Article

Nature, Culture and Oriental Heritage: Ethnographic Explorations on *Patua* and *Chhau* Communities of Bengal

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Abstract

A culturally vibrant country like India has multiple embedded forms of folk traditions accompanied by an essentially rich history that is constituted by a cultural–ecological heritage. West Bengal, one of the eastern states of India, is inhabited by numerous ecosystem-dependent communities. Nature, culture, and livelihoods remain deeply entangled in the indigenous practices, blurring concrete boundaries that separate tangible from intangible heritage. In mainstream "ecological" and "heritage" discourses, the folk performative customs and their architects are often projected as harbingers of ecological wisdom—relying on nature and, at the same time, giving back to her. Shedding light on Patuas of Naya Pingla, West Medinipur, and Chhau mask makers from Charida, Purulia, we complicate this line of argument by exploring complex interactions between material and cultural variables influencing these "living heritage" traditions. We have been "immersed" in dense ethnographic realms of the field to unpack complexities determining complex human–nature intersections that concurrently offer livelihood provisions and cultural sustenance among folk communities of rural South Asia. By weaving multilayered web of information and exploring the nonlinear ecology–economy–culture correlation along the two case studies, we have brought to the fore the significance of place-based narratives to inform

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overarching theories on heritage and ecological sustainability beyond mainstream perspectives. The case studies, though in geographical proximity, are neither meant to complement each other or to present a comparative narrative of ecological–cultural connect, but to highlight the importance of unmappable micro-realities and nonlinearities in shaping a community's resilience.

Keywords

Ecology and conservation, environmental sociology, ethnographic research, social and cultural anthropology

Introduction

A culturally vibrant country like India has multiple embedded forms of folk traditions across her cultural landscapes, accompanied by an essentially rich history that is constituted by a cultural–ecological heritage. However, the Anthropocene is also dotted with declensionist narratives of metabolic rift, framing ecological conflicts, where the Global South and Global North are pitted as antithetical. We argue that this provocative and transformative context is a strong enabler to move beyond this bipolar framing and apply and advance a more nuanced approach of cogitation. Oriental folk cultures are a case in point—they serve as a reminder to the importance of traditions, heritage, and the wisdom rooted in harnessing a holistic relationship with nature.

West Bengal is inhabited by numerous folk communities reliant upon plural ecosystems; these ecosystems are integral toward numerous provisioning and symbolic services for the communities. The cultural consciousness, that shapes the intangible element of Bengal's folk performativity, is reflective of Bengal's rich cultural history and sociopolitical evolution. This intangibility does not remain confined to an exploration of community identity, but it conveys a complex story of the evolution of ecological wisdom along intergenerational transmission of knowledge and skills. The planetary crisis and its local ramifications, on the one hand, and the global prescriptions promoting nature-based solutions (NbS), on the other, lay out the appropriate context through which challenges and opportunities faced by the oriental ecological folk heritage can be debunked along multilayered explorations of complex nature–culture intersections that shape this tradition.

On the global platform, historically, the importance of "heritage" and its purpose in a community has evolved from the concept of built structures to intangible cultural heritage (ICH), which was defined as "practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage" (UNESCO, 2003). ICH also identified oral traditions and expressions, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festivals, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, and traditional craftsmanship as major domains of the field itself, which

is extremely important in the context of understanding human–nature practices embedded with ecological and economic interactions, like cultural ecosystem services (CES) that shape cultural heritage in various microcommunities, especially in the context of Third World countries. Although the emergence of CES in academia can be traced to the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MEA) (2005) synthesis report that first extensively linked ecosystem services (ESS) to human well-being, it were the works by Sarukhán and Whyte (2005) that depicted the intangible identity of CES (Adekola & Mitchell, 2011; Daw et al., 2011) whose features include traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge, and practices concerning nature and the universe, or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts.

It is, however, important to consider that the tangible–intangible binary often gets blurred and necessitates a deeper understanding of associations between ecological and cultural heritage. How can tangible and intangible be effectively demarcated when tangible forms of heritage itself is a tenet for the intangible values that society or a community has put upon them? A structure of heritage is adorned with artifacts, holding numerous memories no less than what is ascribed as "living heritage" through multiple forms of expression. Similarly, the role of a mangrove, soil, a river, or even a local skill set derived from these resources has the ability to hold together a community with its memories, traditions, and expertise that define the community's cultural identity, shaping and transcending into the "living heritage." The deep interconnectedness that exists between living heritage and the resources from its ecosystem reflects the hybridity and flexibility of the ICH framework. While this hybridity reflects the community's uniqueness, at the same time, it makes community identity vulnerable to the ascendency of the dominant society in the current context of globalization (Lenzerini, 2011).

Within the context of emerging frameworks of indigenous knowledge techniques (IKT) and traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) since the early 1990s, scholarships addressing the role of ecosystem-dependent communities in facilitating the translation of ecosystem resources into ESS and benefits beyond quantifiable forms have gained significant grounds (Hatfield et al., 2018; Inglis, 1993; Rist et al., 2010; Van Eijck & Roth 2007). The literature also takes into account the challenges and complexities in the protection and promotion of TEK (Harisha et al., 2015) within particular geographical settings, provoking environmental social science scholars to unfold "epistemology of particulars" (Castree, 2008) in their related spatial and cultural contexts of research.

