

Observation of highly ignored traditional ‘Potchitra’ handcrafts in Bharatpur village, Bankura Dist., West Bengal, India along with study of some local natural dye yielding plants used in this art form - a case study

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Abstract: ‘Potchitra’, one of the oldest traditional handcrafts of rural Bengal, Odisha and parts of Bangladesh, is a unique audio-visual folk lore accompanied by specially folded long piece of cloths or papers painted by natural colors. In West Bengal, ‘Potchitra’ art is being practiced in some districts of southern Bengal e.g., Midnapore, Bankura, Purulia, Birbhum and few tehsils of Bardwan since long back. Among the artisans of only Midnapore District have achieved a marked pinnacle in the National and International market of this traditional artistry. During recent visit for Community Leadership Programme in Bharatpur Village, Bankura, ‘Potchitra’ practices by local potuas was noticed in which mostly vegetables and mineral colors are being used. The present paper attempts to discuss less popular ‘Potchitra’ arts of Bankura District, details of natural colours being used, motifs, the lifestyle of potuas or ‘Chitrakar’ community of Bharatpur village and the problems faced by them in earning their livelihood. In this study local dye yielding plants and minerals being used in ‘Potchitra’ painting by potuas communities of Bharatpur village, Bankura, has been enumerated and documented total 22 plant species belonging to 16 families. This study intends to gather knowledge about other local uses of the dye yielding plants and need of their conservation for bio prospecting. An outline of the future perspectives for the art market of these folk artists is also projected in the present paper.

Background: The ‘Potchitra’ art form, an integral part of intangible heritage, has its origin in Eastern India, especially West Bengal, Odisha and parts of Bangladesh. Through Centuries, this art forms have been served as an effective platform where contemporary myths, lore, tales, audio-visual narratives, political and religious messages and music are being integrated to depict mythological, socio-cultural, political and stories of nature. In the state of West Bengal, India, Potchitra craftship of Midnapore district has touched a remarkable position in International market. During natural dye awareness campaign in Bankura districts, especially Bharatpur village, noticed that few families of this small underdeveloped village, though practicing and trying to keep alive this age old art form, but no recognition or monetary help are available from Government Sector. The present case study has been selected to approach Policy making for the artisans at Government level.

Materials & Methods: The study was conducted through 1. Survey in the target village; 2. Organizing awareness campaign regarding uses of natural dyes; 3. Brainstorming session with the active artisans; 3. Discussion with artisans about motif of their creation, myth, tools and technology used and 4. Problems facing by craftsmen regarding maintaining livelihood.

Results: Present survey cum awareness work on age old but ignored potchitra art form in Bharatpur village, Bankura District, West Bengal, India has tried to provide this intangible heritage arts a focus of public and Government attention. Local field trip in and around the village with representative Potuas revealed scope of uses of more wild plants (c. 22 species) as source of natural dyes.

Conclusion: About 14 highly talented Potuas from 14 representative families of this village were selected for further skill building workshop. Among the selected artisans, Shambhu Chitrakar (1st generation) and Anil Chitrakar (4th generation) have been nominated in Batch-I, for 01 month capacity building training programme jointly organised by Kolkata Centre of Creativity (KCC), Kolkata and B-CAF, West Bengal Arts Leadership Council (WICCI).

Key words: ‘Potchitra’; Folk art; Dye yielding plants; Potuas or Chitrakar community; Bharatpur village; Conservation

