



# Redefining Gender Identities: Women As Change-Makers In Revitalizing Patachitra Of West Bengal.

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the evolving role of women artists in vulnerable art forms across India, with a special focus on the Patachitra tradition of West Bengal. Long rooted in patriarchal structures, Patachitra has undergone a transformative shift as women from marginalized communities step forward as artists, storytellers, and cultural ambassadors. These women are reshaping Patachitra into a tool for education, social advocacy, and economic empowerment, ensuring its preservation and evolution in a rapidly changing cultural landscape.

The integration of Patachitra into Art Integrated Learning (AIL) frameworks has been a significant catalyst for this transformation. Supported by initiatives like Bangla Natok dot com's "Art for Life," women artists are leveraging this art form to address contemporary themes such as gender equality, health awareness, and sustainable development. The digitization of Patachitra into graphic novels, brochures, and multimedia platforms has expanded its reach and relevance, transitioning it from mythological storytelling to a medium for addressing critical social issues.

These initiatives have elevated women artists as "change-makers," enabling them to become community leaders and advocates for social transformation. Their work has been showcased on global platforms, connecting traditional art with contemporary educational and social initiatives. These efforts have shifted the focus of the art from mythology to contemporary societal issues, amplifying its impact as a medium of education and advocacy.

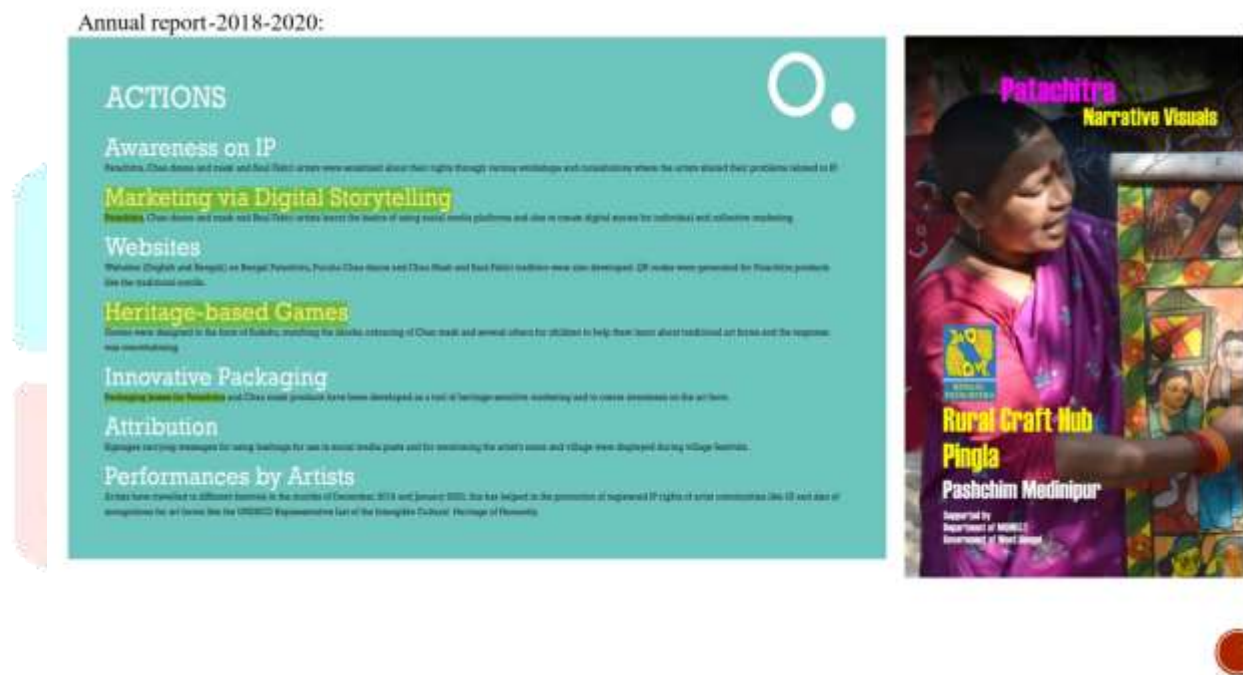
By blending ethnographic research with project outcomes, the study underscores the dual impact of these developments: the revitalization of endangered art forms and the empowerment of women as cultural and social pioneers. It emphasizes the critical role women play in preserving and modernizing traditional art, fostering a sustainable future where cultural heritage and gender equality coexist, and redefining the trajectory of vulnerable art forms in India.