The cases of Naya Pingla and Charida, home to two distinct ecosystem-based folk traditions of Bengal, bring into the foray the exchanges on its intangibility and constantly evolving heritage. These cases, though in geographical proximity, are neither meant to complement each other or to present a comparative narrative of ecological–cultural connect, but to highlight the importance of unmappable micro-realities and nonlinearities in shaping a community's resilience. Beside the implementation of First World perceptions of what needs to be preserved, this constant homogenization of the complexities of the Global South, especially in the folk communities, proves to be a major hindrance in producing a sustainable

solution to these evolving communities. This article aims to empirically validate and inform the interdisciplinary concepts and frameworks discussed earlier, with the larger agenda of unravelling the complex interconnections among nature, culture, and heritage, ensuring or disrupting sustainable livelihoods among folk communities of rural West Bengal.

Realms of the Field

The *Chhau*[1] mask makers and *patachitrakars*[2] of West Bengal provide the empirical frame of reference for this research study. We weave stories to address and complicate the nature–culture correlation to unpack micro-local realities that often get masked under the global narrative of ecological resilience and community well-being.

Can a community's socio-ecological well-being be affected by its continued resilience? Or is community well-being impacted by resilient capabilities offered by natural resources of a particular region? The realities of eco-cultural folk practices in Pingla and Charida expose complex environmental challenges of the Global South or of the Third World that cannot be explained through the contentious application of First World solutions. Guha and Martinez-Alier's (1997) "ecology of affluence" versus "environmentalism of the poor" explicates this scenario and the need for identifying locally tuned/geared approaches to introspect the wide spectrum of regional to micro-local realities.

We applied diverse sets of qualitative methods, blending it with oral history narratives, and our observational insights, drawn from the field and specific artistic events like the Pingla *Potmela* held during winter. We visited Naya Pingla in December 2019 for two days during its customary annual celebration of *Potmela*, where we expected to be thrust into the loud vibrancy of an artistic folk environment. Although secondary literatures had given us an idea on the history and present livelihood of *patuas*, the *Potmela* or the *Patachitra* fair was supposed to be our primary source in understanding this particular folk heritage, and it did not disappoint us; not because it corroborated or challenged our preconceived notions, but it gave us the opportunity to visually immerse ourselves in the scene and to reconsider how we perceive data in the social space. Quite interestingly, our approach in Charida was different. Here, not any particular event, but the regular lives of the mask makers, and their connectedness with the local ecology, were assessed using an in-depth exploration to extract data. Pingla and Charida—these case studies together have provided us with an edge to demonstrate linkages between community–ecology resilience and well-being; lessons from the field enabled us to explore if the relationship between ecosystem resilience and community well-being remains directly proportional to each other or if the resilience thresholds keep evolving, while simultaneously addressing the variables shaping this relationship. The stories of *Chhau* mask makers from Charida, Purulia, and *Patuas* from Naya Pingla, Paschim Medinipur, are the spatial sites of reference from rural West Bengal that have been identified as case studies for this

article to unravel complexities within human–nature intersections, where ecosystem dependence determines livelihood provisions and cultural sustenance making way to nature–culture confluence.

Exploring Naya Pingla

Naya Pingla, the village of singing painters, more commonly known as Pingla and located in the Pingla block in West Medinipur is more than just a village. A small craft hub in Bengal, Pingla is home to unique tribe of painters, singers, and lyricists. With the nearest railway station approximately 11 km away at Balichak, Pingla, is the embodiment of rural Bengal, sheltered away from mushrooming urbanity nearby. Home to almost 300 patuas, the village displays a serene rustic scenery of the countryside.

While the origin of *Patachitra* as a profession is not known, various oral lore and traditions suggest that it began as a profession from around 10–11th century AD in Bengal. Like *Chhau, Patachitra* art is also frequented with spatio-cultural attributes, such as the Kalighat *Patachitra* that originated in the vicinity of Kalighat temple area between 19thand 20th centuries, while the Odisha *Pattachitra*, inspired by the Hindu deities such as Lord Jagannath and Vaishnavite sect, can be traced back to the 12th century AD (Kanungo et al., 2020).

The Bengal *Patuas* would wander from village to village, frequenting the homes of affluent people such as zamindars, feudal lords, administrative and police heads, and display the scrolls while narrating stories of the deities during pujas or festivals. The narration would include stories from local lore and local *Purana*s, especially from the *Manasa Mangal Kavya, Chandi Mangal Kavya*, and *Dharma Mangal Kavya* to the *Ramayana* and, in some cases, even Islamic saints (Bajpai, 2015), and in return of the performance, they would be rewarded with cash or kind or both in the form of grains, food, and clothes. Some of the present *Patuas* identify as Muslims, while practicing Hindu festivals and local accounts suggest that the rural region was influenced by the influx of Muslim invaders from the west from 12th century onwards, so this dual identity is not uncommon in West Bengal. Oral narratives also state that most of the *Patuas* were Hindus who converted in the post-Mughal era, thus retaining many characteristics of their previous religion and forming a unique syncretic culture. This can be observed through the presence of cultural singularity in their surnames "*Chitrakar*," which denote their profession as an artist, while blurring the religious connotations and uniting them as a community. However, the local aristocratic patronage soon dwindled and the *Patuas* had to resort to farming practices to sustain their livelihoods. Such was their dire situation that many resorted to begging.[3]

Keeping in mind the historical context of the region, we traversed the village, intending to explore the ecological–folk heritage dynamics present in the community at present. The visit, however, was not centered around any set of questionnaires or with a consolidated hypothesis in mind. We entered the village with a completely blank slate in mind, enthralled by their annual celebration. Despite the multiple oral narratives and key informant interviews (KIIs), the