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I. Introduction

The essence of Indian folk artistry has an age old historical and perpetual belief and carries with itself a rich aesthetics in the whole world. This traditional art practices require a specialized skills and perfection which are being passed on generation after generation among specific communities. The art works of the craftsmen depict diverse realities and mythological tales in their own regional ways. These folk artisans have disseminated mythological, socio-political, spiritual and ethical values to the inaccessible areas of our country and have reached out audience of diversified taste over the years in various ways of which scroll paintings or 'Potchitra' is the mostly discussed one. The cultural and traditional dynamism of Indian heritage are seen in these specialised art forms. The 'Scroll painting' or 'Potchitra', famous for the dazzling play of natural colours, is one of the oldest and famous art form of India and has a long history of c. 2500 years¹. Historically mention of 'Potchitra' has been traced in Puranas, various Hindu Epics, ancient literature, ancient depicts, and closely related to cave painting of Mohenjo-Daro, Harappa and Ajanta. The word 'Potchitra' came from two Sanskrit words, 'Patta' means 'Cloth' and 'Chitra' depicts 'Picture'. As per another school of thought, 'Pot' means 'Scroll' and 'Chitra' specify 'Chitrakar' or 'Potuas'. Earlier the artists were traditionally referred as 'Potuas', but at present they specifically prefer to be called as 'Chitrakar', literally denotes 'Painter'. The 'Potchitra' or 'Pata' is a conventional mythological story telling art in which the artists perform a song, locally known as 'Pater Gaan', followed by unfolding of the related paintings to visualize the narrated story to the audience. The central elements of 'Potchitra-pater Gaan' include stories of mythological sagas such as marriage of fish and birds, Sokhi bilas, Chokkudan, Dhamsa madal, life of wild animals, contemporary socio-political issues, Hindu-Muslim tales, tribal life & rituals, epic stories, even recent Corona virus pandemic stories etc. which vary widely according to the creative minds of 'Chitrakar' and the taste of audiences. The uniqueness of 'Potchitra' painting lies with the typical making of the art form on the art paper lining with fabrics on the back to give them their characteristic rolled shape with original piece of art. The scroll or locally known 'jorano part', weaved as a vertical series of artworks of approx. 10-20 feet in length based on extent of the tales, inherited from their ancestors. Earlier the 'Potchitra' art forms usually were not sold or left to the audience, as potuas had to run from village to village for performing arts aiming recreation as well as to provide various contemporary messages. The 'Chitrakar' or potua community of West Bengal reside specifically in the districts of Midnapore, Bankura, Purulia, Birbhum and very few tehsils of Bardwan of which Midnapore district (especially Paschim Midnapore) is said to be abode of the Potuas who have made the Potchitra art famous throughout the world². During 20th Century, due to introduction of new forms of entertainments such as mobile, internet, and increasing passion in travels among urban and semi urban elite class people, interest in rural ethos, culture, art forms and, performing arts of Potuas decline in a decelerate rate³. Even in post-Independence era, majority of the 'Potchitra' artists were indirectly forced to abandon their traditional occupation for securing livelihood⁴. However, a good number of Chitrakar community, surviving with fighting against new mind-set of urban people, still pursuing their parental occupation, is intensified in the village of Naya and to a lesser extent, also the village of Habichak in Midnapore district. Surprisingly though the art form in the surrounding villages, have been kept alive with difficulties and practiced by the villages of Bankura, Purulia, Birbhum and few talukas of Bardwan, has not been enlightened in any Government or Private platform. During a recent Community Leadership cum Awareness Programme in Bharatpur Potchitra village, Bankura, practices of the 'Potchitra' art form by local Potchitrikars was observed meticulously by site visit and a brainstorming session with Potuas. The present paper attempts to document various 'Potchitra' art forms practiced by Bharatpur potuas, various motifs, sources of colours they use, scientific and local/vernacular names of dye yielding plants, parts of plants they use to extract dye, types of fixatives they use, other local uses of the dye yielding plants etc. This paper also tries to highlight the problems faced by the Bharatpur Potua community in earning their livelihood to keep up this tradition they inherited from their forefathers and also tried to outline the future perspectives for the art market of these folk artists.

