

A Village in Bengal Where Every Inmate is an Artist

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NAYA... does the name ring a bell? It does, because this is a village tucked in a quaint corner of Pingla, Paschim Midnapur, from where award-winning artists, jet-set around the world with their paintings. This is a village of patachitrakars – folk artists, who have preserved the quintessential folk-art traditions of Bengal, down generations on scrolls which are unrolled, frame by frame, while the artist sings out the tale. For one who travels through the village, Naya is like a visual treat! Flashes of bright colour on every mud wall of every hut, somewhere you come across tigers in luminescent yellow, their vivid red tongues sticking out, crocodiles swallowing their prey coloured in bright green, sunny flowers, owls with gigantic eyes, birds, and planes. It's almost like being in a giant public art space.



[Patachitra](#) had been popular among tribes like Santhals, Hos, Munda, Juangs and Kherias who painted 'Patachitras' depicting the birth of their first ancestors Pilchu Haram and Pilchu Burhi; how they had seven sons and seven daughters and how these seven brothers were married to their sisters. With the growing influence of Buddhism, [patuas](#) embraced the faith. Buddhist kings and monks made extensive use of scroll paintings to preach Buddhism and during this time, Patachitra probably spread to Bali, Java, Sri-Lanka, Malaysia and Tibet. With Muslim invasions, Islam spread and painters became followers of Islam. But this ancient folk art is still appreciated by art lovers all over the world for its effortless style of drawings, colours, lines and space usage. The word Pata derived from Sanskrit word Patta means cloth. The painters are called Patuas. Interestingly, patuas do not just paint, they also sing as they unfurl the painting scroll to show it to the audience. These songs are known as Pater Gaan. The songs are of a wide variety, ranging from traditional mythological tales and tribal rituals to stories based on modern Indian history and contemporary issues like protecting forests and preventing spread of HIV/AIDS. Patuas generally use natural colours, which they procure from various trees, leaves, flowers and clay.



The people of Naya have been artists for generations. There are 250 patachitra painters living in Naya and on any day, most of them are seen painting something or the other since morning, on a scroll or a saree or on jewelry. What's inspiring is that every child of Naya also knows how to wield a brush. Many chitrakars from Naya have been part of international projects such as Manu Chitrakar, who has done a graphic novel about the life of Martin Luther King Jr – I See The Promised Land – in collaboration with African-American writer and Blues singer, Arthur Flowers. Chitrakars like Manu straddle both faiths --- Hinduism and Islam, practicing customs from each. Some have syncretic names and Hindu and Muslim customs are often blended in this village. Naya is just 3-4 hours drive from Kolkata and every November, they hold an annual fest, known as Pot Maya – three days of art, music and dance to celebrate the success of chitrakars in reviving their heritage. Painted sarees, stoles, T-shirts etc. and décor items like lampshades, curtains, wall hangings are usually on display. The village also has a folk art resource centre (CHITRATARU), which showcases Patachitra paintings and products. They also hold workshops, and if you are enthusiastic to learn how to make patas and natural paints, they will teach you that too! First published by

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