Potmela also termed *Potmaya* itself proved to be the best informer of interesting stories (Figure 1). The entry gate to the village, made of bamboo, was housed by a glamorized banner of the fair on top, adorned with two traditional long scrolls on both sides signaling the significance of its heritage, although upon close inspection, paper placards can be observed above the scrolls that had "#Potmela, #Pingla, and #Potmaya" printed on them. These placards were observed in almost every nook and corner of the village, highlighting the significance of social media in the art's continuity and popularity. With our entry, it also became clear that the *Potmela* did not require any formal designated space, where the works of the *patuas* would be displayed in an exhibition. Instead, every household was a stage, where the *kachha* or *pakka* houses were adorned with their art, displayed on walls, floors, or a short makeshift raised platform. There were, however, built infrastructures housing *patachitra* museum and information of the *patua* culture, but without a visit to the houses, it is impossible to understand the eco-cultural heritage of the village. The visitors themselves also gave us interesting perspectives to ponder as we observed people from multiple ethnicities, nationality, and other varied sections of the society visit and interact with the *patuas*. Young students and scholars from nearby colleges and universities sat on the pavements, capturing the scenery on camera as well as in sketches. Few of them actively interacted with the elderly folk, noting their experiences and nostalgia. Officials from *Banglanatok.com* talk with the media houses, urging them to put the spotlight on the challenges faced by the *patuas*. We realized that it was not only the art that made visitors consider *Patachitra* a heritage but also the community and its actors themselves, sharing their stories, and it is this living heritage the visitors would take back home.

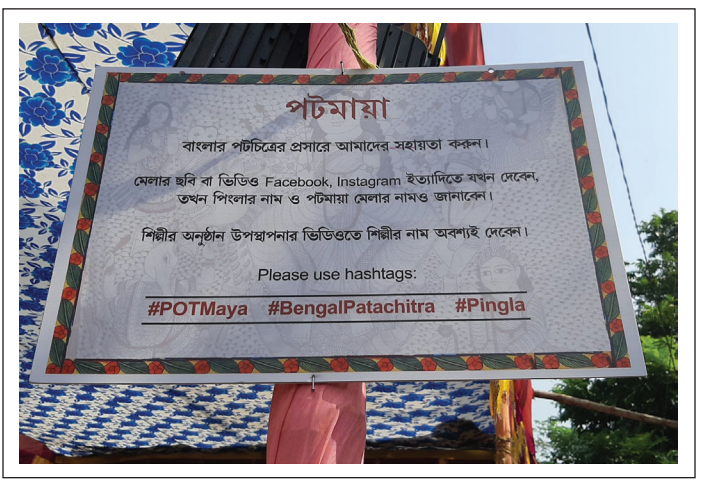

Figure 1. Placard in Naya Pingla Encouraging the Use of "Hashtags" to Popularize Bengal's *Patachitra* on Social Media

Source: The author (S. Bhattacharya).[4]

While all roads in Pingla led to works of art, the roads themselves were a lens to the artistic transformations in the community, signaling the balance between the rustic and modernity. The *kachha* roads were adorned with modern lightings and decorative banners, leading to the heart of the village. Food stalls selling *daal bhat* and biriyani were built at the entry of the village, catering to the culinary diversities of the visitors. As the kids run by visitors leisurely walking by every household, a makeshift platform can be observed in an open space that will house folk song and dance performances for the evening, catering to locals and visitors of different backgrounds. The roads lined by walls of the houses depict *patachitra* style of art but of contemporary events, while the *pats* are seen hanging for visitors to observe. However, the understanding of the art is incomplete without the *patachitra* performance, where the story of the scroll is narrated through a rustic rendition, enhancing the audiovisual immersion of a researcher. These performances, an integral component of the art, are a repository of information itself on the history of art and the influence of global drivers on its form. Whether it is the story of mythology or a conception of *patua,* the ubiquitous presence of living heritage in village dominates one's senses throughout his visit, thus giving us the opportunity to correlate and combine with the multiple oral narratives from the *patuas* and other non-*patua* locals.

Investigating Charida

Charida, located in the Baghmundi block of Purulia district in West Bengal, India, is situated 2.3 km away from sub-district headquarters at Pathardihi and 71.9 km away from district headquarters at Purulia. With a total geographical area of the village at 909 ha, this quaint village, in the land of red soil, is surrounded by the Ayodhya forest and the Ayodhya range. In the south, a village called *Ghorabandh* is situated in the southern part of this watershed. The block town—Baghmundi—is situated on the eastern side. Two adjacent villages of *Dava Sangsad, Dhundikhap*, and *Khirabera* are located on the western side. Charida, snuggled at a corner of the culturally rich Purulia district, is the village inhabited by mainly 300 skilled mask makers (i.e., *sutradhars*) and others non-*sutradhars*. This village is the birthplace of the famous *Chhau* dance, which is an acrobatic martial art–based dance form inscribed in United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Oral traditions suggest that *Chhau* had derived from the Sanskrit word *Chhaya* (meaning "shadow,") while many propagate the story of its military origin, rooted in Oriya words like *Chhauka* (the quality of attacking stealthily), *Chhauri* (armor) and *Chhauni* (military camp). Oral history also dictates that the *Chhau* Dance form had its origin in the Nilgiri region of Baleshwar district, Odisha, while local accounts narrate stories of Hindu chieftains who gradually established their sovereignty in some pockets of the then Bengal Province (comprising Bengal, Bihar, and Odisha) between the 12th and the 13th centuries and were slowly shaped by the lives, livelihoods, and customary practices of the local tribal and

ethnic communities. The dance has been performed on *Chaitra Parab* in several districts of Odisha, South East Bihar, and South of West Bengal since centuries, to appease and influence the Sun God, which is evident from etymological significance of *Chhau* (*Chhaya* implying "shadow"). *Chhau* dancing styles are influenced by spatial and cultural attributes, such as the *Purulia Chhau*, the *Saraikalla Chhau*, and the *Mayurbhanja Chhau*, of which the *Mayurbhanj Chhau* is the oldest.