II. Material and Methods

Bharatpur village, under Susunia Gram Panchayat, Chhatna subdivision of Bankura District, West Bengal, India, is comprising of 98 houses of which only 14 families of Potua community are being partially engaged in 'Potchitra' art practises. A conceptual session was conducted during Community Leadership cum Awareness Programme *w.e.f.* 28.03.22-30.03.22 with four generations of Potuas, representatives of each of the 14 families and collected primary data about their specific 'Potchitra' art forms. As the 'Potchitra' tradition of Bharatpur artisans has not been enlightened till now, no secondary data have been gathered. As tales of the art forms, myth behind the paintings and details of procurement of colours are being handed over generation after generation, only verbally, their knowledge should be properly conserved before extinction of the inside stories. During present study, four generations of Chitrakar community of Bharatpur village including few women artists were interviewed for collection of first-hand data. List of dye yielding plants of Bankura has been documented along with their bio prospecting to sustain livelihood.

III. Observation

A field study along with 4-5 local Potua villagers was conducted in and around Bharatpur village, Bankura along with thorough discussion with them to get complete and authentic data about what kind of natural colour they use in 'Potchitra' painting. As per statement of the most aged and young Potuas namely Shambhu and Anil respectively, due to extreme poverty, they can't afford proper ingredients, equipments and tools, rather use only some torn out cloth (as back lining), cheap papers, broken frames, broken containers and cheap brushes for their artistry. As per their comments, preparation of natural dye for making 'Potchitra' include collection of locally available specific plant parts (roots, stems, leaves, flowers, fruits etc.) followed by simple crushing and sun drying of aqueous extract. For adhering of the desired colours on base materials, addition of natural fixatives such as Gum Arabic, gum from Bael rind, gum from tamarind seeds, exudes of Sirish bark etc. are being followed. They also showed locally available 'Ghiru' stone, being used as mineral source of red dye, chalk dust as source of white dye and soot as source of black dye. After this awareness programme, 14 active and energetic artisans, practicing the craftworks in traditional manner only with natural colours, were selected purposively for future endeavour. About 25 enthusiastic Chitrakar members from 14 families joined the Community Leadership Programme along with showcasing their created 'Potchitra' on various motifs. (Plate 1).

