every song but is always open for improvisation. For patachitra, it so happens that every performance is a new creation of the repetitive stock theme. Memory is volatile and is subject to reductions and additions over the course of time. This is not untrue in the case of patachitra, which is also an orally transmitted art. There has been a constant addition and subtraction to the themes and songs of the scrolls with the advancement of years, but it is hard to track those shifts as memories fail and old paintings wither.

Indigenous knowledge systems are largely oral in India, which proceeded to posterity through memorisation and recollection from memory. The concepts of 'shruti' and 'smriti' are essential for understanding the guiding framework of an oral discourse. 'Shruti' is the first stage of hearing, which involves a reception and absorption in mind. 'Smriti' is the recollection from that memory and production of text in either speech or writing. 'Shruti' creates a 'dhwani' in the mind of the listener, similar to the concurring ringing sound of a bell that invokes waves of imagination in a rather placid mind. The enactment of the memory, or the performance which 'smriti' leads to, may involve an influence of individual imaginative prowess, and this leads to the birth of a multitude of tales related to the original narrative. In the case of myths and legends, which for a long time have travelled orally, gave birth to various versions that centre on the original. Patachitra, being a medium of storytelling that involves both linguistic and visual, provides a fascinating study of how grand narratives have been colloquialised and modified to suit the demands of storytelling.

Gurusaday Dutta, in his mission to archive the *patua* songs, came up with an observation that in the patachitras of Bengal, Sita and Ram, Krishna and Radha, Shiv and Durga are all Bengalis (Dutta xiv). The gods follow the same rituals and customs as the Bengalis follow all throughout the year. In scrolls of Bengal, Sita and Ram are married like a Bengali bridegroom. Though Krishna dwells in Vrindavan, the Vrindavan in scroll paintings is likely to be situated in Bengal. This modification for local reception is not entirely done by patachitra as such. Literature produced throughout history, the *jatra pala* (village theatre), and local myths and legends have their share in this modification. The *Mangal Kavyas*, mentioned earlier, are original to Bengal and sing praises of local deities. These deities are loosely connected to the Vedic gods. The stories of the *Mangal Kavyas*, as a result, include all the material conditions of living in Bengal. Lopamudra Maitra Bajpai, in her article, "Myths and Folktales in the Patachitra Art of Bengal," published in *Chitrolekha* journal, is of the opinion that discreetly in the guise of its story, the *Mangal Kavyas* record the involvement of Bengal in overseas business. It also talks about the significance of the merchant class. The stories

encapsulate the Bengali life of around the fifteenth century, and being a product of its time, the observation of Bajpai is not untrue. Bajpai notes the prevalence of rivers in *Mangal Kavya* patachitras. In the graphic representation of a text, the storytellers or the chitrakars emphasise the river and how human hopes and actions are influenced by the flow of the river. Bengal has two great rivers, Ganga and Padma, and humans used to depend largely on these rivers for their livelihood. Trade and commerce also followed its course and brought prosperity to the merchant class. In the olden days, people's emotional attachment to these rivers was deep. The patachitra, when picturing the story of its people, emphasised the role of rivers. A large section of the scroll is often donated to the painting of a river. Apart from the river as a trope, patachitras employ various other symbols that convey the nuances of authentic Bengali life. The selection of trees in patachitra that are common to the Bengal landscape, the depiction of a marriage scene in accordance with the Bengali customs, the paintings of common fishes and the fishermen, and other such things function as cultural symbols.

Among various scrolls that are made in Naya village, the scroll depicting the ancestors of the chitrakars is a much loved one. These scrolls narrate the story of one undefeatable demon killed by a genius man using his wits. The story of the death needs to be heard by people living near and far. So, the man painted a picture of the demon and also painted the process how it was killed. He went on to villages to tell his story and the chitrakar as a community was born. This story is told and retold for generations by the *patuas* through their paintings and songs. Iteration of this mythic origin of the profession through performances points to the relevance of patachitra as a device of mass communication. The art form has carried the memory of its mythic creation and also calls attention to the scope of the medium. Similar to this legend, patachitra has preserved various other folk tales and legends of Bengal.

Patachitra had also taken the task of graphically representing gods and goddesses in action during a time without television. The storytellers, in their performances, made their audience remember and re-remember the orally transmitted stories of the Epics. These performances were always didactic in the end (and are so still now), which acknowledged the spectators' due devotion towards gods and the nobility of honest living.

