

Unseen Hands of the Pat: Gendering the Transmission of Folk Painting in Rural Midnapore and Bankura

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Abstract

The folk art traditions of West Bengal, specifically Patachitra (scroll painting) and clay modelling, have long been celebrated in South Asian art historiography as vital markers of indigenous visual culture. However, mainstream accounts have predominantly framed these crafts through male lineages, portraying the Patua or Chitrakar artisan class as a male-dominated guild system. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, qualitative oral histories of female artisans in Pingla (Paschim Medinipur) and Bankura, and local craft guild registries, this article uncovers the gendered division of labour in folk art production. It argues that women historically performed critical stages of production, ranging from pigment preparation and canvas scaling to line work and the oral transmission of narratives, while their contributions remained socio-economically marginalized and historiographically invisible. As modernization, market commercialization, and developmental interventions transformed rural artisan economies between 1947 and 1997, women transitioned from uncredited background contributors to visible and independent creators, thereby challenging traditional patriarchal guild constraints.

Keywords: Patachitra, Gender and Heritage, Rural Artisans, Pingla, Bankura, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Oral History, Folk Art Transmission.

1. Introduction

In post-Independence India, the discourse surrounding the preservation of traditional craft heritage has frequently prioritized physical artefacts and stylistic evolution over the social dynamics of their production [Chatterjee 1979]. In the rural micro-cultural zones of West Bengal, particularly in Paschim Medinipur (Pingla) and Bankura, scroll painting (Patachitra) and clay modelling represent interconnected systems of visual storytelling and sacred material culture [Bhattacharya 1980]. Historically, these crafts operated within caste-based, family-run guilds in which knowledge was transmitted patrilineally.

Within this structural framework, the male Patua (scroll painter) or Sutradhar/Kumbhakar (artisan/sculptor) functioned as the public face of the craft. Men performed scroll songs (Pater Gan) in village squares, interacted with patrons, and claimed formal authorship. Conversely, female members of artisan households remained largely invisible in formal documentation and state archives [Sarkar 1985]. This article investigates the gendered mechanisms of craft transmission in Pingla and Bankura from the post-Partition era to the late twentieth century. It challenges the male-centric historiography of Bengal's folk art by demonstrating that female artisans were not merely passive assistants but active co-creators and primary custodians of both tangible artistic materials and intangible oral narratives.

2. The Hidden Labour: Gendered Division in Craft Production

The production of a Patachitra or a clay idol is a multi-stage process requiring a combination of material preparation, spatial planning, painting, and vocal performance. Fieldwork in Naya village (Pingla) and traditional artisan clusters in Bankura reveals a strict yet often unacknowledged division of labour along gender lines during the mid-twentieth century [Dutta 1990].

Gendered Stages of Craft Production

Female Domain (Informal)	Male Domain (Formal)
Extraction and grinding of natural pigments from leaves, minerals, and mud	Sourcing raw paper/cloth canvas
Boiling bel fruit (wood apple) to manufacture organic binders	Primary outline framing
Applying base coats of clay/chalk	Public scroll singing/performance
Intergenerational song teaching	Market distribution and sales
	Negotiation with middlemen/buyers
	Formal guild registration

While male artisans took credit for the completed scroll, the durability and colour integrity of the Pat depended on the meticulous extraction of pigments performed predominantly by women within domestic spaces (Andarmahal) [Hauser 2002]. Women gathered leaves such as Kadam and Aparajita, burnt rice husks to produce black charcoal pigment, and extracted tree sap to bind colours. In clay modelling, female artisans prepared raw alluvial clay, kneaded it with rice husk to prevent cracking, and applied base layers of white wash (Khari Mati) [Ghosh 1988]. Despite requiring specialized technical knowledge, this labour was classified as a "domestic chore" rather than as "artistic production," thereby excluding women from economic remuneration and formal guild records.

3. Orality, Memory, and the Intangible Transmission

Beyond material preparation, women acted as the principal repositories of the oral traditions that gave Patachitra its narrative substance. The Pater Gan, songs composed to accompany the unrolling of visual scrolls, drew heavily on mythological cycles such as the Ramayana, Manasa Mangal, and Chandi Mangal, as well as local folk tales [Sen 1993].

While male Patuas performed these songs in public spaces to earn grain or cash, the intergenerational transmission of these complex poetic verses occurred primarily within the

domestic sphere. Grandmothers and mothers passed them down through lullabies, domestic rituals (Vratas), and informal singing sessions conducted during everyday work [Devi 1991].

"We were not allowed to sit on the porch and paint when buyers came. But inside the kitchen, while grinding colors, my mother taught me every verse of the Manasa Mangal. If we made a mistake in the song, the painting would lose its rhythm."

— **Oral Testimony of a Senior Woman Artisan, Pingla (Fieldwork, 2022)**

Through this oral pedagogy, women preserved the narrative structure, iconography, and rhythmic cadences of the art form. They maintained the continuity of the tradition even when male family members migrated to urban areas for seasonal wage labour [Banerjee 1995].