**Keywords:** vulnerable art, social advocacy, gender, Patachitra

## Introduction

Patachitra, a traditional scroll painting and storytelling art form from West Bengal, India, has undergone significant transformations over time. Patachitra historically, was an artform mostly participated by men, they travelled between villages, narrating mythological tales through their painted scrolls. Women, primarily confined to domestic roles, had minimal involvement in the art-making process. However, socio-economic and cultural shifts in the 1990s led to a reconfiguration of gender roles, allowing women to actively participate in the creation and narration of Patachitra.

The increasing engagement of women in Patachitra overtime has enriched the art form with new narratives and perspectives, shifting its focus from solely mythological themes to contemporary social issues such as gender equality, health awareness, and environmental sustainability. Initiatives like Bangla Natok dot com's, "Art for Life" have further enabled women artists to integrate Patachitra into educational and advocacy frameworks. See Image I & II; The digitization and modernization of this art form into graphic novels, brochures, heritage-based games, digital storytelling and other media have expanded its relevance, positioning women artists as cultural ambassadors and agents of change.



- Image I: The 2018-2020 annual report of Bangla Natok dot com highlights the digitization of storytelling through heritage-based games, graphic novels, brochures, and other media. It showcases these innovations, positioning women artists as cultural ambassadors and agents of change, promoting cultural preservation and social transformation.



- The field visit to Bahadur chitrakars private collection at Naya has also suggested references of copies on Chitrakars working together with Graphic novels and exploring newer media and its impacts on their current art works. 'My mother' written by Jaya Jaitley and illustrated by Bahadur Chitrakar published by Dastkari Haat Samiti, 'another Graphic novel by Suman Chitrakar (Bahadur's daughter) 'Savitri- On women education published by Azim Premji University Publication. Craft Map of West Bengal by Bahadur Chitrakar Published by Dastkari Haat Samiti Handmade Paper (B) (99 cm x 54 cm).
- Also, recent field visit to Majramura in Purulia and conversation with Khemananda Chitrakar has revealed that he along with 4 other artists together have worked in a book art 'Titled Viswa bhora pran featuring the adverse impacts of industrialization' which got featured in the recent Exhibition 'DAKSHA-crafting voices', organised by Bangla natok dot com with UNESCO and RCCH as partnering units.

- Image II reflects the author's personal observations made during field visits to Naya and Majramura.  
Picture Courtesy: Author

### The Role of Patachitra in Art Integrated Learning (AIL)

Art Integrated Learning (AIL) is an innovative framework that integrates art forms, including Patachitra, into educational and advocacy processes. As observed through the annual reports of Bangla Natok dot com, projects like *Contact Base* have invested in initiatives such as Communication for Development (C4D), promoting development through art, including folk traditions like Patachitra see Image III; (Bangla Natok dot com, Annual Report, 2022). The Chitrakars (artists) of Naya have been introduced to various concepts of Art Integrated Teaching and Learning processes.

Today, these Chitrakars use Patachitra not only as a means of artistic expression but as a tool for education and social mobilization through the *Art for Life* initiative. These organizations have redefined women as change-makers, recognizing their potential to inspire social transformation.

The project objectives are twofold:

1. Empowering women from marginalized communities by bringing instrumental changes to their communities through art.
2. Promoting "The Art of Transforming the Future of Work for Gender Equality" (Bangla Natok dot com, Annual Report, 2024).



## Communication for Development

Communication for Development (C4D) happens to be one of the main pillars of our work. In this regard, we use Theatre in Development based methodology for capacity and awareness building of local community members, thereby enabling them to be change makers in their own communities. We undertake 360 degree communication campaigns using interactive street theatre, social and digital media.



