



SOCIO-RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SYMBOLS IN THE FOLK ART OF BENGAL

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Abstract

Symbols play a prominent part in the folk art of Bengal. It is very interesting to note that different symbols have been used in these art forms with some definite religious beliefs, superstitions, and socio-economic contexts. They are used as a vehicle of conscious expression to enforce meaning and make the subject's emotional content more vivid and intense. This paper aims to focus on some of the very interesting symbols used in the folk art of West Bengal with special reference to painting.

Keywords: Symbol, folk, custom, religion, painting

1.0 Introduction

Folk art is a part of the traditional life of a region and provides an unbroken link with the past, keeping intact the social, religious, and economic ties with the soil [1-4]. It is a discernible part of Indian art and an indigenous branch of artistic activity in its various local manifestation. Different types of folk art are practiced in Bengal like wood curving, shankha shilpo or conch shell art, mask making, kantha, pata painting, alpana, ivory work, etc. Among these most popular arts are alpana and pata painting. It is very interesting to note that different symbols have been used in these art forms with definite religious beliefs, superstitions, and socio-economic context. They are used as a vehicle of conscious expression to enforce meaning and to make emotional content of the subject more vivid and intense [5-13]. Most of the folk art are having rich cultural values and significant aspects of prevailing certain religious practices and social life of rural people as certain folk beliefs are also manifested through this symbolism. This paper will highlight the symbolic representation of folk art of West Bengal. Symbols have been delineated in various art mediums like art on paper, cloth, wood, and even on floors and walls. Among these, alpana (painting on floor/wall) and pata painting (painting on paper) are most popular for their symbolic representations in West Bengal.

1.1 Alpana

It is one of the most expressive ancient form of folk art forms in India. This is basically painting on the floor or wall usually done by women folk. Here motifs, designs and symbols are directly painted on the floor or wall with the help of rice paste or coloured dust. This art form is known by different names in different parts of the country viz. Alpana in Bengal, Aripana in Bihar, Mandana in Rajasthan, Rangoli in Gujrat and Maharastra, Chowkpurana in Uttar Pradesh except the Kumaon region and Kolam in South India. The alpana is primarily ritualistic in character and intended to fulfill the desire, either to defend oneself against the powers of evils surrounding the living or to bring greater prosperity to the householder. It is symbolic in form and abstract in theme. The symbols or designs are almost common in the whole country like geometrical patterns, with lines, dots, squares, circles, triangles, then Swastika, lotus, trident, fish, conch-shell, footprint, supposed to be goddess Laxmi, creepers, leaves, trees, flowers, animals and anthropomorphic figures. But some symbols are added or get modified to fit in with local beliefs and rhythms. In West Bengal, alpana's are connected with 'Vratas' performed by women. 'Vratas' are observed for fulfilling certain desires and wishes. In a word, we may agree with remark of Dr. M.S. Randhawa that "in spirit and content, the *Bratas* are the magico-religious rites performed by women folk in Bengal for invoking the blessings of various deities to secure domestic happiness and the welfare of dear ones" [1]. In fact the *bratas* had their origins with two fundamental instincts of human life – to live peacefully and to procreate. Each brata has its own individuality having its own alpana, spells or *Chharas* (verses), and *katha* (story) or history, which glorifies the deity. The alpanas, are therefore, visualized as the painted desire or pictorial representations of the desired objects in symbolic forms and the accompanying prayers, songs, or stories. It is the primary means of communication between women of the household and their goddesses. 'Vratas' are wishful manifestations of this desire. There are around 31 types of 'Vratas' at present in West Bengal where alpana with their symbolic representation is performed. Here, commonly practiced nine of them will be highlighted with their different attributes and beliefs.



Plate 1 Subachani Brata Alpana

1.1.1 Subachani Brata Alpana

This ‘Vrata’ is associated with human fertility and progeny. In this ‘Vrata’ story, the goddess *Subhachani* is depicted as a benevolent deity associated with the duck and as a remover of all distress and difficulties. It is performed by newly married women invoking the favour of Subhachani, the Duck mother who can fulfill her craving for children and save her from the misfortune of having a satin (husband’s second wife). But, in practice in rural Bengal the brata is performed for a successful marriage and having children. This ‘Vrata’ is observed either on Tuesday or on Sunday, early in the morning [2]. The alpana depicts the ducks proceeding towards the royal lake which is an important sequence of the narration (**Plate 1**).

