**Pingla (West Bengal):** “I watched a film in which the customer tells the milk seller that you are putting too much water in the milk to which he replies ‘no, we are not putting water in milk, we are putting milk in water. These days we also mix milk in water and give it to our grandchildren when they ask for it,” says 56-year-old Gurupada Chitrakar before bursting into laughter.

Gurupada is one among the 250 artists hailing from Pingla village in Paschim Medinipur district of West Bengal. One of the most senior Patua artists, Gurupada is sharing with us the dire situation he faces because of the Pandemic. Gurupada has 11 family members – his wife, three sons, daughters-in-law and their children out of which 8 members practice Patua art.

Not just Gurupada, 300 artist families in Pingla – once a sought-after tourist destination – are leading precarious lives today. This is the reality of not just Patua artists but lakhs of traditional artists all over India.

Patuas practice the ancient folk art of painting patachitra or scrolls. Based on the painting, the artists also compose a song that accompanies the painting when presented before the audience. Patuas depend on their art for livelihood and the pandemic has snatched it away.

No tourists, fairs, domestic and international exhibitions, workshops in universities meant no income.

“Almost every artist has taken debt from moneylenders or buying things on debt. I have a debt of Rs 20,000. Didi (West Bengal chief minister and TMC chief Mamata Banerjee) has been giving us ration, wheat and rice, but it doesn’t suffice for the whole family. We have to buy vegetables, oil, sugar, fruits so we have to take a loan,” adds Rahim Chitrakar. Rahim is a 45-year-old artist who has five family members in his household.

In the increasingly polarised atmosphere of today, the community of Patua artists becomes a perfect example of syncretism. A large number of Patuas happen to be Muslims who paint and sing the mythological stories of Hindu deities with reverence.

This is the holy month of Ramzan and many of them are fasting from dawn to dusk. After sunset, they resort to a lavish iftar that comprises fruits, dry fruits, sherbets and desserts. This year Baharul and her husband break their fast with just water and dates.

“There are eight of us and there is no way we can afford a decent iftar. Sometimes it is just water but what to do? It wasn’t that bad last year as NGOs donated us money and also some patrons but all of them have dried up. The future looks very uncertain,” says an anxious Baharul. With eight family members to support, Baharul and her husband had to work on agricultural land to earn some money.

In normal times, an artist’s family is able to earn anywhere between Rs 10000 and Rs 15,000. Rahim says, “Imagine not earning anything for months. Sometimes we have to think about the next meal for the elderly, the sick and children. It won’t be Eid like before.”

In order to market Patachitra better, the enterprising artists of the village formed a Chitrataru Cluster in 2011 and even got a GI tag for the art form in 2018.

Rahim who is an active member of the cluster explains, “We got by last year because of our marketing efforts all these years. Last year we managed to sell a few paintings as well which doesn’t seem possible this year. Last year, our patrons, individual contacts and NGOs helped us but now when we call them they express inability to help which is understandable.”

Though Patachitras are traditionally based on Hindu folklore, in the last few years, the artists have adapted the art form to contemporary realities. The artists also respond to the issues of the climate crisis, socio-economic issues through their art. In the initial days of the pandemic when little bit of work still came their way, the Chitrakars painted on the theme of Covid 19.

“Coronavirus kotha sune, dhara bohi jaye (Listening to the story of Coronavirus, tears start flowing) is how begins the [song](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iBx12Jgd5SA&t=92s)of Mamoni Chitrakar, posted on YouTube by Banglanatak.com. The song is accompanied by her painting which shows Coronavirus as a demon, people falling sick and wearing masks.[[1]](#footnote-2)

**Naya (West Midnapore, West Bengal):** In the quaint hamlet of Naya in West Bengal, every wall is a canvas and everyone practices ‘patachitra’, a form of ancient folk art. They don’t just paint; they also sing as they unfurl the scroll and show their artistry to the audience.

This diverse repertoire of art tells stories that range from traditional mythological or tribal tales to modern Indian history and even contemporary issues. The first frame of the scroll is usually about the protagonist of the story, and the patua then skilfully manoeuvres the scroll, while singing the narrative, frame by frame.

One can reach the village from Kolkata by car, or by the daily trains from Kolkata to Balichak on the Kharagpur line.

While the entrance to the village could be somewhat imperceptible at first, the generous assistance of Laltu Chitrakar from the start ensured that we encountered no trouble. Laltu, a young lad in his early 20s, was eager to act as a guide and share his limited knowledge with all who came to visit the village. Although he is currently under the tutelage of a senior painter, he chooses to call himself a “Chitrakar” like an established artist.

He informed us that while the village is a predominantly Muslim settlement, there are a number of Hindu artists as well. Living together in harmony, no one is recognised by their religion, but by their work and the suffix of “chitrakar” after their first name. They are rather fond of the adage “Na Hindu na Musalman” (neither Hindu nor Muslim). It won’t be surprising to find a Muslim chitrakar painting a depiction of Hindu lore or vice versa.

We saw the quintessential chitrakar residence of Iyakub Chitrakar, one of the most renowned artists in the area who has flown to London and Liverpool to display his work. As we entered his house, Iyakub was giving some finishing touches to one of his scrolls while two other women were painting their respective scrolls. He was very accommodating and hospitable and hastily left his work to pull chairs for us and answered every question we asked in great detail.

