

Sara Painting Tradition of South Assam: A Study

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Abstract:-Sara painting, or Sarachitra, represents a significant yet understudied folk art tradition of the Bengali community, deeply rooted in ritual practices associated with the worship of Goddess Lakshmi. Emerging primarily from regions of East Bengal, this tradition evolved as a form of devotional expression painted on convex terracotta lids (sara), transforming utilitarian objects into sacred visual media. This study examines the historical evolution, stylistic variations, iconographic features, and religious significance of Sara painting, with particular focus on its continuity and transformation in the Barak Valley, which is popularly known as South Assam, following the Partition of India.

The research highlights four principal stylistic traditions - Sureshwari, Faridpuri, Dhakai, and Ganaka—each reflecting regional aesthetics and cultural influences. It further explores the processes of migration through which artisan communities transplanted and adapted this tradition in new socio-cultural contexts. Based on field observations and artisan narratives, the study also documents the techniques of Sara production and the symbolic vocabulary embedded within its imagery.

In contemporary times, Sara painting faces significant challenges due to declining patronage, changing aesthetic preferences, and economic instability among artisans. Despite these constraints, the tradition persists as a vital marker of cultural memory and identity. The paper argues for systematic documentation, institutional support, and cultural reintegration to ensure the sustainability of this fragile yet meaningful artistic heritage.

Key Words: Sara Painting, Folk Art, Tradition, Contemporary, Marginalization, Panibhora.

Introduction-Folk art may be understood as the most intimate and enduring expression of a community's collective consciousness. It is not merely an aesthetic practice but a living archive, an organic repository of memory, belief, and everyday experience (Chattopadhyay 1980; Jain 2015). Through its forms, colours, and symbols, folk art narrates the rhythms of agrarian life, the cadence of rituals, and the continuity of inherited knowledge systems. Unlike institutionalized or academic art, which often evolves through formal training and theoretical frameworks, folk art emerges spontaneously from within the social fabric, shaped by generations of practice and cultural transmission (Dhamija 1992).

In the context of the Indian subcontinent, folk traditions have played a foundational role in shaping the visual imagination of its people (Mitter 2001). Even in the wake of rapid modernization and technological advancement, these traditions continue to inform contemporary artistic expressions, offering a reservoir of authenticity and cultural rootedness. Yet, paradoxically, many of these traditions now stand on the brink of disappearance, threatened by industrial production, changing socio-economic conditions, and declining patronage (Jain 2015).

Among the diverse and vibrant folk traditions of the Bengali community, Sara Painting—locally known as *Sarachitra*—occupies a distinctive and culturally significant position (Bhattacharya 1999). Rooted in ritualistic practices, particularly those associated with the worship of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, Sara painting transforms an everyday utilitarian object into a sacred visual medium. The sara, essentially a convex terracotta lid traditionally used to cover pots, becomes the surface upon which devotional imagery is rendered with remarkable simplicity and symbolic depth (Ghosh 2012). Although the origins of Sara painting can be traced to regions of East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh), the tradition gradually expanded across Bengal and into adjoining regions such as Tripura and the Barak Valley of South Assam (Bhattacharya 1999). This geographical diffusion was significantly accelerated by the migration of communities during the Partition of India, which led to the transplantation of cultural practices across new territorial boundaries. In its new contexts, Sara painting adapted to local conditions while retaining its essential ritual and aesthetic characteristics.

Today, the tradition survives in a fragile state, sustained by a limited number of artisans who continue to practice it as both a livelihood and a cultural obligation (Jain 2015). This study seeks to examine the historical evolution, stylistic diversity, religious significance, migration patterns, technical processes, and contemporary challenges of Sara painting, with particular emphasis on its practice in the Barak Valley. By situating Sara painting within broader discourses of folk art and cultural continuity, the study attempts to highlight its significance as both an artistic and anthropological phenomenon.

Sara Painting in the Context of Bengali Folk Art:

The Bengali cultural sphere is distinguished by an

exceptionally rich and diverse repertoire of folk artistic traditions. These include pottery, bamboo and cane craft, textile weaving, Nakshi Kantha embroidery, Patachitra scroll painting, jute-based crafts, and ritualistic floor designs such as Alpana (Bhattacharya 1999; Jain 2015). Each of these traditions reflects a unique synthesis of functionality, symbolism, and aesthetic sensibility, deeply embedded within the socio-religious life of the community. Sara painting must be understood within this larger continuum of Bengali folk art. It is not an isolated practice but part of a broader tradition of ritual image-making that has evolved over centuries. Scholars have often pointed to stylistic affinities between the figurative conventions of early medieval eastern Indian art, particularly those associated with the Pala-Sena period (8th–12th century CE) and later folk pictorial forms of Bengal (Mitter 2001; Ghosh 2012). These continuities are evident in the linear stylization, frontal compositions, symbolic iconography, and emphasis on narrative clarity that characterize both traditions.

