



Patta Chitra - It's Past and Present

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The Patta Chitra, one of the fascinating art form of Orissa has a tradition that goes back centuries. Soaked in puranic culture and classical romances, with vibrant colours, superb craftsmanship, simplicity in design the patta chitra has become a distinct art form and has captured the imagination of artists and art lovers alike. The term patta chitra has its origin from the Sanskrit. Patta means vastra or cloth and chitra means paintings. So patta chitra means paintings on cloth. The use of cloth for painting has been in vogue in India from early period. So also was the case with Orissa. It is said that painted thin clothes were sent to China from Orissa during the rule of Bhaumakars and the craftsmanship was highly appreciated. The patta painting has its root in religion. It is evolved, nourished and flourished under the cult of Lord Jagannath. As the Kalighat paintings has its link

with Goddess Kali of West Bengal and Pachwai paintings with the Lord Srinath temple of Nathdwara, Rajsthan, so also the patta painting centred round the cult of Lord Jagannath. Therefore the Patta paintings of Orissa is considered to be as old as the construction of the temple of Lord Jagannath at Puri. i.e. 12th Century A.D. A typical ritual in the temple, clearly speaks of its link with Lord Jagannath. On the Debasnana Purnima day (Fullmoon day of Jyestha) the God have a ritualistic bath to fight the heat of summer. As a result the deities become sick for fifteen days. i.e. the first fortnight of Asadha. This period is known as Anasar and the devotees don't have Darshan of their beloved Lord at the Ratnavedi. During that period three paintings of Lord Jagannath, Lord Balabhadra and Maa Subhadra are worshipped. But these paintings are not like



the incomplete wooden images of the triad. Here in these paintings, the deities have been depicted with full leg and hands in padmasan mudra. For example the painting of Jagannath has four hands in which he holds Sankh (conch), Chakra (wheel), Gada (club) and Padma (lotus flower). These paintings are known as anasar pati. By this way the patta chitra very carefully entered the ritualistic arena and is accepted as the substitute of the triad and receives the same sublime veneration as the triad.

These paintings are prepared by the traditional chitrakaras. These chitrakaras observe some rituals while working on these paintings. They too observed some austerities i.e. the women are not allowed to touch the painting. The chitrakar to be strictly vegetarian during the period of painting and he ought to sleep on the ground without using any bed. He has to put on a new dhoti while working on the paintings. After the painting is completed, a Mahasnan is arranged through chanting, of mantras and then asper the tradition placed for worship and darshan. After the completion of anasar, the paintings are preserved at the store of the temple.

As an elaboration of this painting tradition, paintings on the triad known as Yatri pati were prepared in large number and were sold to the pilgrims coming to Puri. For all practical purposes it serves as a souvenir for their visit to Puri Dham. There is a strong belief that a journey to Puri is incomplete unless the pilgrim took back with him some patis of Lord Jagannath, some beads, some cane sticks and Nirmalya. As there was a demand for Yatri Patis, so the chitrakars adopt it as a source of maintaining their livelihood and prepare Yatri Patis in large numbers for commercial sale.

Since the pattachitra has its origin in the jagannath temple, the triad and the great cult have always been the main theme of the pattas. Lord

Jagannath is depicted as Maha Vishnu and the way of worship is shaped mostly in vaisnavite tradition. It is for this reason that most of the themes of traditional Patta chitra are mystical stories from Ramayan and Mahabharat including that of Lord Jagannath, their perennial source of inspiration.

The preparation of pattas on canvas for painting is very interesting. It is indigenously prepared. A piece of cloth is washed neatly and spread out over the surface of a cot or on the varandah floor. The tamarind seed is powdered and some water is put on it to prepare a special gum. This gum is applied over this piece of cloth. Before this gum dries up, another piece of the cloth of same size is placed on it and a fresh coating of gum is pasted on it. Then the patta is allowed to dry in the sun. After it is dried, a paste of soft white stone powder which look like chalk powder, and tamarind seed gum, mixed in an ideal proportion is applied on both sides. After both side dry completely the huge piece of cloth is cut into required sizes. It is a known fact that unless the chitrakaras are ordered for big pattachitras, they prepared patta chitras of normal sizes. After cutting to sizes, the next work is to polish it to make them smooth and suitable for painting. The polishing is first made with a rough stone and then it is polished with a pebble whose surface is smooth. The polishing require long hours of work. The work of preparation of the pati for painting is done solely by the woman folk of the chitrakar families. Then over the polished cloth which look off white in colour, the chitrakar start painting on it.