Plate 1: Different motifs of Bengal Potchitra

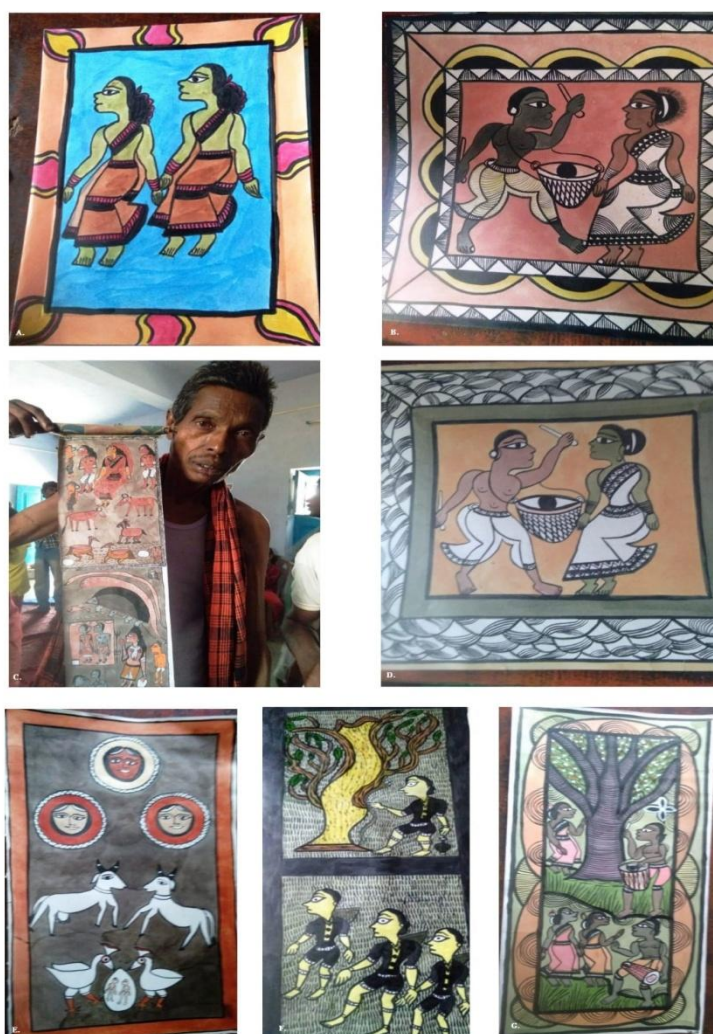
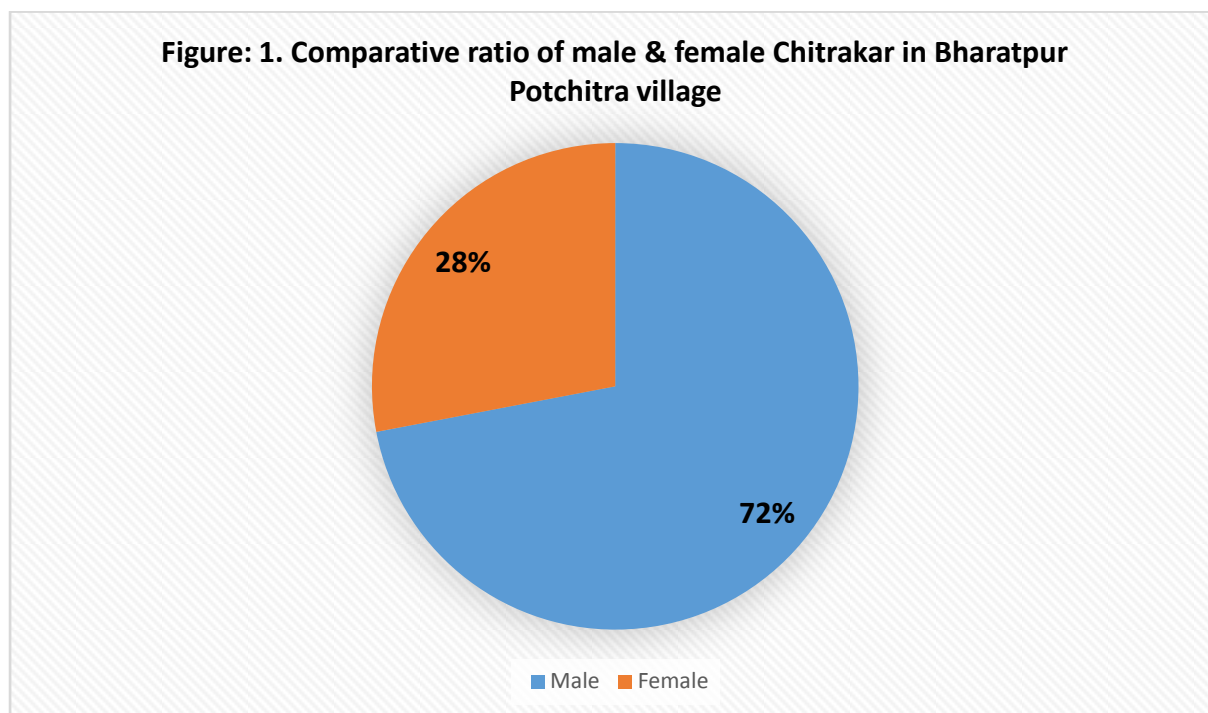


PLATE 1. Different motifs of Potchitra art form: A. Sukhi bhar; B. Dhama madal I; C. Shambhu chitrakar showing roll on potchitra art form depicting guran katha; D. Dhama madal II; E. Local deities and animals; F. Sarga dandhan (upper chitra) - Hasi khela (lower chitra); G. Dhama madal III

The ratio of male and female Potuasis being engaged in this art practise in Bharatpur village, West Bengal is shown in (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Ratio of male and female artisans being engaged in Potchitra artistry

Figure: 1. Comparative ratio of male & female Chitrakar in Bharatpur Potchitra village



The present study has recorded 22 local wild dye yielding plants belonging to 16 families used in the 'Potchitra' paintings by local Potuas of Bharatpur village is presented below (**Table 1**):