The mask-making tradition goes back to the era of King Madan Mohan Singh Deo's reign of Baghmundi. Although *Chhau* was patronized by the Baghmundi rulers, it lost royal support and patronage, owing to the infertility and rounds of drought in the arid ecosystem zone, causing economic insecurities in the region. The decline of the royal regime and subsequent loss of royal patronage compelled the *Chhau* dance and mask-making communities to sustain and earn their livelihoods by themselves. Although there have been multiple changes across times, determining the products and artistry surrounding masks, a major shift has been observed only in the switching of design and manufacturing of *kirat-kirati* and *kathakali* masks in recent times.[5]

Keeping in mind the rich historical and spatial context of Charida, an in-depth investigative approach was applied to understand sociocultural dynamics in the *Chhau* mask-making community (Figure 2). Differing from the "immersive method" in Pingla, various range of methods, including open-ended questions for KIIs, focus group discussions (FGDs), and informal on-site conversations, were tried in Charida. Ethnography has been complemented with secondary literature—mainly vernacular sources discussing folk art in Eastern India.

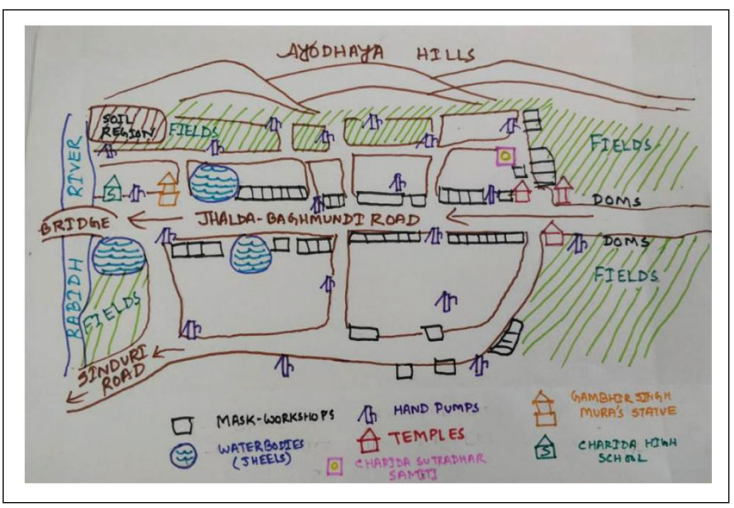

Figure 2. Illustration Based on Transect Walk Conducted in the Charida Village.

Source: Mukherjee and Chatterjee (Forthcoming)

Deriving from Davies et al. (2001), the significance of "memories" (as a collective/percolative process through which stories are told, transcribed, and examined) as a qualitative methodological tool was explored. Semi-structured and open-ended questions were designed to facilitate informants and discussants detailed reflections on the transformations they had observed in terms of use and extraction of ESS in mask making and other social changes across a span of a decade.

Transect walk and Participatory Research Appraisal (PRA) and Participatory Appraisal of Natural Resources (PANR) approaches and tools have been applied. While PRA techniques (including mappings, group meetings, and surveys and transect walks) enabled large-scale participation from village communities, through PANR, local communities' appraisal and relationship with the available natural resources have been traced. A combined methodology converging PRA, PANR, and transect walk could capture the "sense of place," facilitating detailed understanding and compilation of vivid components of intersections between ESS and community roles and livelihood in Charida.

Case Studies: Pingla and Charida

"Natured" Living

The relationship between nature and human has been explained over the years through multiple academic deliberations. This relationship, when perceived through the services provided, and often defined as "provisioning services of the ecosystem" or "ecosystem services" can be further extended to a newer realm, termed as CES (CES). With more focus on the aspect of culture and recreation, (Costanza et al., 1997), the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MEA, 2005) further categorized it into five distinct categories—recreation and ecotourism, aesthetic values, cultural diversities, spiritual and religious values, and knowledge and educational values. CESs play a very significant role so far as *Patachitra* paintings and *Chhau* masks are concerned. This section delves into the nature–cultural services provided through these folk traditions in the respective case studies.

Pingla

Although *Patachitra* finds its origin in both Bengal and Odisha, in this section, we will describe and discuss the various styles of *pats* prepared in Pingla. Recognized as a rural craft hub of West Bengal by UNESCO, the 1-h journey to Naya Pingla village (commonly known as Pingla) from the Balichak station provides a glimpse of the region's challenges and opportunities. Shifting away from the quaint suburban town toward the village, reveals a region adorned by paddy fields and broken roads, enriched with an interactive cultural ecology, finding its roots in Bengal's artisanal history.

The art of *patachitra* is mainly practiced in three formats in Bengal. These original formats of painting are from Purulia, Bankura, Birbhum, and West

Mednipur and are called *Jadano pat, Arelatai pat*, and the *Choukosh pat.* The *Jadano pat*—or the scroll—shows the various episodes of the story in vertically placed sequences in 10–15 frames. In the *Arelatai pat*, there are six to eight horizontal frames that are bound on the two ends by two wooden sticks, allowing the patua to unroll the pat, and gradually displaying it to the audience while performing. Finally, in case of the *Choukosh pat*, as the native meaning of *Choukosh* suggests "square," this *Pat* is a single sheet of rectangular paper, which is commonly used to eulogize a deity or an event (Bajpai, 2015).