The colours used are bright and primarily white, red, yellow, blue, green and black. The red is used predominantly for the back ground. These colours are prepared out of the natural ingredients. White is prepared from powder of conch-sheel, yellow from Haritala, a kind of stone,



red from geru (Dheu) and Hingula black from burning lamp and cocoon shell and green from leaves. The artists execute a sequential procedure for preparation of the paintings. The colours are of single tones were ever used. First the border and the sketch is drawn on the patis either in pencil or in light colour. The artists put correct lines to make the figure more prominent. The lines are broad and steady, then the colour is applied. The visual appeal of a patta painting is in its colour combination. The human figures are generally presented frontally. But the face, leg are shown side-wise but the elongated eyes are drawn from the front side. Sharp nose and round chins are prominently depicted. The typical hair style, clothing, ornamentation, bearded and mustaches are used for different persons, so that there will not be any confusion to recognize which figure is a king, minister sage, royal priest, commonman, the God, the Goddesses and the like. A decorative border is drawn on all sides to give it a frame like look. In this painting overlapping is avoided as far as possible. However, the sense of far and near is neglected here. The typical face style makes this painting different from other school of paintings. The paintings are conspicuous for their elegance charm and aesthetic appeal. Central focus of the painting is the expression of the figures and the emotion they portray, the strong colour only reinforces them. Traditionally, three types of brushes were used. They are broad, medium and fine. These are prepared out of the hairs of the buffalo, calf and the mouse respectively. Some scholars believed that in course of time, the chitrakara family went on increasing and the Puri town could not provide them enough work. So some chitrakaras left Puri and went to the nearby villages, there they developed yajmani relationship with other caste people. The chitrakaras did various types of paintings on the walls of their pattons on festive occasions.

The Pattachitra style have been elaborated and applications are made on other items besides the Patis. Paintings are made on wooden and bamboo boxes and on the mask and the pots, Ganjapa, a typical playing cards is also painted in this style.

Now-a-days, the patta painting has been recognized as one of the popular art form of Orissa. With the advancement of time, a lot of changes have been noticed in the preparation, colour, theme, approach to the subject and in, the market-ability scenario of patta paintings. It has not been confined to art for art sake alone. It is now accepted as a craft. The Jagannath yatri patis, which were very popular previously is not any more painted in plenty. Their place has been taken over by various other souvenir like laminated pictures of the Triad, Finger-ring, locket etc. No more the artists are willing to prepare the colours from the natural ingredients as it is labour some and difficult to prepare. Now the synthetic colours (bottled posture colour) available in the bazaar are used. Even the new generation of artists don't know the preparation of colours. In order to keep the tradition alive, at least to aware the new generation regarding the preparation of traditional colour, a seminar-cum-workshop on the subject was organized in the year 2003 at Raghurajpur. Similarly the traditional paties are replaced with tassar silk cloth. As the tassar is a finished cloth, the painters don't have to put in extra labour to make it suitable for painting as in the case of cloth. In place of the traditional brushes, the chitrakaras now depend on the brushes sold in the market. The patta paintings have made a slow journey from the temple precincts to the walls of drawing rooms, lounges of big hotel and guest houses. The subject of the paintings has also got wide variations. In addition to the stories from Ramayan, Mahabharat and Vesas of Jagannath, new themes on the life



and philosophy of Lord Buddha, pictures on Jainism, Jesus Christ and important historical events are also found placed in patta paintings.

Even the chitrakaras are ready to produce the paintings on any fanciful composition on the subjects whatever the customer desire and place orders. Instead of simple renderings the paintings are now decorated with more ornamentation in order to attract the modern art connoisseur.

The major concentration of the artists and the art form is in Raghurajpur Dandasahi of Puri Sadar Block and Balisahi Chitrakarasahi, Dolamandap sahi, Markendeswar sahi in Puri Municipality, Paralakhemundi, Digapahandi, Chikiti, Berhampur, Dharakot, Bargarh, Sonpur and Keonjhar etc. From among these sites, Raghurajpur, a village about 12 km. from Puri on Puri-Bhubaneswar road near Chandanpur has attracted the attention of the world as a Heritage village. It has been declared as a Rural Tourism Centre. All the house-holds in the village are artists. The village holds the unique distinction of having maximum concentration of patta chitra artists. As per a local survey at least 22 households are pursuing this art form but in practice all most all house-holds in the village are linked with the patta chitra business, they may be artists or promoter. We all know that the chitrakara families were traditionally preparing patta chitras as their hereditary work. Now this art form is not being confined to that caste alone. People from other castes are also adopting this as their profession. Therefore the number of painters are multiplied beyond the traditional craft guild. However there is no organized group for marketing for disseminating the knowledge from one generation to another. Therefore this is centered round the guru. Heavy marketing concentration in and around Puri and Bhubaneswar automatically paralysed patta painting activities in other villages.

Therefore barring some, the income of other artists is marginal and seasonal.

There is no regular income source from paintings. So the savings is absent. Another peculiar trend has been evolved that every youth instead of aspiring to be an ardent artist in patta paintings, want to be small trader in patta chitra business, perhaps as the middlemen, one gets more profit than the artist who is either a illiterate or semi literate, as per the present rural scenario. It is because of lack of knowledge on scope and potential of art form dependence on external support for marketing, absence of organized platform to market the product and the poverty of the artist create some hindrance in the field. Now what is needed is a regular training and continuation of Guru shishya parampara and a concerted effort to sell the painting of the artists so that they will not be cheated by the middlemen. By that way the art will thrive and the artist will have smile on his face.

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