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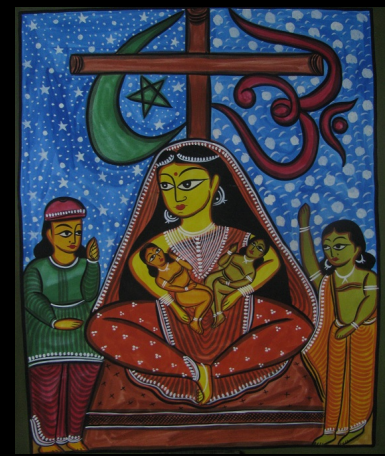
**The Pat as Its People : Communal Harmony Pats of West Bengal
and Dual Religious Identity of Patuas**

Rethinking Heritage and Marginality Today: Craft, Threads and Echoes

GRID Heritage Project Online Workshop, India

New Researchers' Panel

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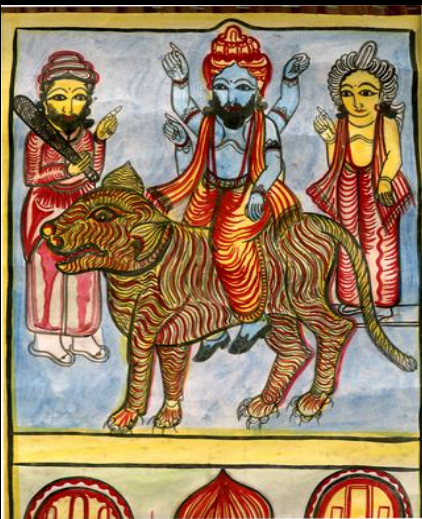
Patuas and Pats on Communal Harmony

A community of **itinerant artist-performers** of Bengal who show painted scrolls on religious and 'current' themes

Currently the patuas from **Naya village, West Bengal** are most successful, well-known and well-documented in among all the communities

A focus of scholars, art market, NGOs, museums and cultural organisations since post-1947

The pats they have made on '**Communal Harmony**' and '**Satya Pir**' are the focus of this presentation



Intersectionality and Patuas

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“Intersectionality is far from a readymade framework to be applied...people's range of actions are far broader than passively receiving knowledge, contemplating or criticizing...thus Intersectionality is neither to explain status quo of problems...nor it is a theory of identity....understanding the politics of identity can constitute a starting point for intersectional inquiry...and not an end in itself.” (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016)

Visually legible aspects Individual and collective identities of patuas are at the **intersection of religion, caste and class.**

For our current discussion the religious aspect is of primary importance.





Secular / Syncretist Heritage and Patuas

By self-admission and scholarly accounts (Chatterji: 2007 - 2020; Hauser 2002, Korom: 1989 - 2017; Singh 1996) they are a community that's '**both Hindu and Muslim**'. Each Patua bears two religious names, follows two kinds of religious rituals and makes pat-s on topics from both religions.

Thus their pats on Communal Harmony are considered part of an **indigenous syncretist 'heritage'** that flows naturally in post-1947 '**official**' secularism of Indian state.

By the scholarship of Johannes Fabian (2004: 47-60) this is a classic case of '**Ethnic Artefacts**' being treated as '**Ethnographic Objects**' where intersectional identities of makers are conflated with objects they make, classifying '**things as people**' and '**people as things**'.

(contd...)





Secular / Syncretist Heritage and Patuas

Agreeing with Beatrix Hauser's conclusive argument (2002: 105-122), my 2018 fieldwork confirms that the majority of the current Patua / Chitrkars, and definitely those in Naya, are **low-caste Muslims**.

Subrata Kumar Manna (2012), Frank Korom and other Patua scholars of repute has thrown light on the chequered history of religious identity of Patuas closely tied with **two partitions of the Indian subcontinent (1947, 1971) based on religion and forced conversions by Hindu supremacist groups, especially of the low-caste, low-class populace.**

Although the contiguity of Islam and Hinduism in Bengal since early 12th Century (Eaton 1993, 2000) have created **surprising commonality in lived rituals**, Ralph Nicholas (2016) warns us that calling it erasure or transgression of religious identities and boundaries, 'syncretism' or 'secularism' is facile.



Satya Pir Pat - The 'Original' 'Secular / Syncretist' Pat?

'Satya Narayan' / 'Satya Pir' hagiography pat-s in nationalist Bengali literature prior to independence and contemporay scholarly literature are lauded for their “tolerance” and syncretism (Sen 1958, Rahman 2018, Nagpal 2019)

Satya Pir Pats by Kripamayee Karmakar, Prabir Chitrakar and Manimala Chitrakar problematises this convenient assumption of erasure of Hindu Muslim traditional boundaries to a glorious 'syncretist secular' whole.