The main classical themes of *patachitra* find their origin from Hindu mythologies and folk stories from Bengal, Bihar, and Odisha, which the *patuas* have learned through generations. A huge section of the community are Muslims, so it is interesting to see practitioners of Islam, who are against idolatry, drawing their livelihoods from paintings of Hindu mythological figures. The *patuas* use their own lyrics to narrate the stories on the scrolls (*pater gaan*), which project the vibrancy of this colorful aural–visual art form, unmarred by sociocultural limitations. Their color palette consists of several colors such as red, yellow, blue, brown, green, etc., all of which are derived from natural resources (discussed in Table 1). Locals suggest that all these colors are prepared in coconut shells in bulk quantities and can be used and reused for almost 1–2 years.

The majority of the colors used in the scroll paintings are still mostly made from natural elements such as tree barks, lamp soot, gum, etc. Although, apart from paper and cloth, sometimes palm-leaf manuscripts were made to paint the

Table 1. Use of Natural Colors in *Patachitra*.

Color	Source
Yellow	Marigold flower, turmeric, or soil
Green	Leaves of hyacinth bean plant, green beans, or the leaves of wood apple
Purple	Black plum or blackberry
White	Conch-shell powder or white mud
Brown	*Arjun* and *Shagun* tree barks, and limestone mixed with black catechu
Red	Saffron fruit, pan or betel leaf, lime and khayer, vermillion, *alta* (a reddish or scarlet ink or dye solution used for coloring feet), or terracotta soil
Grey	Soot from earthen ovens
Blue	*Aparajita* flower, blue seeds—locally known as *nil bori*
Black	Soot off from the outside bottoms of clay pots, oil lamps, or even burning bamboo or rice and pounding it to a powder to which is added homemade glue for required consistency or by burning the roots of the velvet apple trees. Presently, they are collected from dirty lorry exhaust pipes with a stick and in plastic bags

Source: Field observations and narratives.

scrolls, in recent years, this has been substituted completely by the use of paper, which is stuck on cloth to provide more stability when used as a canvas for drawing. The paintbrushes are also made from natural elements like the whiskers of the tail of squirrels and mongoose, tied with thin strips of bamboo to give the shape of a paintbrush. The colors are then mixed in empty shells of broken coconuts (which serve as a palette) with the help of water and homemade glue. To make the colors durable, they are mixed with gum, which is made from grinding the seeds of the wood apple tree and mixing it with water.

Both men and women in the village participate in manifold forms of conservation methods. Women plant several small trees in their courtyard and harvest flowers, leaves, and fruits as natural elements of their artwork. They pick their products judiciously in order to preserve them for almost a year. The men in the village support the women to plant seeds and prepare the soil.

However, in recent times, like the canvas, the natural colors have also been substituted with easily bought acrylic and fabric paints from the market, mostly for the commercialized products.

Charida

In the case of Charida, the most important ecosystem resources for mask making are soil and water, although the manufacturing and production of the masks also require the help of various trees, found in local forests and in the premises of mask makers' houses, and the overall climatic characteristics of the region, without which the physical process of the mask making would be incomplete.

The mask makers of the village collect the clay from a specific 2-*bigha* soil region, located in the northwestern part of Charida.[6] The importance of this region lies in the characteristics of its soil properties—a combination of clay and loamy soil bordered by the Rabidh River in the northwest, and wide patches of paddy fields on either side of the village. The first phase of the process, known as *mati gara*,[7] begins when the soil is diluted with water, thus providing the *chanch* (foundational base) of the mask. Once the *chanch* is ready, it is dried and baked under the sun. This follows into the next step of *kabij lepa*, where a thin layer of clay is again added to the baked *chanch* after mixing it with water. This is followed by the two parallel processes of *chhai makhano* (i.e., sprinkling of powdered ash) and *kagoj chitano* (i.e., pieces of papers pasted on the mask base, with the help of gum, made of white flour). Here, it is interesting to note the bifurcation of artisan status and responsibilities. The "skilled" artisans have the privilege to prepare the *chanch*, as they are the descendants of the original bloodline—the *Sutradhar* lineage—while the "unskilled" people only assist by remaining engaged only in surface-level preparation, including coloring and décor.

Water, essential in mask making, comes from the Rabidh River and its two streams—*Badhti Tola* and *Anandanagar*, flowing through the northwestern part of the village. Womenfolk of the village mention that few decades ago, water was collected from the *Basudi* River for both household activities and mask making until it dried up, after which water was collected from Rabidh and Sakha rivers, which are rain-fed. Water is used in several ways during the mask-making process like being added to the soil during the *mati gara* and *kabij lepa* stages of mask

preparation or during the preparation of the traditional gum (*rul moida*), made by boiling flour and then mixing with copper sulphate (*tute*). *Rul moida* is mainly required during the *kagoj chitano* stages, where *kagoj*, that is, paper, is pasted on the dried and baked *chanch*.

The northern part of Charida, adjacent to the Ayodhya Hills, is bestowed with a huge forest cover of 540 ha, where different trees such as tamarind, coconut, neem, pumpkin, corn, guava, mango, indigo, black plum, etc., grow in different types of land in Charida and its adjoining areas that include upland (*tarr*), mid upland (*baidh*), mid lowland (*kanali*), low land (*bohal*), and also as homestead species, which are used to make natural colors that are applied on face masks. A variety of colors are extracted from nature in Charida that not only provide an aesthetic value to the masks in its artistic provisions but also in the global market itself as a product of commercial value (Mukherjee & Chatterjee, Forthcoming).

