INTRODUCTION

In the early nineteenth century, an awareness of the indigenous quality of the traditional art of India moved a batch of talented students to look within India for inspiration of art-activity. This was the time when indigenous rural culture which was termed as folk, affected the creative thought of Indian intellectuals - writers, poets, musicians, dramatists and visual artists. Art activity during that time therefore, became broadly divided and termed as folk art and high art or the art of the Bhadraloks. In fact, there has been a long standing controversy on identification of 'folk' and 'high' art which have variously been described by different scholars as grāmaśilpa as opposed to rāja śilpa, or desi as opposed to marga.  

A word of explanation is perhaps necessary for distinguishing folk art and high art. Initiated and organised by the intellectual middle class, the high art in strictly social sense, expresses the imagery or ideation of the class of society which is alienated from the traditional currents of social life. The process of urbanisation or commercialisation links it up with their expanding life style showing a curious mixture of many elements. Indeed, the artist belonging to high art tradition seemed to have reacted and responded actively and

1 Pāṇini, VI, 2,62
2 saṅgīta darpaṇa, 1, 4 - 6.
creatively to all that was happening around him. Every single articulated idea of the artist has been influenced by the social environment to which he exposed himself.

But folk art like folklore, proverbs, songs, dances is a part of the traditional life of a country, providing an unbroken link with the past, maintaining social and religious as well as physical and economic ties with the soil. By usage rather than definition, this art essentially deals with the cultural quest for an identity with the general mass. It is a product of and for the community rather than an impression of individual creativity.

Impetus of artistic production at folk level is closely related to the welfare interest of the community as a whole. Magical beliefs of the folk connected with urge of production and welfare of the community find expression in the folk arts. That is why some of the products of art are associated with rituals and performances aiming at the betterment of the community as a whole. This aspect is best represented through the vrata alpanās and some paṭās of magical significance like the Cakṣudāna paṭās. Besides, interpretation of the borrowed stories of the epics and purāṇas have been moulded and transformed by the Paṭuās to suit their requirements. The central theme in all the paintings is the social urge of some form or other, and the characters in these are moulded by the attitudes, responses and reactions to social values as felt by the artists.
and craftsmen themselves. Hence, they serve a kind of utilitarian purpose.

The environment and conditions suitable to folk art are those of undisturbed isolation. Here artistic tradition is continuously reviewed, recalled and accepted with a direct impact of the environment on the form and style of the product. The community continues the inherited tradition from one generation to the next. But this extreme isolation cannot go on for long, as no human being can be entirely independent of external control. Not only communications with other people, but also the parallel growth of urban industries profoundly affected rural life. Yet, fortunately for India, the process of drift from land has just begun, and thus folk art still maintains some amount of vitality and continuity, conserving social values which urbanism tends to destroy. We, therefore, propose to make a record of this immemorial antiquity of traditional life through study and discussion of folk paintings of Bengal.

But however folkish or utilitarian, the predominant force of these paintings, at one stage the unconscious sensibility of human mind lends it a new aesthetic charm. The impact of this art is best revealed in the interpretation of the manifold forms of the abounding nature and the elements influencing the psyche. The realistic presentation of nature in this art is not that essential, instead the subjects have been interpreted freely,

independent of the likeness. Adherence to nature is limited
to its intrinsic symmetry but not to its likeness. This
ultimately leads to abstraction which suits the purpose. In
such art forms represented themes need not show the
technicalities of spacing and perspective, modulation of lines
and tonality of colours. One finds instead, a single motif or
synthesis of several motifs, apparently decorative but
definitely having a communicative value. The lines in such
cases can easily eliminate all accessory elements. Indeed, the
art of this type is characterised by (i) simplification of
lines, (ii) repetition of motifs or of figures; (iii) free
use of colours in patches one after another and (iv)
exaggeration of motifs without the least care for deformations.

Needless to say that while discussing folk painting we
have been selective in our choice, since our aim is in no way
to give a descriptive catalogue of all kinds of paintings
present in Bengal. We have, therefore, picked up those
specimens only which despite intrusions of various elements,
have retained a distinctive folk character until to-day.

From time immemorial we find reference to paintings or
citra in classical texts.