"Folk in the Indian context is 'loka', and the 'loka' and 'shastra' (folk and the elite) contrast is contrary to the Western contrast between the high and the low traditions" (Sengupta 16). What *shastra* offers, 'loka' carries it and disseminates it among the masses. Patachitra has been a folk medium of painting and storytelling in Bengal, simplifying the sayings of the *shastras* for the people in general.

Politics of the Device of Recall

"[I]t is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories..." (Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* 38) Patachitras are memories of Bengal in its past, something that signifies the culture. In fairs and exhibitions, the paintings are displayed as cultural objects. The absorption of this culture leads to a sense of bonding among the participants as belonging to the particular ethnic group. Together, they participate and keep evolving the collective memory. Maurice Halbwachs defines collective memory as the active past that forms our identities (Bosch 3). Patachitra is such a process through which identity is realised through acts of remembering within the group. Siegfried J Schmidt, in his chapter "Memory and Remembrance: A Constructivist Approach" in the book *Cultural Memory Studies*, edited by Astrid Erll and others, states that remembering needs occasions (193). Patachitra is such an occasion. Naya village is such an occasion in its entirety, always having the cultural products on display for consumption.

There has been a long tussle between history and memory in the field of memory studies, and thinkers have tried to show diverging and converging points between the two

disciplines. In the present study, the realm of patachitra is critical because of its nature as a passive chronicler of society. Its passivity lies in its indirect way of moralising people through storytelling, and in the process, the recording of history that it does. The art form has its own history of evolution, but the history of people that it records demands a critical observation.

"It (collective memory) is a current of continuous thought whose continuity is not at all artificial, for it retains from the past only what still lives or is capable of living in the consciousness of the groups keeping the memory alive" (Halbwachs, "From The Collective Memory" 143). History, on the other hand, is interested in events and changes of actions or ideas. History is a collection of facts but memory is a state of continuously living with what has happened to both the individual and the group. Halbwachs is of the opinion that similarities or resemblances in the group foster a sense of inclusion because "when it considers its own past, the group feels strongly that it has remained the same and becomes conscious of its identity through time." (Halbwachs, "From The Collective Memory" 146) It is exactly this function, a sense of bonding, that patachitra serves within its interest group. The art and the tone of singing, comprising folk elements, remind people of their inclusivity within the group as participants of a shared heritage.

Time and history are accelerating; we arrive in the modern period, the traditions destroy, the old men die, and in such cases, the collective memory becomes 'broken'. The correct memory of the race can exist in lieux de mémoire or sites of memory as popularised by Pierre Nora over his various research projects originally published in French and later translated into English. The loss of a pristine rural Bengal, with its folk elements and myths unadulterated by modernity, its folk paintings and painting presenters in their somewhat original forms, and the culture and living style of ancestors, is a matter of reminiscence. When the cultural consciousness of a group fails to derive its milestones from the official history of the state, upon which it can tether its advancements as a race, the time comes for accessing memorial objects. "These lieux de mémoire are fundamentally remains, the ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness …" (Nora 12). In his article "Memory and History," Pierre Nora assigns both tangible and non-tangible objects as lieux de mémoire or sites of memory which have historical significance and act as mnemonic objects. Such a mnemonic object calls for its study when the national and personal identity is at a critical stage or in a stage of transition. More than an object of study, his concept calls for a re-realisation of the cultural object as "lieux de mémoire originate with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebration" to conceptualise our cultural standing (Nora 12). Patachitra has come to this point where it works as a site of memory, reminding people of the lived traditions of Bengal. The renewed interest in the historical and ethnographical heritage in a post-colonial environment has spurred the study of such sites where memories are stored.