The colors also signify the different characteristics attributed to the mythological characters that are performed in *Chhau*. Generally, the masks used for protagonists are painted white and crafted with delicate designs—a tinge of blue and green appear along the jawline and the forehead, like Lord Rama and Lord Krishna, while the masks of the antagonists reflected vivid red or green colors. Their masks demonstrated wide dilated nostrils, bloodshot eyes, ferocious facial expressions, wrinkled skin, and open mouth from which fangs come out and unkempt black hair and black beard. All heroic characters wore elaborate headdress, consisting of beads and yarn. The floral ecosystem makes way to these colors and décor that are discussed in Table 2. For the final touches in decoration, yarn, jute, bamboo sticks, and beads are used.

The women in the village, as a result of their intrinsic nature–society relationship, over the years, are aware of the ecological sensitiveness of their craft. From planting tamarind and *aparajita* flowers (Asian pigeonwings) in their courtyard gardens to preserving seeds and soil, especially for the winter season,

Table 2. Use of Natural (Floral) Colors in Mask Making and Décor.

Color	Source
Red	Barks, roots, insects, terracotta soil, etc.
Blue	Indigo (neel), flowers, and seeds of the *Aparajita* plant
Yellow	Turmeric (*holud*), *kamela, tesu*, marigold, and *dolu*
Green	Leaves of the hyacinth bean plant and wood apple
White	Conch-shell powder and white mud
Grey	Soot of earthen ovens
Black	Soot of clay pots; rice (burned and pounded into powdered form and added to homemade glue); and (burned) roots of velvet apple trees

Source: Compiled From qualitative interviews and observations (2017–2020).

the women in the village participate in their own ways to preserve their local environment.

Actors, Arrangements, and Changing Socio-ecological Scenes

While the practice of natural elements in traditional folk art imbibes the community heritage of the space, the evolving context surrounding the folk practices needs to be addressed as well. In both cases of Pingla and Charida, the changing scenarios, involving the contextual challenges and the role of multiple stakeholders in the region's emerging resilience, have had a lasting effect on the region's socio-ecological context. This following section delves into these aspects, shedding light on the socio-ecological well-being of the region.

Pingla

While there exists a dearth of history on the origin of this art form in Bengal, the community was indefinitely affected by the change of Bengal's sociopolitical regime. The *patuas* reluctancy to share their earnings, at present times, can be traced back to the community's shared past filled with challenges to survive the past decades. Oral testimonials reveal the dire existence they were in only a few decades ago until local and intra-local government and private agencies like *Banglanatok.com* provided them the platform to rejuvenate and redefine their art, where they could adapt and cater to local, national, and global demands. The cost of long elaborate *Pats* or scrolls range in between ₹10,000–300,000, while the small economical items such as coasters, lamps, umbrellas or garments start from around ₹50. Conversations with the artisans reveal that even though the continuation of their heritage while sustaining themselves is considered to be a boon for some, others still need more aid to overcome some of the challenges, which blur the ecological resilience–well-being equations straitjacketed by the quantitative discourses in past decades, ignoring the protean sensibilities of environment and human well-being across macro and micro spatio-temporalities.

Local non-*patua* narratives suggest that the condition of the *chitrakar* community in the village, before its recognition by UNESCO, had been extremely poor, as the artisans had shifted to begging and farming to make their ends meet. However, the receival of the Geographical Indication tag (GI) and recognition as a rural craft hub by state and international organizations proved to be a boon for the community. At present, Pingla is home to 255 *Patuas* who have been taking part in the *potmela* for almost a decade. The annual *potmela* is organized by the local artisans, government bodies, and members of agencies like *Banglanatok.com*, which has been essential in bringing the change in the community, as stated by the locals. Various elderly crafts(wo)men narrate how the officials from *Banglanatok.com* took upon themselves to encourage and popularize the dying form of art globally. This change not only allowed the community to choose the livelihoods they preferred but also alleviated the condition of multiple women in the *chitrakar* community. Case narratives reveal that artisans like Swarna

Chitrakar, arguably the most famous *patua* in the village, were once a victim of domestic abuse.[8] However, her skill, which got her global recognition, also gave her the condition to stand up for her own rights. At present, Swarna lives contentedly with her husband and daughter, both supporting and participating in her venture. Similarly, other *patua* women also share similar stories, about matriarchies now running the families through their skills and direction, while the men, who previously had given in to substance abuse, now enthusiastically engage and assist their wives and daughters with *patachitra* activities.

It is important to recognize the impact of the agential roles from an anthropocentric perspective, not only on the local ecological aspect but also under the aegis of Third World political economies that face the constant pressure of global consumerism. The *potmela* festival draws a large crowd across states and foreign residents and provides the *patuas* with a significant source of income. Beside these, they also receive invitations from national and international craft fairs, where they showcase their long scrolls. Artificial coloring seems to have become popular for non-scroll products such as coasters, lamps, umbrellas, etc., as the natural colors are not durable on the surface of these objects, which are economical items and thus are popular among tourists during the *mela*. Regarding the practice with new ingredients, an interesting dynamic can be noted across various generations. While the elderly generation values the traditional methods, they are not opposed to the use of artificial coloring, as for them the survival of the community takes precedence. The younger generations, however, prefer the traditional methods as, according to them, these methods bind them to their heritage and give them respect on the global platform. Interestingly, this interplay of traditional and adaptive practices actually gives the local ecosystem a chance to survive, by bringing the necessary global/infrastructural attention to the art form, and thus contributing to the regional ecological resilience and community well-being.