Though citra, the synonym for paintings, had a wider
connotation denoting even sculpture in the round according
to several silpa texts and a number of Agama works, we would

4 Šilparatna, I, 46, 3–5, Raghavan, V, Some sanskrit
texts on painting, IHQ, Vol IX, 1833, p 898.
like to confine ourselves to the study of the citras or paintings as found at the folk level.

In Bengal the practise of worshipping ghaṭa and paṭa (ghaṭe paṭe pūjā) even as substitutes of higher gods are found to be quite popular. While worshipping these objects painting becomes the principal media. Matsyapurāṇa while referring to citrajā images mentions also about images painted on walls and vessels (paṭe kūḍye ca pāṭre ca citrajā pratimā smṛtā). We have also found references to the paintings on floors or ālpanās in several texts. Though Kramrisch has suggested identification of dhulicitra with ālpanā, Prof. Banerjea is more inclined to accept identification of Śrīkumāra's rasacitra as ālpanā. In this connection it may also be noted that while referring to eight kinds of materials for image making, Sukranītisāra refers to paistī i.e. dough like material made of rice powder mixed with water. This evidently approximates Bengali piṭulī which is used for painting the ālpanās.

In regard to style and motifs of wall and floor-paintings, we have not yet been able to trace out the original forms. This is perhaps due to the perishable ingredients used for doing such paintings. Since there is a continuity, tradition from earliest times to the present day, one may now find the age-old types of paintings on the walls and floors of houses. Infact, the house walls and floors were the earliest available grounds to the

5 Banerjea, J.N., Development of Hindu Iconography, pp. 220-221.
6 Kramrisch, S. Vignudharmottara, p. 8.
7 Banerjea, J.N., op.cit., p.223.
8 IV.4.72.
painters where the artists seem to have articulated their desires and beliefs in terms of line and volume through colour. This tradition is found even today in isolated pockets among the tribals and in the rural areas. Direct association of these paintings with rituals or some sort of mystic beliefs have possibly helped these paintings to retain their near original characters. This seems to have continued till the painters were exposed to urbanisation and industrialisation leading to a shift in their psyche.

Most widely discussed and popular folk paintings are the patacitras or paintings on patta or cloth. The question of the antiquity of the pataṣas has been attempted by various scholars. From the indirect textual references to painting and painters it has been generally accepted that the pataṣa might have existed during 6th/5th centuries B.C. Prof. D.P. Ghosh is of opinion that Gosala Māṇkhāliputta belonging to 6th Century B.C., a contemporary of Mahāvīra and founder of the Ājīvika sect, was a 9 song of Māṇkhā i.e. a professional 'picture-shower'. Gautama Buddha was also believed to have admired a kind of painting called carana-cītta which according to the commentary of Buddhaghosa (1st century AD), is a kind of painting where one picture is arranged below the other. These again approximate the early Buddhist narrative art of Sanchi and Bharhut which are translations of patacitras in stone. As paintings preceeded sculpture, it is but natural that the patacitras provided the

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model for the reliefs of Sanchi and Bharhut.

In this connection it may also be noted that scholars have argued that some of the Mohenjodaro and Chanudharo seals bear distinct stamp of the stories of Vyagga Jātaka. The sequences of the Jātaka story and representation of the seals display some amount of logic in the argument which, if accepted, will push back the antiquity of patacitra at least to the age of Mohenjodaro.

There are a large number of references to the patas and the pata painters in classical literatures which include Harivaṃśa (2nd Century AD), Abhijñāna Śankuntalam (4th Century AD), Mālavikāgnimitram (4th Century AD), Muddrākṣhasa (5th century AD), Vidogdha Mādhava (6th Century AD), Hārṣacaritā (7th Century AD), Uttararāmacaritā (8th Century AD) etc. Pāṇini (4th Century B.C.) and also Patañjali in his Mahāvāsyā have referred to the pata painters and the paintings. Mahāvāsyā gives a detail description how the folk artists used to display the Kāmasavadha episode with the help of long scrolls. We find identical descriptions in Hārṣacaritā describing the entry of Hārṣavardhana in Thanesvara where he saw a Paṭṭikārā narrating

10 Chakraborty, S. Origin and Perspective of the Word Pat, PPR, pp. 90-93.

11 For details see Chapters I and III of this thesis; also Coomaraswamy, A.K., One hundred Reference to Indian Paintings, Artibus Asiae, 1930-32, IV, No.1, pp. 41-57 & further References to Painting in India, Artibus Asiae, IV, No. 2-3, pp. 126-29.
the story of Yama. The narration seems to have been done by visual presentation of the god as seated on a buffalo along with a song telling the story of Yama. In doing so, the artist is said to have taken the help of a stick for pointing out the story which he was referring to. We are told of those painters as Paṭakāra, Paṭṭikāra, Paṭidāra, Paṭuā, Citrakaras etc. by the ancient Jaina and Buddhist texts as well.