Jan Assman, in his book *Cultural Memory and the Early Civilization*, gives a broad definition of the concept of 'cultural memory'. He observes cultural memory as "the exterior dimensions of the human memory," the contents of which are controlled by "the external conditions imposed by society and cultural contexts" (6-7). Cultural memory is the sphere of memory where the mimetic (what we learn from observing others), the memory of things or commodities that we use everyday that define who we are, and the communicative memory (interaction with others in the group) merge. Here, the mimetic takes the form of rituals. Rituals are a part of communicative memory that codifies things with a meaning that goes beyond their practical purpose as symbols or icons. Such 'things' may include monuments, idols, or tombs. Communicative memory can contain the history of the recent past with personal and group memories of a century, but cultural memory encompasses the symbolic heritage contained in things such as museums, memorials, celebrations, inscriptions, and so on. Cultural memory helps to create a picture of the past for us and develop an identity for ourselves on that basis. Patachitra, as cultural 'things', gathers their meaning from within the

group because of the mimetic and communicative act that the participants of the group are actively engaged in. The mimetic and communicative act of the group points to the gods and goddesses being commonly worshipped, which the patachitra paints and are learned naturally by residing within the cultural framework, or the mythical stories heard over time, and also the fact that patachitra presents a glimpse of the past as well as recent times with narration as an act of communication. However, more than the codification of a certain 'thing' as a memorial, Assman and Nora are more focused on the symbolic aspect of such mnemonic objects. Places of meanings are like signs having a multiplicity of interpretations. The place disappears, but the meanings expand. The assessed past appears to have many versions with many versions of interpretations of the same memorial object.

Patachitra, as a symbolic object, offers a site that allows various interpretations of the history it contains. In her assessment of patachitras, Ratnabali Chatterjee, in her article, "Representation of Gender in the Folk Paintings of Bengal," has found how the identity of a Bengali married woman in the historic Bengal has been fostered through patachitra as a chaste woman having a sense of duty towards her family and may achieve impossible feats such as bringing her dead husband back to life through her patience and determination. She has stressed the significance of the Behula Lakshindar story of Manasamangal Kavya. Pika Ghosh, in her article "Unrolling a Narrative Scroll," studies a historic scroll and records the narration of a Pingla *patua* and observes that in the depiction of Rama in scrolls, the painters aligned their own social conditions with the feats of Rama. The art produced in the first half of the twentieth century, covered under her study, contains an embedded meaning that Rama protects not only sages but also artists against European influences. It is their response to new forms of entertainment like cinema, theatre, or even lithographs, which posed a threat to their profession in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal. Such interpretations are diverse, and a multitude of symbolic meanings are waiting to be deciphered in the future, which can shed new light on unseen facts of history.

"Cultural memory is constituted by a host of different media, operating within various symbolic systems: religious texts, historical painting, historiography, TV documentaries, monuments and commemorative rituals, for example." (Erll, "*Literature, Film and the Mediality of Cultural Memory*" 389) The memory of 'things' as Assman puts it, or the 'material or medial memory' (Erll, "*Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction*" 4), of which patachitra is one such media, plays a part in the construction of cultural memory. There are certain characteristics that turn patachitra into a media of cultural memory.

In the chapter "Literature, Film and the Mediality of Cultural Memory" of her edited book *Cultural Memory Studies*, Astrid Erll has discussed how literature and film become a media of cultural memory (389-398). She notes the presence of a threefold force operating from within, between, and around a media that has the potential to shape cultural memory. Such works represent the past as lived through experience, biography, life writing, or novels in stream-of-consciousness technique. Secondly, such works may mythicise the past and point to the remembrance of the myths and stories of the past. Thirdly, the work may present an alternate version of the past, which may establish that the memories of a certain group are true by denying the other. Thus, literature gives the scope to ponder over the past and allows critical reflection from various angles. Apart from this function, Erll points to the "premediation" and 'remediation" functions of literature and movies. "Remediation" denotes the fact that some events are represented again and again through various media formats. "Premediation" stands for the phenomenon that some historical events represented in media provide the basis for future events. Such characteristics of media make it strong enough to contain memories, but "what is needed is a certain kind of *context* in which novels and films are prepared and received as memory-shaping media" (Erll, "*Literature, Film and the Mediality*" 395). By *context*, Erll denotes the cultural reception of a particular history or an event of history in the present

time through media. She marks the increased interest in a particular memorial event across various forms of media at a given time.

It is indeed a fact that patachitra paints the myths of the past and makes them feasible to remember within a group. It does not radically make any alternate version of the past but, in some cases, presents such memories that are exclusively remembered through patachitra, such as the story of the origin of the artist community or some playful stories of gods and goddesses (mainly Shiv and Parvati; Hindu gods) which are exclusively folk inventions. Gurusaday Dutt, in his book *Patua Sangeet*, lists such patachitra songs, one of which tells about Shiv, who has gone fishing, leaving his wife Parvati worried at home (141). Such homely tales are not found in scriptures and there is hardly any other medium to preserve these almost forgotten folk stories. Such conditions, in total, as Erll finds, may seem fitting for literature and movies that represent the past, but the case of painting is different and such a methodology falls short. Patachitra never records any personal memory, and it is an altogether different media when compared to film and literature.