Street &  
Interactive  
theatre



Dance



Folk traditions



Digital Media



Art

- Image III, from Bangla Natok dot com's 2022 annual report, highlights interactive modes like street theatre, dance, folk traditions, digital media, and art under the C4D initiative, claiming to bring these initiatives into practice, promoting Art for Life and art-integrated learning.

Through these initiatives, women are given the opportunity to become change-makers within their communities. The focus on upgradation and digitization of Patachitra into graphic novels, brochures, and books signals a shift in the visual narrative. As a result, mythological themes are being replaced by socially relevant contemporary issues, and the active participation of women artists from marginalized communities is emphasized. These women now serve as torchbearers for the movement of women empowerment, leading to observable changes in the themes of Patachitra, particularly in villages like Naya and other areas within the Medinipur division, which have been directly impacted by this organization's efforts.

### Changing landscape of present day patachitra:

Historically, Patachitra art was focused on mythological themes, with stories drawn from Hindu epics and local folklore (Wadley, 2005). However, through the intervention of organizations like Bangla Natok dot com and initiatives like *Art for Life*, the themes of Patachitra have undergone a significant transformation. The post-intervention phase of patachitra has led to a noticeable shift in its practice, particularly in regions like Naya (Medinipur), Pingla, and surrounding areas of West Bengal. Traditionally, a wide range of pats depicting local deities such as Adikanto, Harishchandra, Jampala, Krishna Pala, Madan Mohan, Manasa Mangal, Mahi Ravan, Adivasi Itihas Pat, and Bhuter Biyer Pat were common. However, these have now been largely confined to more limited themes, such as specific mythological or traditional pats like 'Macher Biyer Pat' in Naya and 'Adivasi Itihas Pat' in Bharatpur (Bankura) and Majramura (Purulia). Additionally, contemporary social issues, including themes on women's empowerment like 'Nirbhaya', 'Dowry Killing', and 'Encouraging Working Women', have emerged as new subjects in patachitra. This shift reflects a move towards addressing current social issues while maintaining the traditional form. Following skill development workshops in Bharatpur (Bankura), chitrakars demonstrated an elevated understanding of composition, not only in terms of space arrangement but also through playful exploration of individual elements in their artwork. The use of geometrical motifs, including triangles, squares, lines, and semi-circles in borders, has become a notable trend. While the core concept of the pats remains intact, there has been a shift in the themes, such as the inclusion of animals and birds in the once popular 'Macher Biyer Pat'. Larger scrolls have been condensed into smaller formats like '*chauka*' pats and '*Arelatai*' pats (vertical or horizontal panels); see Image IV (G, H), and multiple grid-like panels are now commonly used within a single frame; see Image IV (I). The intervention through skill development programs made by the organizations has fostered an increased uniformity in composition, with decorative borders and more compact, color-intensive works; see Image IV (C, D). A significant peripheral shift is evident in the materials used, with natural colors once derived from organic sources now replaced by synthetic ones, marking a move towards more accessible and affordable creations; see Image IV (E, F). Pats are now also being painted on various objects, understanding the demand and supply chain and making the artform more widely accessible to a larger audience. This evolution reflects a broader transformation in patachitra, to meet the needs of contemporary audiences while preserving the essence of the art form. This shift is particularly noticeable in the works of artists like Swarna Chitrakar, a renowned Patachitra artist from Naya village, see Image IV (A, B) who has integrated themes like COVID-19 awareness and women empowerment into her paintings.

**Note:** As identified by Frank J. Korom (2011) in his study *Civil Ritual, NGO's and Rural Mobilization in Medinipur District*, social awareness was first introduced to Rani Chitrakar on AIDS, and Gurupada

## Works on Female and Child trafficking by Swarna Chitrakar:

Scroll pat (narrative) Vs Chauka pat (abbreviated)



Chitrakar created *chauka* IV (A, B) sing deforestation and water pollution. This early introduction to social issues paved the way for incorporating contemporary themes into the art form. IV (E, F)



IV (C) Vesoj color; source: Naya Vs IV (D) Present Day use of Market color; source: Dak Bungalow ground, Bolpur



## IV (G, H)



## PERIPHERAL SHIFT IN PATS:

(Scenes from Majramura, Kashipur, West Bengal)

The following images shows peripheral shift in pats reflecting a common transformation occurring after the intervention being made by Bangla natok dot com. The pats are intentionally objectified to the affordability and access of common people. Courtesy: Khemananda Chitrakar, location: Majramura, W.B, 19.2.23



Technical Formulations in pats of rural villages.