The goal is clearly to persuade both the Hindu and Muslim worshippers to convince worshipping Satya Pir. The act of worship will attract material and ritual merits and the refusal might attract horrific punishment.



(contd...)

Satya Pir Pat - The 'Original' 'Secular / Syncretist' Pat?

None of the pats indicate that one of the merits acquired by worshipping Satya Pir is 'Communal Harmony'.
Two of them merely indicate that both Hindus and Muslims can worship him - a matter of fact.

Faithful to the simultaneous Hindu and Muslim origination stories dated back to the sixteenth century (Stewart 2019), the Kripamayee's Pat plots the **purely Hindu story of origination** (an immaculate conception in a Princess by Vishnu that involves birthing a lump and a tortoise egg).

Prabir's and Manimala's pat-s involve narratives of the **Muslim Pir getting a Hindu king to worship him and punishing a rich Hindu miser for not doing so.**

Pir-ism scholar Tony K Stewart (2019: 257-58) points out not only 'malleability of abstractions' or 'imprecision of languages' in conflating Secularism, Syncretism and Tolerant Pluralism but also historicises the revival of this trend in post-1947 scenario - **Many figures that hint of allegiances that cross the hard modern categories of Hindu and Muslim are marshalled by the cultural elites in this effort to counter the communalism that has become so widespread.**



3 Communal Harmony Pats – The Manu Chitrakar Story

An attempt by the author to commission three specific Communal Harmony Pats on “**Babri Masjid Demolition Riots**” (December 6, 1992), “**Gujarat Riots following the Godhra Train Burning Incident**” (February 22, 2002) and the spate of “**Cow vigilante violence in India**” (2014 onwards) ended up producing three pats on “**Gujarat Riots**” and the “**Contemporary Communal Problems**” the “**Let's have Communal Harmony**” instead.

Without spelling it out, **Manu Chitrakar** underlined his identity as a low-caste Muslim when he disagreed to depict Cow vigilante violence in India. Rightly being cautious because he knew **his cultural construct of 'both Hindu and Muslim' / 'syncretist' / 'secular identity won't protect him.**



Communal Harmony Pats by 4 Chitrakars – Texts, Images and in-betweens

How to compare 'Communal Harmony Pats' Manu Chitrakar, Bablu Chitrakar, Anwar Chitrakar, Ajay Chitrakar without beginning on a **nationalist (Dutt 1933)**, **glorified exotic (Das 2020)**, **patronizing post-modernist (Chatterji 2009)** or **commodity culturist (Mukhopadhyay 2008)** discourse which doesn't foreclose artistic agency for both text and image making?

While creating a pat, the story comes first , which then is turned into the lyric of a song, thereafter episodized frame by frame into images. This story remain documented only as the song lyrics the Chitrakar, **almost sketch-like**, reproduced visually as a pat, on commission.

This is **modular production process** of repurposing stories and images, **not just random gathering of fragmentary floatsams**, brought into being for ever newer narratives and happenings.

Scholars (Dutta 1933, Singh 1996) have noticed that the frames of pat which accompany lyrics being sung **don't neatly dovetail** into each other neatly. And stock frames repeat themselves very differently themed pats. This gives the patuas **maouverability and control over the oral narrative**.

Communal Harmony Pats by 4 Chitrakars : Core Narratives and Discourses

Therefore, giving equal importance to text, music and image we have to employ both discourse analysis and visual analysis to compare the Communal Harmony pats of Manu Chitrakar, Bablu Chitrakar, Anwar Chitrakar, Ajay Chitrakar.

The modular core narratives are:

The 'Habil-Kabil' narrative module

By citing that the very first brothers (sons of Quranic Adam and Hawwa, known as Eve in Bible) created the bifurcation of Hindu and Muslim religion by each taking up a different religion. That makes Hindus and Muslims brothers.

The 'God is one' narrative module

God is called by different names in different religions but is one and this has been proven by 'Science' which proves Nature is the same as God. Here religions other than Hinduism and Islam (Santhals and Christians) are cited.

The 'A few bad men' narrative module

Communalism and Communal violence are due to the evil machinations of a few bad men (mostly politicians, scientists too).

The 'solution to Communalism' narrative module

Either by reminding ourselves of our brotherhood, or by reminding ourselves of our brief stay on this earth and the meaninglessness of violence and by taking a pledge together we can tackle this evil.