Table 1: Local wild dye yielding plants used in potchitra artform

Sl. No.	Name of taxa	Family	Local/ vernacular name	Dye yielding parts	Dye obtained	Other local uses
	Acacia catechu (L.f) Willd.	Leguminosae	Khair	Wood Bark	Brown to black	Catechu is antiseptic, applied on skin affections and mouth ulcers
	Aegle marmelos (Linn.) Correa ex Roxb.	Rutaceae	Bel	Rind of unripe fruit	Yellowish brown	Fruit edible, used in chronic dysentery
	Areca catechu L.	Arecaceae	Supari	Seeds	Brown to black	Seeds edible, seed extract used in tanning
	Artocarpus heterophyllus Lam.	Moraceae	Kathal	Root Wood chips	Yellow Brown	Bark tan yielding. Fruits edible
	Azadirachta indica A. Juss.	Meliaceae	Neem	Leaves Bark	Dark green Brown	Leaves used as vegetables, anthelmintic properties
	Basella alba L.	Basellaceae	Pui	Fruits	Dark red to purple	Leaves edible, leaf paste applied on boils. Dye used as food colourant
	Bauhinia purpurea L.	Leguminosae	Kanchan	Bark	Green to brown	Bark used in tanning. Flowers edible
	Bixa orellana L.	Bixaceae	Latkan	Fruit	Red	Leaves used in dysentery
	Butea monosperma Taub	Leguminosae	Palash	Flowers	Orange to red	Seeds anthelmintic
	Calotropis gigantea (L.) R.Br. ex Ait.	Apocynaceae	Akanda	Juice	Yellow	Seed floss used as stuffing materials. Latex used in leprosy
	Cassia fistula L.	Leguminosae	Amaltas	Bark Pods	Yellow to brown	Bark laxative. Seed pulp purgative.
	Clitoria ternatea L.	Leguminosae	Aparajita	Flowers	Blue	Leaves cooked as vegetables. Root bark laxative.
	Curcuma longa L.	Zingiberaceae	Halud	Rhizomes	Yellow	Rhizome paste used as antiseptic, food colorant, spice
	Commelina benghalensis L.	Commelinaceae	Kanchira	Flowers	Blue	Leaves used as vegetable
	Diospyros peregrina (Gaertn.) Gurke.	Ebenaceae	Gab	Rind of fruits Leaves	Yellow Brown	Fruits edible

	Eclipta prostrata (L.) L.	Asteraceae	Keshuth	Leaves	Black	Leaf pate applied on inflammation
	Enhydra fluctuans Lour.	Asteraceae	Helecchna	Whole plants	Bluish black	Leaf consumed as vegetable. Leaf juice antidiabetic
	Heliotropium indicum L.	Boraginaceae	Hatishur	Leaves	Black	Leaf decoction used in treat tumors
	Lawsonia inermis L.	Lythraceae	Hena	Leaves	Red to brownish red	Leaves eaten in case of dysentery
	Nyctanthes arbortristis L.	Oleaceae	Shiuli	Corolla tubes	Yellow to orange yellow	Leaves are consumed to expel worms in children
	Peristrophe tinctoria (Roxb.) Nees	Acanthaceae	Rang gachh	Whole plant	Red to magenta	Leaf decoction used in diarrhoea
	Tagetes erecta L.	Asteraceae	Ganda	Flowers	yellow	Petals are also used as food colourant