Though we do not find any textual reference to sarās and cālacitras in classical Indian literatures, there is every likelihood that the sarās might have evolved from the medallions found in Buddhist art. Similarly the cālacitras might have had some relation with the decorated śīrṣākara around the icons.

In regard to tāsas we have absolutely no ancient record. But there is no doubt that the tāsas or playing cards were of a later origin, initiated not earlier than the 17th/18th century during the Malla reign in Visnupur.

It may be of interest to know that different types of folk paintings we have taken up for study in this dissertation seem to have emerged from the same aesthetic and functional source. It would thus be our endeavour to study their correlation more closely to know better the individual functioning.

Importance of the Study

when one analyses an authentic folk specimen, one would see that the original status of folk painting is found suffering
from partial displacement. The main reason for this is the sudden but powerful waves of social change. In such a transitional stage of life and culture, a full documentation of folk art in proper perspective is very much needed. Such documentation may give an insight to understand the cultural base of Bengal.

The dissertation also aims at understanding the artists in the context of their socio-economic, religious conditions and also their attitudes and responses to such conditions. Historical assessment of the attitude of this group who focussed the rural and folk reactions and also the counter-reactions have helped us to read the mind of the traditional society. Evolution of the conception of good and evil, social value system, change of religious, social, economic and political environment expressed through different and diverse themes have thrown interesting light on the social history of this region.

Study of the techniques and survey of the styles of different kinds of paintings give an insight not only to the mere evolution of usage of raw materials or development or degeneration of different styles but establishes the role of paintings as a medium for communication with the rural folk. Apart from tracing the aesthetic sensibilities and attainment, the study reveals the initial driving force of these paintings and their gradual erosion as media with the change in the social milieu.
The steady displacement and gradual disappearance of the paintings and the resultant condition of the folk artists lead one to the contemporary socio-economic question as to whether revival of the traditional art is possible. Since the basic structure of rural society has undergone tremendous changes which refuse to accept the propagation of age-old value system forwarded by these painters, it is, therefore, time to assess the feasibility of the oft propagated revival movement in the context of the prevailing socio-economic conditions.

Sources and Method of study

We have noted earlier that, since the materials used for folk paintings are highly perishable in nature, no ancient specimen has come down to us. In so far as Bengal is concerned, the extant specimens are not earlier than the 18th Century A.D. The collections of some museums like Asutosh Museum, Calcutta, Gurusaday Museum, Calcutta, Bangiya Sahitya Parishat Sangraha and Acharya Jagadish Chandra Purusottam Bhowmik, salap, Visnupur etc. are particularly rich with the 19th and 20th centuries' paintings, in paper and in cloth. But what one may not find in a museum is the alpana type of paintings, or paintings done on the walls. Fortunately, some of these are found even to-day in some isolated pockets of rural Bengal almost in their original setting. Besides, it is not yet difficult to make a direct contact with the artist-craftsmen working in the age-old method and technique. We have, therefore, gone deep into the working condition of the artists and their art works in their own socio-cultural economic environment.
By doing this, we have been able to study not only every detail of this art, but it has also been possible to bring out the relations of folk art and social life in all its different aspects. The data upon which this work is based come from interviews with painters. We have taken interviews of the painters of a number of villages of our study area, belonging to different age groups, sharing different experiences of their traditional profession, technique of painting, reaction of the society to their art-products etc. These empirical data collected from the relevant field have helped us to understand the inter-relationship between habitat, economy and society.

The second important source which we have used for reconstructing the history of folk painting is the textual evidence. Such evidence, in so far as the whole of India is concerned, has been found from the Gupta period onwards. But the texts, canonical and non-canonical, though incidentally mention about the folk paintings or their techniques, do not supply enough material for reconstructing either the style or the techniques. But since the techniques remained more or less timeless, advantages of corroborating the available textual materials with prevalent ones have been taken.