Jens Ruchatz, in the chapter "The Photograph as Externalization and Trace" of the same book, *Cultural Memory Studies*, seeks to find the ways in which a photograph becomes a container of memories (367-377). He lists two approaches to looking at a photograph: *externalization* and *trace*. Externalisation is the phenomenon when information or, rather, memory is stored outside of the human body in certain media. He argues that photography captures memory not simply as an *externalization* but also keeps a *trace* of what has actually happened in the past. Photographic traces perform an indexical function in recalling the past. Through captions and titles, photographs are embedded in the context. Through an interplay of signs, the photograph performs as a mnemonic device. Broadly, Ruchatz presents three conditions responsible for photography becoming a memory-containing medium. Firstly, it is subconsciously regarded as an externalisation of memory. Secondly, in some cases, captions and titles situate the photo to a particular context, and thirdly, when a photo is used over time in many different contexts. In the third case, the photo loses its original meaning and becomes an emblem of a race, nation, or takes on a more generalised form. The photograph as a medium shares similarities with the outer mode of patachitra as a painting, while literature and film may partly correspond to the narrative features of patachitra. The modes of remembering, as shown by Astrid Erll and Jean Ruchatz, with some exclusion, can serve to analyse how patachitra becomes a media of cultural memory.

Erll has talked about the concept of "remediation" and "premediation" while explaining the characteristics of film and literature. "Remediation" is the repeated representation of the same object across different media. The themes of gods and goddesses that patachitra deals with are not exclusive to patachitra but are also found in other different mediums such as children's cartoons, story books, *jatra* or the village theatre, bedtime stories told by grandparents, and so on. Patachitra also chronicles contemporary events in some cases, as discussed earlier, such as the 9/11 attack in America or the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and earthquake, or can include awareness campaigns relating to AIDS and other social problems. Such themes, from mythological to social, are also shown in other media, of which patachitra constitutes one. Ruchatz has argued that captions under a photograph in a newspaper, billboard, or at other places make the photograph possess an indexical relationship with the event. The photograph itself stands for the past event. In the case of patachitra, the narration of the performer, in some cases, situates the scroll as a substitute for the otherwise imagined event. This is especially true for patachitra on mythological themes where the scroll with narration starts having an indexical relationship with the presence of gods and goddesses. Not in Bengal, but in Gujarat, the scroll paintings of gods and goddesses are considered to be temples in themselves, and the act of displaying and performing is no less than pilgrimage. In Bengal, these painted objects are revered as holy but not with that intensity as in Gujarat.

In order to be accepted as a media containing memory, patachitra needs a context in which its meaning can flourish. Both Erll and Ruchatz have accepted the importance of a social context in which the particular media is received. If patachitra comes at a time when people show less interest in the art form, or if no one looks at the patachitra and no one hears the song, then the art form will fail to perform its function as a reservoir of cultural memory. The recent interest in traditional and folk art forms, as discussed before, has fostered its reception in society. Patachitra has been at the centre of academic interest since the late thirties of the twentieth century when Gurusaday Dutt published his writings on patachitra. Asutosh Museum of Calcutta University made a collection of patachitras as a response to the newly found artistic enthusiasm. Niharranjan Ray writes a Foreword for the book *The Pats and Patuas of Bengal*, published in 1973, edited by Sankar Sen Gupta, and in his writing, he mentions that "a sort of nostalgia of a hitherto unknown past, not unmixed with an inarticulated attachment towards revivalism of rural cultural forms, had already taken hold of the urban Bengali intelligentia …" in the middle half of the twentieth century. It is in this context of a revival of the past that had received patachitra as a media of cultural memory symbolising a rural folk heritage and a common mythical past.

Memory function

In turning the Vedic gods into Bengalis, in its presentation and dissemination of local legends, in its education of moral tales concerning virtue and vice, in its presentation of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, the storytelling tradition entwined itself with what is called the Bengali culture. It would not be wrong to say that patachitra has shaped the culture along with other similar agents. The process through which patachitra has functioned is entirely based on the enactment of memory. In its performances, it has been enacting social and cultural memory down the ages. The mythic, Vedic, local, or personal (relating to the artist community) – all memories surface and continue to live within the patachitra as a medium. Patachitras are such mediums of enactment that have kept the mythological memory fresh down the ages.