The image shows the technical evaluation of pat painted by artist Khemananda Chitrakar from stitching to pasting of different panels in order to develop scrolls, which has also comparatively abbreviated in size. Courtesy: Khemananda Chitrakar, location: Majramura, W.B, 19.2.23



## IV (I)

(Scenes from Hathirampur, Bankura, W.B)



Part of bigger scrolls are now abbreviated into smaller formats chauka pats, Arelatai pats (vertical or horizontal panels)

- Use of Multiple grid like panels in a single frame.

### Need for Women Patuas as Educators: Social Dynamics of Birbhum vs. Naya

Interestingly, Birbhum patuas follow the indigenous style of concluding with Jam pat, but a lack of attention is evident in their execution. Gorur Pat and Jam Pat are indeed ancient scrolls from the region, and while similar narratives can be extracted, the illustrations often appear to be mere copies without a deep understanding of the scenes. As previously V (A, B, C) Gorur Pat portrays the severe consequences for rural women who mistreat animals (cows), including punishments in the afterlife. However, the Birbhum patuas, without much observation, have simply replicated these scenes from traditional pats. Despite these important cultural messages, the illustrations in these scrolls often lack depth and understanding, as Birbhum patuas appear to replicate scenes from traditional pats without much observation or engagement. The narrative consistently portrays women as the sole perpetrators of misdeeds, showing them as responsible for all sins and curses, which reflects a partial view of gender roles; see Image V (A, B, C). The lack of awareness and superficial portrayal of women as victims in these communities is concerning, especially when compared to more progressive works in places like Naya, where active women patuas, such as those in villages like Naya, demonstrate a deeper understanding of equality in both thought and practice. In contrast to Birbhum's static and gender-biased representations, the women in Naya are more actively involved in transforming their craft, not only as artists but as educators of social awareness; see works by Swarna Chitrakar Image VI (A, B, C). This highlights a crucial need for women patuas in regions like Birbhum to emerge as torchbearers and educators, fostering a more sensitive and nuanced understanding of gender dynamics within their culture. Without external intervention, the question remains: can these communities self-educate and evolve their approach, or is further guidance necessary to bridge the gap in social and cultural understanding?



Part from different scrolls, Nimai Sannashi, Taraka Vadh, Manasha Mangal, Shiv Durgar Sonkho Vadh Gorur and Jamm Pat Itagoria, Birbhum:



• Interestingly, Birbhum patuas follow the indigenous style of concluding with Jam pat, but a lack of attention is evident in their execution. They depict only women or female figures as examples, showing them as responsible for all misdeeds and suffering from all sins and curses.

VI (A, B, C)

## Works on Stop Dowry by Swarna Chitrakar:

Scroll pat (narrative) Vs Chauka pat (abbreviated)



## Women as Agents of Change: Empowerment through Art

The involvement of women artists in the Patachitra tradition represents a profound shift in gender dynamics within this art form. Women are now becoming leaders and change-makers in their communities. Through initiatives such as the Guru Shishya Hastshilp Prashikshan Program (GSHP), organized by Child Support and WE and sponsored by DC Handicrafts, women are receiving training in traditional and contemporary themes, thereby enhancing their artistic skills and contributing to the preservation and transformation of the art form (Shukla, 2012).

During a visit to Naya, I documented the contemporary works of Swarna Chitrakar, who guided me through the resource center where a group of women artists from the Patua community were receiving training under the GSHP program. See Image VII; This initiative has allowed these women to gain new skills and engage with modern issues, such as gender equality, through their artwork. Swarna Chitrakar shared how she encourages her students to incorporate themes that align with current social awareness campaigns, such as gender empowerment and social justice.