1.1.2 Tara Brata Alpana

This ‘Vrata’ is also associated with human fertility and progeny. Tara brata is observed by the unmarried girls in the evening. The girls draw pictures of the sun, moon, stars, mirrors, comb, palanquin etc., on the floor with the help of rice paste. It is believed that if a bratini observes this brata, she will marry a husband like Shiva, have sons like Ganesha and Kartikeya, daughters like Saraswati and Laxmi and blessed with much wealth. Besides this, bratinis also draw a figure of a mother with many children in her arms, at her waist and even near her legs. This is known as ‘Hate po Kankhee po’, drawn in a linear alpana in the tara brata. It symbolizes the mother goddess bearing ‘magico-religious significance of producing children by barren women’ [4]. The term ‘po’ means child and ‘hat’ and ‘kankh’ means hand and hip respectively (baby in her arms, baby on her hips). It depicts women blessed with the number of children. It reflects that the worshiper wants overall flourishing and prosperity. Nevertheless, by drawing the figure of a woman with large no of children, the participant expresses her hope for complete fulfillment of her future as a woman, by becoming the mother of a large number of children (**Plate 2**).



Plate 2 Tara Brata Alpana

1.1.3 Laxmi Brata Alpana

Laxmi was originally a non-Aryan primitive corn goddess who was later on absorbed into Hinduism [4]. Deity Laxmi is worshiped in the houses as a deity associated with agriculture and prosperity and attaining fortune,

plenty and wealth. She is generally represented by footprints or lotus. As she is the preceding deity of ‘Dhayna’ or paddy, she is also commonly used as a symbol of Laxmi. But in the folk art of Bengal, we can see some other symbols like furniture and ornaments. Necklace, and bangle, stands for cloths known as ‘Alna’ are among them. It’s a very common proverb in Bengali “AMI AKCHI PITULIR BALA, AMER HOK SONAR BALA” which means I am drawing a bangle with rice paste as I expect a gold bangle from you. All the symbols of their desired objects must be within an unbroken line, with no gaps to be left anywhere in the line for an evil spirit to enter (**Plate 3**). So, it clear that the Goddess has always been closely associated with agriculture and the brata rituals observed in her honour seem to be associated with agriculture especially with the main crop of Bengal. i.e., paddy.



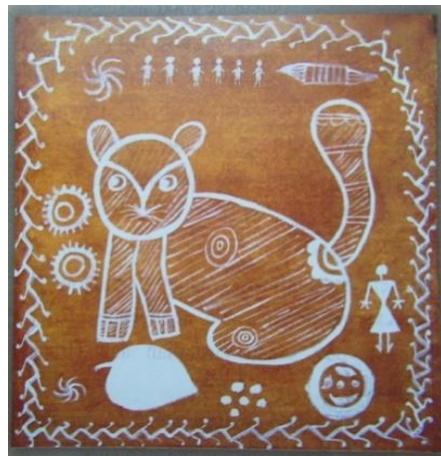
Plate 3 Laxmi Brata Alpana

1.1.4 Bhaduli Brata Alpana

The Bhaduli brata was observed in honour of Bhaduli, the presiding Goddess of the seas, throughout the month of Bhadra, “when the rivers are full and the monsoons are high, and the anxiety of tender hearts becomes greatest in respect of their husbands, fathers, and brothers whose ships not so secure by scientific methods and appliances as now, were often playthings of the deep” [4]. This alpana reflects the dependence of life on the river in Bengal. The alpana drawing relating to this brata includes symbolical themes – seven seas, thirteen rivers, the sandy sea beach, rafts sea-fowls, Palm trees, fish (fertility and prosperity), and Swastika (auspicious symbol, dates back to the Indus Valley civilization), boat-crew-oars, water birds etc. – denoting the sea-voyage. As Bengal is crisscrossed by numerous rivers, the boat becomes a normal mode of travel as well as associated with all journeys from home. The worshipers perform this brata wishing the safe return of those, dear and near to them, engaged in sea-voyage and also boatman and the passenger (**Plate 4**).

**Plate 4** Bhadhuli Brata Alpana**1.1.5 Aranya Sasthi Brata Alpana**

In Bengal, many bratas are observed in honour of Sasthi, the guardian deity of children who not only protects but also bestows children [6]. The purpose of observing all the bratas of Sasthi is to have long-living children and by mothers whose children do not survive long. Aranya Sasthi brata is among of them. This brata is performed by a newly married women invoking the favour of Sashthi- the Goddess of fertility (**Plate 5**). This alpana depicts a the seated cat, the Vahana of Sashthi- with a group of children around her and a standing female beside her. Betel leaves and swastika - auspicious symbols are also there.