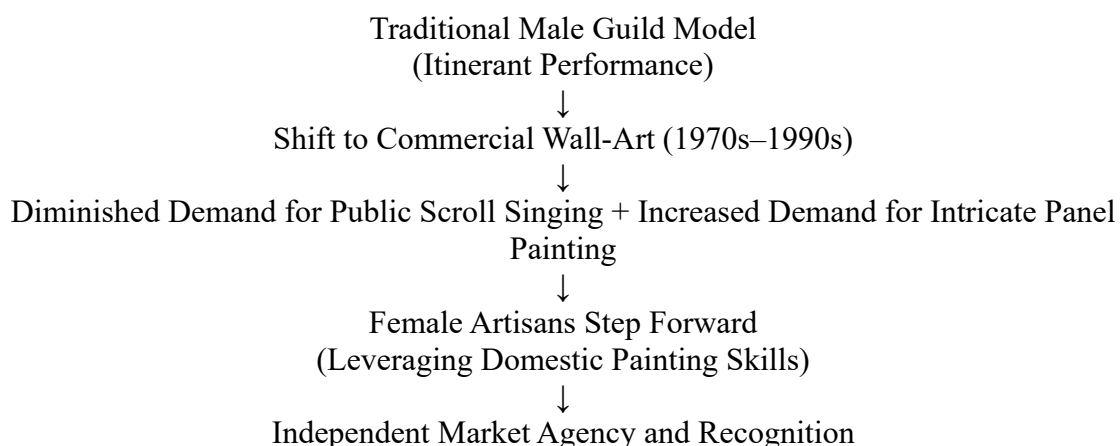
4. Modernization, Market Shifts, and Female Agency (1970s–1990s)

The period between 1970 and 1997 marked a significant structural shift in the socio-economic topography of rural West Bengal. Several factors converged to alter the traditional guild structure:

- 1. Decline of Itinerant Performance:** The rise of mass media, including radio, cinema, and later television, diminished rural demand for wandering Patua performances [Mukherjee 1982].
- 2. Commercialization and Tourist Markets:** Folk art shifted from a performance-based ritual craft to a commercial wall-art commodity targeted at urban collectors and state-sponsored craft fairs and melas [Roy 1989].
- 3. NGO and State Interventions:** Government bodies, including the Crafts Council of West Bengal, together with non-governmental organizations, began organizing training workshops and developmental initiatives that directly targeted rural women [Korom 2006].

As scrolls transitioned from long vertical performance strips to smaller, framed decorative panels, the need for public singing declined, while demand for intricate painting increased. Women capitalized on this transformation. Drawing upon their experience with Alpona (sacred floor painting) and domestic colour preparation, female artisans in Pingla and Bankura began executing independent scrolls and clay figurines [Chakrabarty 1996].

Transformation from the Traditional Guild Structure to Female Artistic Agency



By the late 1980s, female Patuas such as Swarna Chitrakar and Gouri Chitrakar emerged as recognized master artists in their own right, challenging the historical monopoly of male lineage [Ghosh 1998]. Women also adapted the visual vocabulary of Patachitra to address contemporary social themes, including female literacy, health awareness, and environmental conservation. In doing so, they transformed a traditional sacred medium into a tool for social empowerment [Singh 1997].

5. Historiographical Gaps and Guild Registry Marginalization

Despite these functional contributions, institutional and archival documentation from 1947 to 1997 continued to marginalize female artisans. An examination of regional craft cooperative registries and district cooperative records in Bankura and Midnapore reveals a significant gender disparity in formal memberships [West Bengal State Archives 1984].

5.1. Head-of-Household Bias

Government loan distributions, artisan identity cards, and cooperative memberships were overwhelmingly granted to the eldest male member of the household. Women were frequently recorded merely as "unpaid family labour" or "dependents" [District Gazetteer Midnapore 1981].

5.2. Exclusion from National Awards

Early state recognition programmes almost exclusively awarded titles such as Shilp Guru and Master Craftsman to male artisans, overlooking the collaborative nature of household production [Mitra 1992].

This systematic exclusion from official records created a historical illusion of a male-only artistic tradition, a perception that oral histories and micro-historical field research directly challenge.

6. Conclusion

The historical narrative of Bengal's folk art requires critical re-examination through the lens of gender. In rural Midnapore and Bankura, women were never passive observers on the margins of production; they constituted the structural backbone of both Patachitra and clay-modelling traditions. Their hands prepared the raw materials, their memories preserved complex narrative poetry, and their artistic skills sustained craft continuity through periods of economic upheaval.

As modernization dismantled traditional agrarian patronage between 1947 and 1997, female artisans converted their domestic technical expertise into public artistic agency. Uncovering these "unseen hands" not only rectifies a historiographical omission in South Asian art history but also redefines our understanding of how intangible cultural heritage survives through the resilience of marginalized women custodians.

Conflict of interest: No

Authors contribution:

Chandan Bhakta: Conceptualized the study, conducted the primary field research, gathered empirical data from rural Midnapore and Bankura, and drafted the initial manuscript.

Prof. (Dr.) Shravan Kumar Singh: Supervised the entire research process, provided critical feedback, and undertook the final editing, revision, and compilation of the manuscript.

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