- Image VII, Picture Courtesy: Author

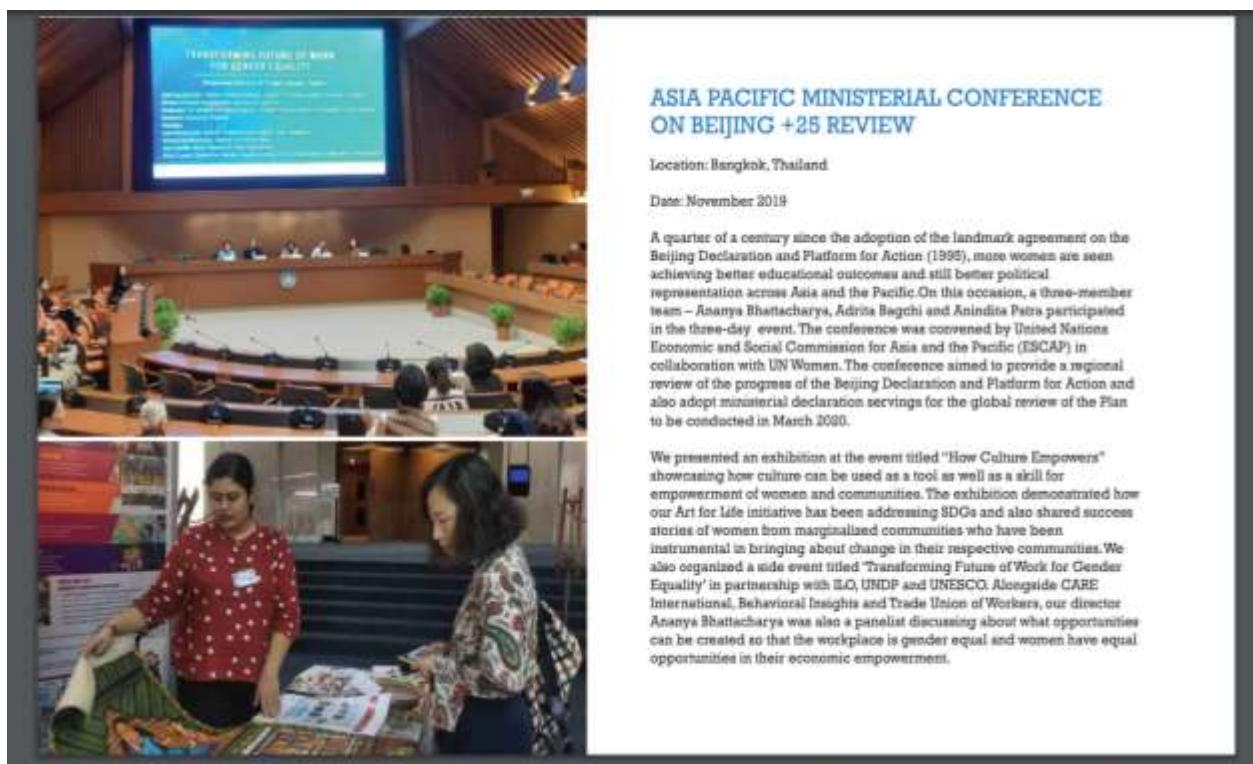
**Guru Shishya Hastshilp Prashikshan Program (GSHP) Organised by Child Support and WE and sponsored by DC Handicrafts: Swarna Chitrakar as Trainer.**



## Impact of Organizations on Women's Empowerment

The success stories of women from marginalized communities, as documented in the annual reports of Bangla Natok dot com, see Image VIII have demonstrated how these initiatives are transforming the lives of women artists. One such example is the Asia Pacific Ministerial Conference on Beijing, which highlighted the *Art for Life* initiative's impact in addressing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Wadley, 2005). These success stories serve as evidence of the positive impact that art and empowerment initiatives can have on gender equality and community development.