While performing this task, the art has become a memory in itself, which reminds us, in the present day, of the unadulterated village folk art tradition that is an original cultural trait of Bengal. In post-colonial society, patachitra as an art form functions as a mnemonic device for realising the 'authentic' art culture of rural Bengal. The European influence of the colonial regime had several fractures in the culture of the place. People have been alienated from the indigenous culture. In their attempt to go back to their roots, patachitra functions as a media of cultural memory.

Digital Shift

Patachitra is now digitised and shared virtually. As in most cases of digitising memories, for patachitras, too, the materiality of that memory piece becomes crucial. The scanned image of the long scroll only gives the impression of cloth-based canvas and natural colours, which will wither away with time. Digital copies are always lacking touch and feel, but in the case of patachitra, the digital reductions are more intense. In electronic copies, scrolls are presented as art objects, and the presence of a song behind it is lost. The storytelling is often recorded and viewed, but such videos do not stand as a substitute for the real-life presence of the artist. It is well agreed that electronic media has resulted in easy transferability as well as the accessibility of patachitra. The shift to this new medium has further enhanced the function of patachitra as a mnemonic object.

This mediality – understanding the culture through phone and computer screens that communicate, inform, and connect; creates the liminal space in the 'regimes of memory'. As Radstone and Hodgkin define it, the conditions of production and consumption of memory are referred to as 'regimes of memory' (Nayar 178). Digital images of patachitra perform their

function as a memoir of cultural recall in the same way the patachitra in its original form can evoke. The intervention of digital media, in many cases, runs a risk of obscuring the cultural memory that a media contains. In the case of patachitra, memory disseminates in an altogether different way. In this new media, the copies of patachitra proliferate easily, or it can be said that the production of culture is done in large quantities in less time. The mediality eases the process of witnessing and the power to access the memory. In digital media, Patachitra is now an act of creation and manipulation of that cultural memory, which has now been refaced in the new electronic media. Patachitra is a well-loved topic not only in academic research and exhibitions but in social media websites as well. In the present time, the demand for the consumption of patachitra as a cultural artefact has increased, and digital media has propelled the cause.

In the book *Cultural Memory Studies*, Martin Zierold, in the chapter titled "Memory and Media Cultures," argues that memories in a complex digital medium need to be analysed empirically as existing theoretical knowledge might fall short of assessing the production and consumption of memory (399-408). Such empirical data relating to the usage of patachitra over digital medium is yet to take a sizable volume. Such an analysis can be carried out in the future but witnessing the problems of the present day, Zierold also stresses the need "to analyse who is in a position to influence the politics of memory, that is who selects historic subjects to be represented in the media and which strategies of staging these stories are used" (405).

In this electronic medium, the power of the artists over their paintings has gone. The scroll is now always unfurled. The selection and de-selection of patachitras to be viewed lie on the collective power of the recipients of the culture in their likes and dislikes. Some *patuas* or chitrakars are favoured more on the internet than others. Some *patuas* have received national awards and international recognition, and their paintings are more easily discoverable on the internet. Some *patuas* who fail to digitise their art remain in obscurity. The *patua* is no longer visiting the zamindar or the well-to-do; instead, the people who are interested in such art are viewing performance videos. In the olden days, the live performance would have been paid, but now, over digital media, the orientations have changed.

Due to reduced exposure to the narrations or the storytelling forms of patachitra, some of the original stories of patachitra are on the verge of being forgotten. There are some motifs in patachitras that will only derive their meaning upon narration, such as the *yama pattis*, which shows the punishments of hell at the end of a scroll. Without the narration, it is difficult to understand why one gets punished over there and how the punishments are carried out. The paintings are done considering the key incidents, but the narration is carried out in detail, covering all major and minor incidents. Without the narration, the scroll is a dead art piece.