Originally concentrated in regions such as Dhaka, Faridpur, Barisal, and Comilla, Sara painting was closely linked with domestic religious practices, especially Lakshmi Puja (Bhattacharya 1999). Over time, through processes of migration, trade, and cultural exchange, the tradition spread into West Bengal, Tripura, and Assam. Despite these geographical shifts, Sara painting retained its essential ritual function, serving as a medium through which devotees could invoke the presence of the deity within the domestic space (Ghosh 2012).

In contemporary times, however, Sara painting has undergone certain transformations. While its ritual significance remains central, it has also begun to enter secular and urban contexts. Sara paintings are now occasionally used as decorative objects in modern homes, apartments, and hospitality spaces, appreciated for their aesthetic appeal and cultural resonance (Jain 2015). This transition from sacred object to decorative artifact reflects broader changes in the perception and consumption of folk art in modern society.

Religious Significance of Sara:-The religious significance of Sara painting is deeply intertwined with the agrarian foundations of traditional Bengali society. Agriculture, being the primary source of sustenance and livelihood, shaped the community's worldview and ritual practices (Chattopadhyay 1980). In this context, Lakshmi emerged as a central deity, embodying not only wealth but also fertility, abundance, and prosperity. Her worship was integral to the domestic religious life of Bengali households, particularly during the harvest season (Ghosh 2012). Lakshmi Puja could be performed in various forms, including sculpted idols, symbolic arrangements such as nabapatrika, or ritual objects like the saptatari—a boat

made of banana leaves (Bhattacharya 1999). However, in many regions of East Bengal, the use of painted sara became especially prominent. The sara, with its circular and slightly convex form, provided an ideal surface for the depiction of Lakshmi and associated motifs. The imagery typically included the goddess seated or standing on a lotus, accompanied by symbols such as owls, paddy, and vessels of grain, all signifying prosperity and auspiciousness (Ghosh 2012). The ritual use of Sara painting reflects a unique fusion of functionality and symbolism. Unlike sculpted idols, which require more elaborate preparation and resources, the sara is accessible, portable, and intimately connected to everyday life. Its transformation into a sacred object through painting underscores the ability of folk traditions to imbue ordinary materials with profound spiritual meaning (Jain 2015).

The Partition of India marked a significant turning point in the history of Sara painting. Large-scale migration from East Bengal led to the displacement of artisan communities, who carried their skills and traditions into new regions (Chatterji 2007). In West Bengal, areas such as Taherpur, Nabadwip, Dattapukur, Sodpur, Naihati, and Panihati became important centres for Sara production. Artisans belonging to the Rudrapal or Kumbhakar community played a crucial role in sustaining the tradition, often preserving stylistic elements associated with their places of origin, such as the Faridpuri style in Taherpur (Bhattacharya 1999). Similarly, the tradition found new ground in Tripura—particularly in regions like Melaghar, Rani Bazar, and Khairpur and eventually extended into the Barak Valley of Assam. In these new contexts, Sara painting adapted to local cultural environments while maintaining its core ritual significance (Ghosh 2012).

An important and often overlooked aspect of Sara painting is its reflection of religious plurality and cultural syncretism. While primarily associated with Hindu rituals, particularly those of Vaishnava, Shakta, and Shaiva traditions, the practice also transcended religious boundaries. In regions such as Tangail, Muslim artisans produced Gazi Saras, featuring figures associated with local Islamic folklore. Additionally, Saras depicting themes related to Muharram were also crafted, indicating the shared cultural space within which these traditions operated (Asher & Talbot 2006).

This inclusivity highlights the role of Sara painting as a medium of cultural dialogue, where artistic expression transcends doctrinal boundaries and fosters a sense of collective identity. The sara, therefore, is not merely a ritual object but a symbol of coexistence, reflecting the layered and pluralistic nature of Bengali society.

Types and Stylistic Variations:

Sara painting, as a ritualistic and pictorial folk tradition of Bengal, exhibits a remarkable diversity of stylistic expressions shaped by regional, social, and artisanal variations. Despite its seemingly simple format, the painted *sara* embodies a complex visual grammar, where composition, iconography, and colour conventions are transmitted through hereditary practice. Scholars of Bengali folk art have broadly classified Sara painting into four principal stylistic categories: Sureshwari, Faridpuri, Dhakai, and Ganaka (Acharya) styles (Bhattacharya 1999; Ghosh 2012). Each of these styles reflects localized aesthetic sensibilities while remaining rooted in shared ritual frameworks.