Communal Harmony Pats by 4 Chitrakars : Core Narratives vs. Secularism Discourses

The Nehruvian discourse of an always-already-secular India

The Nehruvian discourse of an always-already-secular India (Nehru 1989, Zachariah 2009, 2012) whose nationalist past was mostly tolerant and multi-religious with a brief aberration of communal violence during the partition and its immediate aftermath. This tolerance narrative interestingly checks both liberal-democratic and Hindu Nationalist discursive paradigms (Chatterjee 1999, Adcock 2014, Karpov & Svensson 2020). *This is reflected in both the timeless 'Habil - Kabil' origin story module and the 'few bad men' narrative module in the pat-s.*

The discourse of the 'equality of all religions'

The discourse of the 'equality of all religions' are rhetorically established as different versions of Humanism, the 'universal religion' - a legacy of numerous religious reform movements across India (Jones 1989). In Bengal, this coincides with the strategic use of medieval Bhakti movements' emancipatory humanist ideals. *This is reflected in the 'God is one' narrative module in the pat-s.*

The circular discourse of 'Communal Harmony'

The circular discourse of 'Communal Harmony' being the lack of 'Communal Violence' and vice versa, thus 'Communalism' and 'Secularism' being opposites of each other and circularly defining each other (Tejani 2007) is something overwhelmingly all-pervasive in post-independence India.

This is reflected in the 'solution to Communalism' narrative module where just a conscious choice of not pursuing it seems enough, or recognising the futility of 'Communal Violence' for that matter.

Communal Harmony Pats by 4 Chitrakars : Visual Evidences

The way the core narratives relect the discourses on Secularism are visually evidenced. The national flags make themselves more and more visible in contexts of collective actions in the newer Communal Harmony pats, while the lyrics remain as before without any mention of nation or national.

Depictions of Hindus and Muslims get more and more stereotypical over time instead of being visually near-identical as in case of rural Bengal.

(contd...)



"Let's take a pledge together
We'll sing in the same tune
Will keep us brothers together
Won't let our egos gather
We humans are of the same mother
Of the same mother."



"All community's is this India, our pride
Why fight here taking one side
O people, Hindu Muslim men women"



"Bad business this politics, takes two days to
split party
No money is needed only need sweet speeches,
very arty
The present social scene let me tell you"



"Let's all take pledge
Harmony with brothers, no more
rage
Will forget caste
and embrace and wish each other
the best
The present social scene let me tell
you"



Ajay Chitrakar's 'Communal Harmony' Pat



Depictions of warring Hindus and Muslims
in Manu Chitrakar's 'Communal Harmony' Pat

Communal Harmony Pats by 4 Chitrakars : Visual Evidences

The depictions of communal problems are more of individual moral problems in local spaces in older pats and in the newer ones as collective problems in national spaces.

Most damningly, the songless 'Communal Harmony' pat (by Anwar Chitrakar) about the 2017 historical coincidence of Durga Puja idol immersion and Muharram procession date and their eventual harmonious occurrence, which didn't happen. The occurrence of the two were segregated by dates to avoid rising communal tension.



The public sphere of village in Ajay Chitrakar's 'Communal Harmony' Pat



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and embrace and wish each other the best
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Code Switching and Conflations : Habil Kabil Narrative

Habil Kabil is one of the keystone narratives of almost all Communal Harmony pats. As the first mortal men and brothers - offsprings of Adam and Hawwa - is well-documented across centuries in Quranic and other Islamic literature. But in the original, it is the narrative of first murderous hate (over a woman) and the first killing (of a fellow man and a brother). Their Biblical counterparts are Cain and Abel, born of Adam and Eve. But here, they are the origin of bifurcation of Hindu and Muslim religion by each taking up a different religion. That makes Hindus and Muslims brothers.

(contd...)



Code Switching and Conflations : Puran Quran Narrative

What is lauded as Patua communities' 'double identity' is understood as a 'precious marginality' by Patuas themselves. The tale Patua-s tell about their Hindu-Muslim dual status is Puranic, rather than Quranic. They refer to a curse from Shiva to live in the liminal zone of religiosity between Hinduism and Islam for transgressing their caste duties of singing and performing and daring to paint. In neither of the versions it is a story of harmony and fraternity but strife and proscription, which become a tale of harmony in its excised version.

Conclusions: Heritage and Intersectionality

Ealasaid Munro states that intersectionality is “the idea that different axes of oppression intersect, producing complex and often contradictory results” (Munro, 2014: 24)

By keeping in tandem with each wave of 'invented traditions' and trying to use their religious liminality to their advantage by self-fashioning identities and the embedded narratives in their artworks, Patuas navigate an increasingly religiously polarised world. Here their artistic agency can't be fully legible in modernist terms.