IV. Discussion and Conclusion

Since couple of years back, on stringent application of various Environment Protection Laws viz. Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA), Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA), Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-know Act (EPCRA), impulse of using natural dyes instead of synthetic colorants in arts and textile industries has raised enormously. During mid-21st Century, keeping in mind the severe harmful effects of synthetic dyes, majority of first world countries especially USA and European countries started to stop import of different textile fabrics, artworks, leather goods, food productsetc.fromdifferent developing countries where primarily chemicalcolorantsare being used in different industries and artstries. As a consequence, various artisan communities especially of third world countries who used to practice their artworks with synthetic colorsdue to easy availability and less price have fallen in great troubles.Subsequently the young generations, for sustaining livelihood, started to shift from their heritage profession to the more casual jobs such as pulling rickshaw, auto, small business, as sharecropper, casual labor in different small industries etc.At the end of 20thCentury to early 21st Century, even after ignoring bloodshot eyes of extreme poverty, several Potuas of specific districts of West Bengal and Odisha still keeping up their legacy in 'Potchitra' crafts.Realization of sustaining 'Potchitra' art form and recognition by Government and various non-Governmental organizations, raise a light of hope among Chitrakar community of particular districts of West Bengal (Naya village, West Midnapore) and Odisha (Raghurajpur village). However,discussionoffour generations of Potua community membersnamely, Shambhu Chitrakar, Anil Chitrakar, Ashok Chitrakar, Gulabi Chitrakar, Raghumani Chitrakar and Purnima Chitrakar of the study area of Bankura (Bharatpur village), it has been known that Potchitrakar of this village are practicing vegetable dyeingin Potchitra since generation aftergeneration but till now their artistic talent has not received any publicity or financial support from Government or NGOs. Therefore, with time the art of Bharatpur 'Patachitra' appeared to be a tradition on the verge of disappearing. As they stated that most of the young generations have lost their interests in these craft ships and shifted to another world of work for getting their bread and butter. The traditional village audiences also turned their face away from this old culture for easy access of more lucrative entertainment resulting Patachitra as one of the dying arts in recent days. Eventually poor Potua community face enormous problems and fail to compete with cheap and easily procurable market goods where synthetic colours are utilised⁵. Illiteracy made them even more vulnerable exhausting their artistic spirit. The sophisticated city-dwellers devalued these rural folk painters who found it quite difficult to gain a safe, respectable space for themselves within urban boundaries. The art of making Potachitra also lacking any specific thrust or policy support from the State Government. However, with spreading awareness among urban as well as semi urban societies, some steps are being taken by several Government organizations and NGOs, towards promoting the 'Potchitra' artform among energetic young Potuas. In a recent capacity Building programme, Botanical Survey of India in collaboration with B-CAFÉ, West Bengal Arts Leadership Council (WICCI), Paschim Rarh Itihaas o Sanskriti Charcha Kendra, Library & Museum and Lok Sanghita Foundation, discussed with the artisans about their created 'Potchitra' paintings, conducted a workshop to provide knowledge about how to procure some more beautiful shades of color from some available plants. Besides utilizing different locally available plants as dye sources, cultivation of Indigo, Marigold, Basella, Tea, Coffee, Cashew, Rubber, Coconut, Beetlenut etc. was suggested for securing their livelihood.Importance of the conservation practices of locally available economic plants were discussed with the villagers and convinced for multicrop cultivation. During a brainstorming session, the major problems that are faced by the artisanswerealso focused for settlement.Instead of unique piece of painting, the Potuas of this village were suggested to fabricatesmaller rectangular or square more handy dozens and dozens of 'Potchitra' paintings depictingthe same theme for sale in local as well as city market and exhibition purposes. As per the statement of Anil Chitrakar, young representatives of Bharatpur Chitrakar Society, Potuas' exhibition often faces a kind of entertainment whose intrinsic meaning is not felt and the buyers often bargain for the paintings as far as possible. Although in recent days, National and International market of 'Potchitra' art forms of few villages of particular district of West Bengal has touched a remarkable height, geniusness of less known or ignored Potua communities is still in dark. At the end of this Community

Leadership programme, a group of 14 highly skilled artisans were selected for further specialized training to lead their community in Bharatpur, Bankura. Among the selected Potuas after Awareness Programme, Shambhu Chitrakar (1st generation) and Anil Chitrakar (4th generation) have been nominated in Batch-I, for 15 days capacity building training programme jointly organised by Kolkata Centre of Creativity (KCC), Kolkata and B-CAF, West Bengal Arts Leadership Council (WICCI).

Rather than short term monetary assistance, making National and International market of their artistry by Government and non-governmental entrepreneurship, will be much more fruitful towards keeping alive the Bharatpur Potchitra and sustenance of this less known community.

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