Sureshwari Style: The Sureshwari style, originating from Sureshwar village in the Madaripur region of undivided Faridpur (present-day Bangladesh), is often regarded as the most refined and compositionally balanced form of Sara painting. Characterized by a structured division of pictorial space, this style typically organizes imagery into horizontal registers. The uppermost section often features Mahadev (Shiva), symbolizing cosmic authority; the middle plane depicts Durga with her children, evoking familial and protective dimensions of divinity; while the lowest register presents Lakshmi, the primary deity of the ritual context.

The elegance of line, economy of detail, and rhythmic arrangement of figures distinguish the Sureshwari style from other variants. The compositions display a remarkable sense of proportion and symmetry, suggesting an inherited visual discipline that resonates with classical Indian compositional principles. This stylistic clarity and devotional coherence have contributed to its enduring popularity among connoisseurs and practitioners alike.

Ganaka (Acharya) Style: The Ganaka or Acharya style is closely associated with *Grahacharya* families, traditional ritual specialists and image-makers who were often patronized by elite households. Saras produced in this style are distinguished by their refined craftsmanship, dynamic figuration, and rich chromatic backgrounds, particularly the dominant use of red.

In Ganaka Saras, the iconographic program frequently includes Goddess Durga alongside Lakshmi, accompanied by attendants such as Jaya and Vijaya. The figures exhibit a certain monumentality, with pronounced gestures and expressive detailing. Historically, this style enjoyed patronage from zamindar families, which perhaps contributed to its sophistication and relative opulence. The Ganaka style thus represents an intersection between folk practice and semi-classical refinement, reflecting the social hierarchies within which it evolved.

Faridpuri Style: The Faridpuri style, another major variant, is characterized by its multi-tiered narrative composition. Typically, the upper register features divine couples such as Lakshmi-Narayana or Radha-Krishna, indicating

the influence of Vaishnava devotional traditions. The middle section presents Lakshmi flanked by Jaya and Vijaya, while the lower portion often includes symbolic motifs such as owls or peacocks. A distinctive feature of the Faridpuri style is the inclusion of ritual objects, such as rice grains and the *Gachh Kouto* (a vermilion container), held by Lakshmi. These elements reinforce the agrarian symbolism of prosperity and fertility associated with the goddess. The compositional layering and iconographic richness of this style make it particularly significant for understanding the narrative dimension of Sara painting.

Dhakai Style: Originating in the Dhaka region, particularly Bikrampur, the Dhakai style introduces a unique thematic variation within the Sara tradition. Here, the upper register typically depicts Lakshmi-Narayana, while the lower section portrays Lakshmi seated within a boat, accompanied by attendants. This imagery reflects the geographical and cultural context of riverine Bengal, where waterways played a central role in daily life and imagination.

The boat motif also carries symbolic connotations, suggesting the journey of prosperity and the movement of divine grace across the landscape. The Dhakai style thus exemplifies how environmental and regional factors influence the iconographic vocabulary of folk art.

Iconographic Characteristics:

Beyond stylistic classifications, Sara paintings may also be categorized based on their iconographic arrangements. These variations, often referred to in colloquial terms, reflect both ritual requirements and artistic preferences:

Ek Putul (Single Figure): Depicts Lakshmi accompanied by her vehicle, the owl.

Tin Putul (Three Figures): Features Lakshmi with attendants Jaya and Vijaya.

Panch Putul (Five Figures): Includes Lakshmi alongside Lakshmi-Narayana or Radha-Krishna, with additional attendants.

Hati Sara (Gaja Lakshmi): Represents Lakshmi seated on or flanked by elephants, symbolizing royal power and abundance.

Durga Sara: Combines Lakshmi with Mahishamardini Durga and her family, indicating a broader ritual context. Decorative motifs play a crucial role in enhancing the visual appeal of Sara paintings. Floral patterns, creepers, rice husks, owls, and peacocks are commonly employed, each carrying symbolic meanings associated with fertility, vigilance, and prosperity. Traditional colour conventions are remarkably consistent: Lakshmi and Durga are rendered in yellow complexion, clad in red saris; Krishna appears in deep blue; the owl is white; and elephants are depicted in grey tones.

While individual artisans exercise a degree of creative

freedom, they largely adhere to inherited aesthetic norms. This balance between innovation and continuity reflects what scholars describe as the “conservative dynamism” of folk art (Chattopadhyay 1980).

Sara Painting in the Barak Valley:

The presence of Sara painting in the Barak Valley of South Assam is a relatively recent phenomenon, closely linked to the historical processes of migration and resettlement following the Partition of India in 1947. Artisans belonging to the Kumbhakar (potter) community migrated from East Bengal, bringing with them their traditional skills and cultural practices. Over time, Sara painting became integrated into the local cultural landscape, particularly within Bengali-speaking communities.