**Plate 5** Aranya Sasthi Brata Alpana**2. 0 Flow of life**

The outer border of alpanas is designed with different types of creepers. We can see these types of creepers on the stone railing pillar of Bharut and Sanchi. They are term as “flow of life” or ‘tree of life’. In ancient Indian

sculptural representation, trees/creepers sprouting from women's naval are common. The folk people strongly believe that if these symbols are drawn on the wall or floor of the house, their family will extend like that creeper which means it is associated with human fertility (**Plate 6**). In Bengal, the association of fertility and trees may be seen even today. A banana sapling is still given a prominent place not only in marriage but on all auspicious occasions. Generally, this creeper border is continuous in nature, no gap or opening will be there. It is believed that if so, the family legacy will be interrupted. Another important aspect of this alpana is the designs used here are the reflection of the women folk's imaginative side. As these bratas are mainly practiced in villages and by rural women, they have drawn the designs from their day-to-day life and surroundings. As this sect of society spends most of the time in the preparation of food in the kitchen for their families, they use Khanti or spatula to cook. They have depicted the spatula design in the border known as "kuntilata". Like this 'Shankalata' with shankha or conch shell design, 'Chaltalata' with the fruit design of Chalta, most commonly found in Bengal villages etc. Shanka is one of the most auspicious symbols in Indian art and is used in the daily worship of deities in every house.



Plate 6 Flow of life

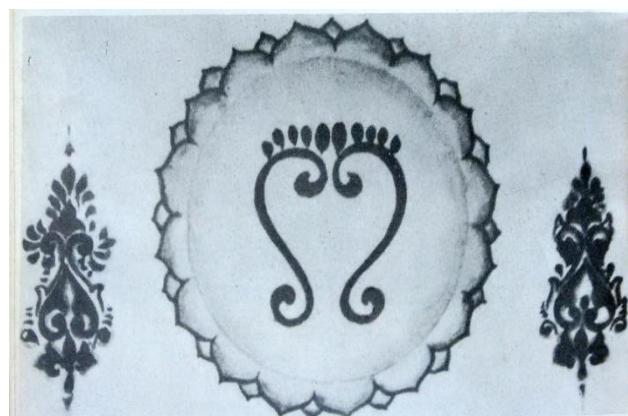
2.1 Prithibi Brata Alpana

This brata is observed from the last day of Chaitra to the last day of Vaisaka [6], the Bengali month of the calendar by the maidens of Bengal. This alpana depicts the Prithibi - the earth goddess at the top with her husband inside the circle. The central motif is placed on a lotus leaf with its stem going inside deep down showing the roots. From the roots also rise six stalks of *Astadalpadmas*, three each on either side (**Plate 7**). The lotus is a symbol of eternal order, cosmic harmony, of the union of earth, water, and sky. It is practiced in almost all the villages of south Bengal still today as this area is very earthquake-prone. It is believed by the village people that this symbolic depiction with prayer will save the earth from any natural calamities.

**Plate 7** Prithibi Brata Alpana

2.2 Haricharan Brata

The Haricharan Brata is observed by little girls in honour of Lord Hari (Narayana) who is believed to be the protector of the worlds, throughout the Bengali month of Vaisakha [1]. Alpana painted during the performance of this brata is the foot prints of Narayana and offering pujas to this symbol. By observing this brata a bratini worships the feet of Lord Hari, who is the protector of the Universe and express her desire for happy and prosperous family life (**Plate 8**).

**Plate 8** Haricharan Brata

2.3 Punyipukur Brata

This brata is considered a rainfall-compelling brata. The name of this brata itself suggests that this brata had its origin in the hope that the tanks and ponds should be filled up with rain water, that is by observing this brata, the bartinis pray for sufficient rain to fill the tanks and ponds as the village folk depends sole on their water, especially when Bengal is agricultural land. This brata is observed for a whole month from the last day of *Chaitra* to the last day of *Vaisakha* [7] and observed either by the married women or by the maidens. The

observance of the *Purnipukur brata* includes the digging of a miniature pond, the plantation of either a twig of Bilwa tree or a Tulsi plant, and the filling of water in the pond. The alpana depicts this same thing in the belief that by doing so the ponds and tanks should be actually filled with rainwater. The plantation of either a twig of Bilwa tree or a Tulsi plant is suggestive: possibly, by doing so, the Bratinis pray to the God of rain for adequate rainwater, necessary for a successful plantation. Moreover, the practice of digging a pond and filling it with water is clearly an imitative rite (**Plate 9**).