According to him, the history of this Patua community dates back to around the 13th century. Traditional practitioners of the ancient craft used to go from village to village entertaining and educating the village folks. In return for their performances, the villagers used to offer them rice and vegetables as payment.

They procured their paint from natural sources by crushing flowers or fruits such as marigold, saffron, turmeric and sometimes even the barks of trees. These were then mixed with the gum of the Bengal quince flower (bael) to make paint. Surprisingly, this is prevalent even to this day.

“Some Patuas in other parts forego this laborious process. But in this village, we insist on it and it makes our patachitras unique,” says Iyakub.

Exceptions can only be made when painting on clothes or other materials that involve regular washing. “People are paying for our work, and if the paint wears off after washing, it wouldn’t be fair to them,” he adds.

Most of the plants required are grown locally and other materials like turmeric for yellow, indigo for blue are available at the nearby Pingla market. Often these natural paints are prepared in advance in coconut shells and stored in plastic jars for use all year round.

He proceeded to describe how a pata was created in the earlier days using jute fibres. Lamp black was mixed with the sap of the wood-apple tree, thereby acting as a binder for the fibres. These, when put together, turned it into a canvas. Nowadays stitching together multiple sheets of commercial poster paper is all it takes. Presently there are paintbrushes of different sizes to suit the artist’s need, but in the earlier days, it wasn’t possible to draw minute details like the eye or the saree lining. They used to trim goat fur and attach to reed pipes, substituting it as a makeshift brush.

There was a time when Iyakub feared that their art form was on the verge of extinction due to no assistance from the erstwhile government. He expressed his gratitude to the current Mamata Banerjee-led Trinamool government, for having given every artist health insurance, a steady amount of monthly payment and other facilities. This is encouraging youngsters to take up the traditional art form as both a passion and a profession. They have also been enlisted to paint the subway stations currently under construction, and a plan to re-decorate the domestic airport is also underway.

The chitrakars do not sketch with pencil first but apply paint straight away, with very lucid and swift strokes. Although the tradition was customarily passed down from father to son for many generations, many Patua women have also taken up the craft, guided by a senior painter Dukhushyam Chitrakar. Led by her, these women have not only established themselves as excellent artists, but also as leaders within the community. Under an initiative called ‘Art for Livelihood’, these women are spearheading local development.

She delightfully showcased some of her works and sang a song narrating an episode from “Krishnaleela” upon request. She further added her intent to perform at the annual festival called ‘Pot Maya’, which was started in 2010 as a means to save this indigenous art form. “The whole village looks like an art gallery. Visitors can learn about the craft and participate in painting workshops”, she says.

There are no hotels in the area, but chitrakars are more than happy to host visitors in homestays during the three-day long festival. Performances by chhau folk dancers and baul singers from the neighbouring villages of Purulia and Nadia are also an attraction. Chitrakars even spruce up the surroundings with flowers and hang scrolls in their courtyards. Many Patuas from the village won the President’s Award too and participated in exhibitions, cultural exchange programmes worldwide. Anwar Chitrakar has managed to sell his paintings to the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation for Rs 80,000 and had his work showcased at the Harley Gallery in the UK. They still live in mud houses, encounter almost all regular problems like water crises and frequent power cuts. But they never complain; they are always smiling, and occasionally singing songs too. The only thing that matters to them is receiving recognition for their work and more importantly, keeping the flame of this traditional art form alive for future generations to witness.[[2]](#footnote-3)

Bengal Artist Portrays Fight Against Pandemic In A Fabulous ‘Patachitra’

In a bid to keep spirits up and building mental resilience towards the sea of emotions during the ongoing pandemic, different people are engaging in different activities. **In the same bid, this viral video shows that Swarna Chitrakar, an artist hailing from the village of Pingla in the state of West Bengal, has expressed the war the human race has raged against coronavirus through a colourful Patachitra**—a technique of traditional, cloth-based scroll painting.

The technique is known for detailed work, and usually picks on narratives from folklore, social issues and mythology. The artists, usually based out of the states of West Benga and Odisha are known as Patuas.

**Swarna used the technique for a superb representation of the narrative of the pandemic and complimented her art with a rendition of a melodic song.** This is part of the Patachitra tradition, where each painting is complemented with a song (in Patua Sangeet), which the artist sings while ravelling the artwork to throw light on is narrative and importance.

**In her current work, Swarna has used seven frames, with representations of the virus itself, the patients, and those working on the frontline—the healthcare workers. She has also portrayed the current situation of staying indoors and wearing a mask if stepping outdoors.[[3]](#footnote-4)**

1. <https://thewire.in/health/west-bengal-no-end-to-patua-artists-financial-woes-as-covid-19-rages> accessed on 20th July 2021 19:41 p.m [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. <https://thewire.in/culture/chitrakari-west-bengal-artists-painting> accessed on 20th july 2021 20:00 p m. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. <https://www.femina.in/trending/bengal-artist-portrays-fight-against-pandemic-in-a-fabulous-patachitra-155717.html> accessed on 20th July 20:20 p.m. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)