Panibhora- The Principal Centre:

Among the various locations in the Barak Valley, Panibhora emerged as the principal centre of Sara painting. The tradition here was initiated by Jiten Paul, an artisan originally from Faridpur. After his demise, the practice was sustained by his sons, Dinesh Paul and Gandhi Paul, who continue to produce Saras despite numerous challenges.

The Saras produced in Panibhora largely follow the Sureshwari style, characterized by simplicity, rhythmic composition, and accessibility. Other artisans, such as Shyam Paul (Panibhora), Ashu Paul and Priyabala Paul (Srikona), and Shambhu Paul (Katlichera), also contributed to the tradition. However, due to declining demand and economic constraints, many have discontinued their practice.

Dinesh Paul and Gandhi Paul, two brothers were the practicing Sara painters of Panibhora. Dinesh Paul has been died recently. Now, Gandhi Paul is the principal custodian of Sara painting in the Barak Valley. It is seen that Dinesh Paul's son Bappan Paul has also some interest regarding the Sara tradition. Their continued engagement with the craft, despite limited financial returns, underscores the resilience of folk traditions sustained through dedication rather than institutional support.

Process of Making Sara: The creation of a Sara is a meticulous and labour-intensive process that combines technical skill with ritual awareness. The process unfolds in several stages:

1. **Clay Preparation:** Raw clay is carefully cleaned to remove impurities such as stones and pebbles, followed by thorough kneading to achieve the desired consistency.
2. **Shaping:** The clay is flattened into a circular form and pressed over a convex mould. The surface is then smoothed using bamboo tools.
3. **Drying and Firing:** The shaped Saras are sun-dried for several days and subsequently fired in a kiln to ensure durability.
4. **Base Coating:** A white ground is prepared using chalk soil (kharhi mati) mixed with tamarind-seed gum, providing a suitable surface for painting.
5. **Surface Polishing:** A layer of sago paste is applied to impart a subtle sheen.

6. Drawing and Colouring: Traditionally, natural pigments were used- lamp soot for black, mango bark extract for brown, and indigo-based powders for blue. In contemporary practice, synthetic colours sourced from local markets have largely replaced these materials.

The painting process begins with black outlines that define the composition, followed by the application of flat colours and final detailing. This method reflects a linear aesthetic characteristic of many Indian folk painting traditions (Mitter 2001).

Crisis and Marginalization;

Despite its cultural and artistic significance, Sara painting today faces a severe crisis of survival. Artisans such as Dinesh (before his death) and Gandhi Paul report a drastic decline in demand- from approximately 800–900 Saras per season in earlier decades to barely 300–400 in recent years. The modest pricing of Saras, typically ranging between ₹200–300, often fails to compensate for the labour involved.

Several factors contribute to this decline:

Changing aesthetic preferences favouring glittering idols and mass-produced decorative items.

Aggressive bargaining by customers and lack of fair pricing mechanisms.

Declining interest among younger generations due to economic insecurity.

Absence of sustained governmental patronage and institutional support.

This marginalization reflects broader structural issues affecting folk art traditions across India, including inadequate market integration and weak linkage with contemporary art institutions.

Broader Context and Future Prospects:

The challenges faced by Sara painting are not isolated but resonate with the decline of other Bengali folk traditions such as *Patachitra*, puppet theatre, and *Nakshi Kantha* in certain regions (Jain 2015). While modern art enjoys institutional visibility and market support, folk traditions often remain confined to seasonal demand and localized patronage. Nevertheless, there are emerging possibilities for revival. Urban interest in handcrafted objects, heritage-based interior decoration, and cultural tourism has created new avenues for Sara painting. Workshops conducted in places like Silchar have introduced younger audiences to the tradition, fostering awareness and appreciation.

Sustainable revival, however, requires structured interventions, including: Government grants and artisan welfare schemes, documentation and archiving in museums and academic institutions, inclusion in art education curricula, development of tourism-linked craft markets and Digital promotion and e-commerce platforms.

Conclusion: Sara painting transcends its function as a ritual object to become a profound expression of agrarian faith, collective memory, and inherited

craftsmanship. In the Barak Valley, it stands as a testament to the processes of migration, adaptation, and cultural resilience. The lives and work of artisans like Gandhi Paul embody both the devotion that sustains the tradition and the neglect that threatens its survival.

The future of Sara painting depends not merely on nostalgic appreciation but on active and sustained engagement. Preservation must involve documentation, patronage, and above all, recognition of the artisan as a creative agent. Only then can Sara painting continue as a living tradition rather than recede into the silence of museum archives.

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