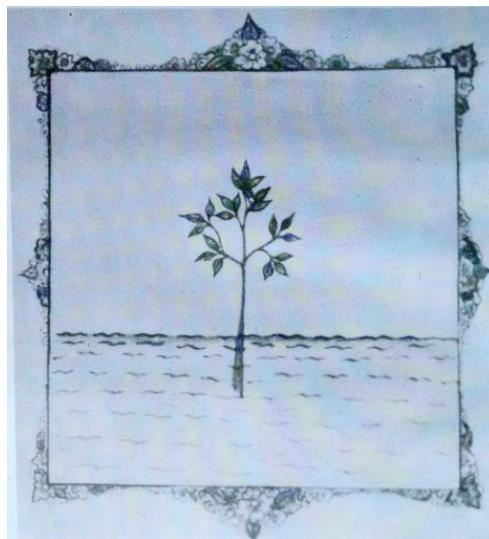


Plate 9 Punyipukur Brata

3.0 Pata Painting

Pata painting is another popular folk art of West Bengal. It is a class of painting which is done on patta or silk cloths. The word ‘Pata’ is derived from the Sanskrit and Pali word ‘Patta’ which means cloths. The Bengali word pata means in general ‘picture’. This artistic activity is mainly found in the northwestern and southwestern part of West Bengal mainly in the districts of Birbhum, Puruliya, Medinipur, Bankura, Hooghly, and South 24 Paragars, and was mostly practiced in 19th -20th century. On the basis of shapes, patas are divided as Scroll painting and Square painting. In Scroll painting, several events or themes relating to one broad subject are depicted. Like the story of Krishna-lila (**Plate 2**), Story of Ramayana (**Plate 3**), Chandimangal etc. In rectangular or square pat one single event or theme mostly secular in nature is depicted like Reverence e for religion, social humor, scandals, caricature, satirical events, symbolic representation of contemporary society etc. Some of these patas depict the theme in symbolic form. Three of such are discussed below.

3.1 Chankshudan Pat

Among the patas with magical themes, the most popular and widely known type is the Chankshudan pata. It is a tribal pat. Here, the theme depicts that the Jadu patua reaches to the house of the recently deceased person

and shows a pata painted with a human figure without his eye it to his family. The potua proposes to draw the iris of the eyes against some gifts which would restore the eyesight of the dead man suffering from blindness in the afterworld. This type pata is entirely a symbolic one by which the artists wanted to suggest that by restoring the eye sight of the departed soul, he is giving direction to find out the right path (**Plate 10**).



Plate 10 Chankshudan Pat

3.2 Fake Viasnava

It is the symbolic representation of the hypocritical activities of saint and the contemporary society. Here a Vaisnava saint is sitting in a casual manner bending his knees. He is holding a stick in one hand and a small bag from which peeps a rosary apparently required for *Vijamantra*. The Vaisnava is having a long tuft of hair on his shaven head, tilak on his forehead, a tulsi mala as a necklace and clad in saffron dhoti. But just over his head, a parrot is perching. This bird and his stick have symbolically used in this painting to portray his greedy and fake character and more closeness to mundane affair that is not the path of a holy Vaisnava saint [8] (**Plate 11**).

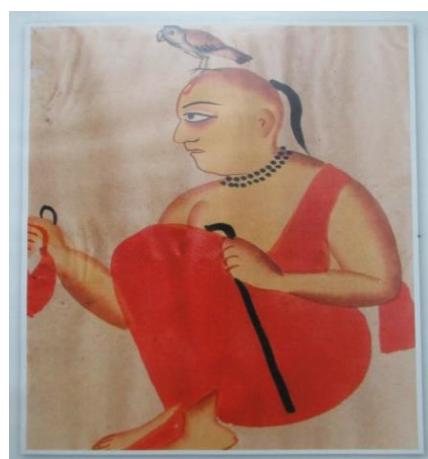


Plate 11 Fake Viasnava

3.3 Cat with a fish

It is the symbolic representation of the contemporary secular theme like domination of a higher or powerful class on a weaker section. The period of this painting was the 19th century, and the prevailing social scenario of British domination of native people has been symbolically represented here (**Plate 12**).



Plate 12 Cat with a fish

4.0 Conclusion

The religious and magical significance of symbols in the folk art of Bengal has given us a new direction to understand its regional beliefs and taste of people. Some symbols are having universal character but some are used according to the geo-physical, cultural as well as religious aspect. According to AK Coomaraswamy, symbol is a material embodiment of the imitable form of an idea to be communicated. It is for the sake of the idea and not for its own sake. Thus when we are taking about symbols in folk art of Bengal, they are not mere depictions; all these symbols reflect wonderfully the perception towards the dynamism of life.

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