The *patachitra* tradition, being an emotive display of the skill sets of accomplished lyricists, painters, singers, and storytellers, has been instrumental in expressing the man–nature relationship from an ecological–cultural perspective. Multiple artisans, ranging from teenage to elderly *chitrakars*, share their contentment toward practicing the profession, while expressing the solidarity toward practicing the collective heritage, even at the cost of including modern themes, concepts, and methods of preparation because it allows them to pursue what they love. The walls of various houses in Pingla are adorned with *patachitra* art, depicting contemporary scenes like the Pulwama attack or the imagery of Dr. Martin Luther King concurrently portrayed along with scrolls adorned with imageries from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, hanging on same walls, bathing and drying in the sun. Multiple *patuas* paint about climate change, using trees, roads (from mud to concrete), and even changing building structures to express their concern about the changing environment and use their skills to bring awareness in the community as well as the visitors. The *potmela*, therefore, has been instrumental in not only popularizing the region's story on a global scale but also familiarized global issues in this particular region's doorstep.

Charida

One of the most interesting scenes of socio-ecological transformation in Charida is observable in the aspect of gender dimensions and hierarchical complexities, followed by the region's recognition into an ecotourist hub. The Baghmundi block is the home of Late Chipa Singh, Late Babulal Mistri, and others who were the pioneers in introducing the present form of Purulia *Chhau*, thus attracting an international market for this specific stylistic form. Guru Gambhir Singh Mura (son of Late Chipa Singh) continued this ancestral tradition and was awarded the *Padma Shri* by the Government of India in 1981.[9] Although the dancing lessons were initially only imparted to the male members of the society hailing from families of orthodox artists, at present, women also participate in the dance form. Most of the *Chhau* dancers presently are the *shishyas* (disciples) of *Guru* Gambhir Singh Mura, *Guru* Anil Sutradhar and *Guru* Nepal Sutradhar, considered as stalwarts in the Purulia *Chhau Parampara*,[10] and of these *gurus*, Anil Sutradhar and Nepal Sutradhar are still alive and have now switched from dance to full-time mask making.

Oral narratives recall the story of a few Brahmin image or idol makers were brought to Purulia from the adjacent district of Burdwan and also from the adjoining states of Bihar and Odisha. It was Babulal Sutradhar, the predecessor of Anil Sutradhar, who had invented the mask-making technique for *Chhau* in the region. Initially, pumpkin shells were used to make the base of facial masks.[11]While a growth in mask production was noticeable under the reign of King Madan Mohan Singh Deo of Baghmundi, eventually, the decline of the royal regime took away the royal patronage of both the *Chhau* dancing and mask-making communities and thus compelling them to sustain and earn their livelihoods by themselves.

The artistry itself has a separate division of labor, classified into "skilled" and "unskilled" mask makers in the village in the context of the *chanch*. The "skilled" artisans are only allowed to prepare the *chanch*, as they are "privileged" of being descendants of the original bloodline, that is, being identified with the *Sutradhar* lineage. The "unskilled" people are the assistants who remain engaged only in surface-level preparation, including coloring and décor[12] (Table 3).

Despite the work severance, several changes can be observed in lieu of the state and global recognition of this folk-art tradition. Though women were not initially included in the mask-making process, at present, among 308 mask makers in Charida, more than 50% of women assist male mask manufacturers, including taking part in the *matigara* phase, while remaining sensitive to the entire mask production process, using ecosystem resources.

Table 3. Income Difference Between Skilled and Unskilled Labor.

Artisans	Average Income (in ₹/month)
Skilled	2,000
Unskilled	1,200

Source: The authors.

With Charida's transformation into a UNESCO ecotourist heritage site, the non-*Sutradhar* (agriculturist) families, besides the 308 traditional mask-making households, have also become enthusiastic in setting up mask shops to cater to the tourists. These families depend on *Sutradhar* women for manufacturing cost-effective masks as compared to masks made by traditional ("skilled") male mask makers. The elevation of women's role from "unskilled" (assistants) to "semi-skilled" labor, along with increased engagement in the process, has also sharpened their ecological sensitivity and awareness, evident from plantation activities in households and maintenance of homestead gardens.

The village's recognition as an ecotourist heritage site has also promoted ecosystem and cultural heritage preservation ethos in the local community. The locals have taken ownership of the conservation process by actively engaging in the sociopolitical dynamics of the cultural art form. The main four organizations in Charida that are encouraging the preservation and promotion of the *Chhau* culture are *Chhau Mukhos Silpi Sutradhar Samity, Chhau Mukhos Silpi Sangha, Manbhum Lokshilpi Sangha*, and *Purulia Chhau Samity. Chhau Mukhos Silpi Sangha* is a cooperative society, which was formed by the *Chhau* mask makers of Charida in 2012, with 10 female members, and it organizes a village fair, also popularized as the Charida festival. West Bengal Khadi and Village Industries Board has recently provided a working capital of ₹500,000 to this organization to strengthen their business.[13] The committee also provides loan to its members at a minimal interest rate.

Apart from these local networks, the nongovernmental organization—*Banglanatak.com*—also supports Charida *Chhau*. The organization's mission statement is the protection and preservation of the rights of women, children, and indigenous communities and with their specialization in communication for development like theater, they promote and preserve intangible cultural heritage like performing arts and crafts produced by community-led creative industries, with the final agenda of facilitating community well-being.