In course of studying materials found in the actual spots, or in museums, we have been able to corroborate to some extent, the textual descriptions with materials collected in the field.
One of the first to tackle this subject, in 1880, was T.N. Mukherjee. Sir George Birdwood was also an eye-opener in the field through his work entitled 'Industrial Arts in India'. H.P. Sastri and Dinesh Chandra Sen pioneered the movement of serious historical and academic study of folk arts. Since then, historians, art lovers, artists and the sociologists like Gurusaday Dutt, Abanindranath Tagore, Ajit Ghosh, Jamini Ray, W.B. Archer, Prabodh Chandra Bagchi, Nihar Ranjan Ray, Deva Prasad Ghosh, Stella Kramrisch, Binod Bihari Mukhopadhyay and others have done commendable work on this subject. The contemporary journals of art, like Rupam, Rooplekhā, Journal of Indian Society of Oriental Art, Journal of Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, Journal of Letters, Calcutta University, Modern Review, Marg, Folklore, Art in Industry etc., came forward to focus the attention on this subject.

Basing on the empirical data collected through survey and references in texts and other writings, attempts have been made to study the history of the folk paintings and the painters. As we have already noticed that folk painters are products of the society and they produce for the society, it is but natural that the study of folk paintings has to be initiated with the study of the socio-religious conditions of the painters themselves. Hence the first chapter deals with the painters - their socio-religious conditions. In this chapter, we have tried to deal with the history of the painters, their socio-economic condition.
We have also tried to analyse the religious attitudes of these painters and their ritualistic behavioural pattern with the help of the themes depicted in their paintings. Indeed, the contents of these paintings clearly indicate the responses and reactions, the artists' experience from time to time. It is also possible to observe even through the study of these paintings, how the artists are economically, socially and hence artistically depended on the society for their existence.

The second chapter discusses different types of paintings, classified first on the basis of the materials and types, namely, ḫilpanās, patacitras, cālacitras, sarās and tāsas, and secondly in consideration of the content and theme. Needless to say that each one has been examined in details in its proper perspective.

The third chapter gives an outline of the techniques of different kinds of paintings, the materials used for paintings including use of colour, preparation of colour, and brush work in details. This is followed by discussion on different processes adopted for making paintings on the floor and the wall, patacitra, cālacitra, sarā and tāsa have also been studied separately in trying to bring out their distinctive features. An attempt has been made to compare the techniques prescribed in śilpa texts (for both folk and high art) with those practised by the folk painters.

The fourth chapter records the empirical data collected through our survey of patacitras of different districts of Bengal. The work of each district has been studied in the context of the prevailing geocultural situation emphasising
The distinctive features shown in colour, line, composition and selection of themes. In the process of doing so, we have studied the painters individually and also collectively as part of the community as a whole. The chapter also includes the study of the square paṭas of Kalighat emphasising its unique features as revealed in the various phases of development in connection with aesthetic and technical qualities, such as line, colour, composition etc.

The fifth chapter outlines the survey of miscellaneous paintings which includes wall, floor paintings, cālācitras, sarās and tāsas. These have also been studied with emphasis on theme, colour, line and composition.

The concluding chapter is an attempt to assess the problem of revivalism of the folk paintings of Bengal which have already suffered displacement and disappearance. The question of revivalism and the measures to be adopted for such revivals have been discussed in the context of the contemporary social situations. We have also tried to examine the social relevance of these paintings in the contemporary society.

The observations arrived at from our study have been profusely illustrated by a large number of plates. A map showing the distribution of centres of folk paintings in Bengal is an useful guide to know the pattern of settlement of the artists. The selected excerpts of our interview with representative folk painters have been included in the Appendix section for ready reference.
Acknowledgements:

My indebtedness to the past and present workers in the field will be obvious in course of this work. On personal level, I am deeply indebted to Dr. Amita Ray who has been my academic adviser.


It is difficult to express adequately the deep sense of gratitude which I owe to the large number of folk painters who have enlightened me on the subject not only by explaining the technicalities of their productions and their problems but, also by helping me in understanding the status and philosophy of the painters and their productions in the changing social milieu.