The role of organizations like Bangla Natok dot com is crucial in this transformation. By providing not only artistic training but also platforms for recognition and economic benefits, these organizations are redefining the socio-economic status of women artists. The creation of an active space for these artists, the promotion of their work through exhibitions and craft fairs, and the introduction of government schemes and monetary benefits have allowed these women to transcend their previous roles as "unskilled daily laborers" to recognized and celebrated artists. As a result, the themes of their Patachitra art have evolved in response to both market needs and their personal experiences.



### ASIA PACIFIC MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE ON BEIJING +25 REVIEW

Location: Bangkok, Thailand

Date: November 2019

A quarter of a century since the adoption of the landmark agreement on the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), more women are seen achieving better educational outcomes and still better political representation across Asia and the Pacific. On this occasion, a three-member team – Ananya Bhattacharya, Adrita Bagchi and Anindita Patra participated in the three-day event. The conference was convened by United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) in collaboration with UN Women. The conference aimed to provide a regional review of the progress of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and also adopt ministerial declaration servings for the global review of the Plan to be conducted in March 2020.

We presented an exhibition at the event titled "How Culture Empowers" showcasing how culture can be used as a tool as well as a skill for empowerment of women and communities. The exhibition demonstrated how our Art for Life initiative has been addressing SDGs and also shared success stories of women from marginalized communities who have been instrumental in bringing about change in their respective communities. We also organized a side event titled "Transforming Future of Work for Gender Equality" in partnership with ILO, UNDP and UNESCO. Alongside CARE International, Behavioral Insights and Trade Union of Workers, our director Ananya Bhattacharya was also a panelist discussing about what opportunities can be created so that the workplace is gender equal and women have equal opportunities in their economic empowerment.



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- Image VIII, from Banglanatok.com's 2023 annual report, features the Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference in Beijing (top) and a detailed readable version (bottom), showcasing success stories of women.



### **The Catalytic Shift in Patachitra: Field Observations and Ethnographic Research**

Through ethnographic research conducted in regions like Naya, Itagoria, Satpolsa, Majramura, Turka, and Bharatpur, see Image IX; this study reveals a catalytic shift in the style and content of Patachitra across various regions. The data collected from these field visits illustrates the uniform transformation in the art form, marked by changes in visual motifs, the introduction of popular themes, and the integration of new media such as graphic novels and digital content (Biswas, 2004). This shift, while significant, is not entirely driven by the artists themselves but is induced through training programs and the influence of organizations like Bangla Natok dot com. These organizations are actively guiding artists toward the adoption of contemporary themes, thereby catalyzing a uniform transformation across regions. The artists have embraced these changes, recognizing the potential of their work to inspire social change and empower their communities.



- Image IX reflects regional transformations in Patachitra. The top images show scroll paintings, while the bottom depicts Chowka Pats. Images are from Naya (Medinipur), Satpalsa (Birbhum), Bharatpur (Bankura), and Majra Mura (Purulia). Picture Courtesy: Author

### Review of Existing Literature

Numerous studies have been conducted on the Patachitra tradition and the women artists of Naya. Hauser (2002) elaborates on the influence of the urban intellectual elite of Kolkata in training the patuas of Naya to deviate from traditional themes. Chatterjee (2013) in his article "Crossing the Threshold: Women Patuas of Bengal in Transition" highlights the struggles of the women chitrakars in asserting their rights to livelihood and their agency in modernizing Patachitra. Other studies, such as Shukla (2012), Wadley (2005), and Biswas (2004), examine the socio-cultural impact of women artists in transforming Patachitra into a more inclusive and relevant art form.

The work of these researchers underscores the growing empowerment of women in the Patachitra tradition and their contribution to the revitalization of this art form.

### Conclusion

The evolving role of women in the Patachitra tradition of West Bengal reflects broader socio-cultural shifts and highlights the intersection of gender, tradition, and progressiveness. Through initiatives like *Art for Life*, women artists are reshaping the Patachitra tradition, ensuring its relevance in the contemporary world while also using it as a tool for social advocacy and empowerment. As these women continue to push the boundaries of this once-patriarchal art form, they are forging new paths for the future of Patachitra and the empowerment of women in the arts.

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