Discussion and Conclusion

The case studies together reveal the role of the intricate relationship between the community and the shared ecological scenario, in the development of cultural identity, and social consciousness among the artists. In both cases, changing social scenes have been instrumental in the onset of intangible cultural preservation discourse. The introduction of *Potmaya* or *Potmela* was crucial in engaging the global and local folk culture perception for Bengal *Patachitra* art. Encountering the depiction of global events in traditional folk art is a testament to the passion of these *Patuas* who keep themselves updated with transformative sociopolitical contexts and integrating them in their cultural livelihood practices. Similarly, the promotion of Charida as an ecotourist hub, witnesses its folk practitioners, utilizing the opportunity to engage with redefined tools of practice, incorporating the dimensions of climate change, gender, and cultural preservation in the age of Anthropocene. The multiple and varied micro-dimensions of their livelihood

practices also differ in both the communities, which, thus, bear contrasting effects on the community's well-being.

Thus, the stories from Charida and Pingla shed light on the importance of intangible heritage preservation in ecosystem-dependent folk communities, incorporating the human–nature interactions, and how this influences the socio-ecological resilience in these regions. The place-based narratives not only allow us to explore the complex dynamics between environment and society but also offers a glimpse into this constantly evolving relationship of ecological resilience and community well-being against the linear purview of correlation. The different methodological techniques applied in understanding the role of heritage conservation and ESS in the same arena allow opening the aperture on socio-ecological resilience in rural communities in South Asia, providing an in-depth grasp of the nonlinear ecology–economy–culture dynamics.

Both the cases present unique narratives of culture and ecology and their connectedness to resilience and well-being, relegating any presumptive notions on the scale of time, place, and perspective. The dense field explorations from Charida and the spontaneous immersion around *Potmela* in Pingla help us in assessing the changes in gender and social hierarchies over the decade with unique perspectives. The influence of global events and the consumerist culture also shows the development of inclusive traditions in these rural artistic communities. So, labeling the individualistic socio-ecological, economic, and even political developments under a broad umbrella presents a very limited understanding of these localized verities. Along with this, their ecological worldviews and cultural rootedness are evident from the diverse strategies and ways that they devise and experiment with to continue with their artistic traditions. This is evident from the works of Dharmendra Sutradhar, a young mask maker from Charida who, while carrying on the old traditional method of the mask-making process, not only preserves the traditional art form but also experiments and adapts to the global changes, by introducing new themes and mask models. The pandemic has not succeeded in curbing his passion. Dharmendra continues teaching the village youth about mask making, disseminating his years of experience and passion for the art form.

These plural narratives, thus, allow us to explore the multiple transformations and its drivers in different regions and how it influences in different regions. While there are stories of staying rooted to traditional skills of heritage among the youth, there are narratives of acceptance of new changes with the advent of global consumerism among elderly generations, whereas both cases depict different stories of a community striving toward their own well-being. Therefore, as discussed in the beginning of the chapter, these "nonlinearities" of socio-ecological resilience must be introspected from micro-local perspective, with the local stakeholders and actors being provided with the agency to collaborate and come up with a sustainable solution away from the global linear lens that perceives ecological resilience, preservation, and well-being under one umbrella. We finally argue that it is through the understanding of these place-based narratives, eco-cultural traditions can be grasped with inclusive and resilient framings of sustainability.

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Notes

1. A distinct folk dance form from Charida village, Purulia, West Bengal.
2. *Patachitrakars* or *Patuas* are the folk-art practitioners situated in Naya Pingla village, West Medinipur, West Bengal, who use natural elements for their distinctive style of paintings on *pat* (long cloth) and present it via folk songs.
3. Interviews with owners of nearby tourist lodges who have noticed the transformation of the *Patuas*
4. *Potmaya* Festival, Naya Pingla Village, West Medinipur, West Bengal; November 16, 2019.
5. *Kirat-kirati* are the masks of Lord Shiva and Durga disguised as hunters. According to the *Chhau* legend, Lord Shiva and Durga disguised themselves as hunters to break the penance of Arjun, from an episode in the Mahabharata. Kathakali masks are used for decorative household purposes only. These masks are a replica of facial images from the oldest classical dance forms of South India.
6. *Bigha* is a traditional unit for measuring land area, commonly used in India. Its value varies within states and also across states, and it is still used today. Five *bighas* are equivalent to 1 acre.
7. This consists of the first phase in the mask-making process with water and clay as chief ingredients.
8. KII conducted in December 2019.
9. *Padma Shri* is the fourth highest civilian award in the Republic of India, after the *Bharat Ratna*, the *Padma Vibhushan* and the *Padma Bhushan*. It is awarded by the Government of India every year on India's Republic Day (January 26).
10. *Parampara* is the Sanskrit term, which means "uninterrupted tradition." The *guru–shishya parampara* is still alive in the *Chhau* tradition, signifying a deep emotional, intellectual, and spiritual bonding between the master and the disciple.
11. Interview conducted with Anil Sutradhar in August 2019.
12. KIIs conducted in August 2019 with Monoranjan and Nepal Sutradhar, the original "skilled" artisans who are internationally acclaimed dancers, proud of their S*utradhar* bloodline. Both of them are descendants of Babulal Sutradhar.
13. KII conducted in December 2018 with Rama Sutradhar, the secretary of *Chhau Mukhos Silpi Sangha*.

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