Conclusion

In the framework of social memory, artefacts signifying a cultural past are easily accessible on digital media. Patachitra is an agent of memory in that media. In this medium, patachitra is in a state of transition – from hard copies to soft copies, the shift of authority from the artist to a network of likes and dislikes, in the generation of a sense of belonging through the dispersed community connected only through digital means – denotes a liminal space. Patachitra serves as a medium to preserve memories. It has preserved the orality of the past as well as documented present-day social problems and traumatic events. The chronicler depends on memory for its themes and songs, which is more a traditionally shared memory among the chitrakar community. The age-old art, in its major shift from hard copies to soft copies, has pushed its performance aspect into an endangered category. The future rests on how patachitra will be kept on remembering and the significance it will create for the participants that make the culture. The active socio-cultural forces that are keeping the artefact in

remembrance might change forms in digital format to an altogether new cultural experience in the years to come.

Works Cited

Anand, Mulk Raj. *Kama Kala: Some Notes on the Philosophical Basis of Hindu Erotic Sculpture*. Geneva: Nagel Publishers, 1958. Print.

Assmann, Jan. *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization : Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Print.

Bajpai, Lopamudra Maitra. "Myths and Folktales in the Patachitra Art of Bengal: Tradition and Modernity." *Chitrolekha International Magazine on Art and Design* V.I (2015): 124–131. Print.

Bosch, Tanja E. "Memory Studies: A Brief Concept Paper." *White Rose Research Online*, 2016. Web. 24 October 2022.

Chatterjee, Ratnabali. "Representation of Gender in Folk Paintings of Bengal." *Social Scientist* 28.3/4 (2000): 7–21. *JSTOR*. Web. 24 September 2023.

Dutta, Gurusaday. *Patua Sangeet*. Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press, 1939. Print.

Erll, Astrid. "Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction." *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*. Ed. Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning, and Sara B Young. Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2008. 1–18. Print.

---. "Literature, Film and the Mediality of Cultural Memory." *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*. Ed. Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning, and Sara B Young. Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2008. 389–398. Print.

Erll, Astrid, Ansgar Nünning, and Sara B Young, eds. *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*. Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2008. Print.

Ghosh, Pika. "Unrolling a Narrative Scroll: Artistic Practice and Identity in Late-Nineteenth Century Bengal." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 62.3 (2003): 835–871. *JSTOR*. Web. 7 August 2021.

Halbwachs, Maurice. "From the Collective Memory." *The Collective Memory Reader*. Ed. Jeffrey K Olick. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 139–149. Print.

---. *On Collective Memory*. Trans. Lewis A Coser. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. Print.

Jain, Jyotindra. "Indian Picture Showmen: Tradition and Transformation." *Akhyan: A Celebration of Masks, Puppets & Picture Showmen Traditions of India*. New Delhi: IGNCA, 2010. 8. Print.

Korom, Frank J. "Gurupada Chitrakar: An Appreciation of a Life Short-Lived." *Nidan: International Journal for Indian Studies* 6.2 (2021): 69–88. *Academia*. Web. 23 March 2022.

Nayar, Pramod K. *An Introduction to Cultural Studies*. New Delhi: Viva Books, 2008. Print.

Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire." *Representations* 26 (1989): 7–24. Print.

Ray, Niharranjan. Foreword. *The Patas and the Patuas of Bengal*. Ed. Sankar Sen Gupta. Calcutta: Indian Publications, 1973. Print.

Ruchatz, Jens. "The Photograph as Externalization and Trace." *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*. Ed. Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning, and Sara B Young. Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2008. 367–378. Print.

Schmidt, Siegfried J. "Memory and Remembrance: A Constructivist Approach." *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*. Ed. Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning, and Sara B Young. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008. 193. Print.

Sengupta, Jayita. "Memory, Orality, Literacy and Translation." *Lokratna* X.2017 (2017): 16–36. Print.

Zanatta, Maura, and Anjali Gera Roy. "Facing the Pandemic: A Perspective on Patachitra Artists of West Bengal." *Arts* 10.3 (2021): n. pag. *MDPI*. Web. 2 September 2021.

Zierold, Martin. "Memory and Media Cultures." *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*. Ed. Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning, and Sara B Young. Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2008. 399–408. Print.

Jamela Chitrakar, a resident of Naya village, Pingla, is showing a patachitra at an exhibition in 2022. The photograph is taken by the author.

Soutik Chakraborty
Research Scholar
Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University,
Maharaja Complex, Dunlop More
Balurghat
West Bengal, India
Pin: 733101
Email: soutik.chaks@gmail.com