



FROM SCROLL TO PANEL: PATACHITRA AS AN INDIGENOUS-ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVE METHOD OF GRAPHIC STORYTELLING

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

Comics (or Graphic Novels) as a medium rests on three of its aspects: images (with or without words), *sequentiality* and, the drive to tell stories through pictures. Telling stories through pictures dates back to a time, even before human race acquired language as a medium of expression and hence, it was a custom to speak through pictures. The earliest recorded comics in its contemporary sense of the term can be found in such European renditions as *The Adventures of Mr. Obadiah Oldbuck* or *Max and Moritz* or the American *Yellow Kid*. However, the spur to organise experience into sequential pictorial units precedes both writing and print culture. From prehistoric rock art and mural cycles to ritual iconography and scroll traditions, human societies have repeatedly spatialised time and memory through images. Sequential visualisation thus emerges not as a formal property of modern comics alone but as a cognitive and cultural strategy for structuring knowledge. This article approaches storytelling from anthropological insights and, sees the tradition of Patachitra as a visual–oral narrative system that encodes temporal progression through the rhythmic unfolding and folding of scroll and activates it through performative singing (*pater gaan*) and communal spectatorship. The scroll operates as a portable mnemonic archive in which narrative units are organised spatially rather than textually, while performance produces durational sequentiality through voice, gesture, and audience interaction. Instead of positioning Patachitra as a proto-comic or as an alternative to Western comics, the study proposes a continuum of visual epistemology that connects prehistoric image-sequences, performative scroll practices, and modern comics without suggesting a compartmentalised evolution among them. Comics is therefore understood as one historically specific manifestation of a broader anthropological strategy: to think, remember, and tell stories through spatialised images. This reframing expands comic studies beyond medium-specific formalism and situates sequential visuality within the *longue durée* of human cognitive practices.

Keywords: *visual narrativity, sequentiality, Patachitra, mnemonic image, scroll temporality, performance narrative, anthropological insights, semiotics*

Introduction

Gita Wolf, the founder of the Tara Books, one of the leading houses that promote pictorial literature, addressed the *Patua Chittrakars* in a workshop in collaboration with the Tara Books and the folk artists from different parts of India thus: ‘Tell the artists that theirs is the only indigenous form of the graphic novel that we have’ (Qtd. in Chatterjee 181). It is not as simple a task to define a comic book or a graphic novel as it appears. Drawing on the alleys of the critical and semiotic idiom of the form, the paper intends to deal with the weaving of comics or graphic narratives; and in that process, the differences and commonalities between the indigenous and the urban renderings of the same. It is generally considered that comics or comic book is rather old-school a label, while ‘graphic novel’ fashions itself more after the contemporary academic amity. Nevertheless, the terminology ‘comics’ is etymologically linked to the early strips published in various newspapers, magazines, and periodicals, sometimes called “funnies”; and therefore, latent always with humorous and sarcastic undertones. “Graphic Novels” or narratives, on the other hand, offer an alternative with far more sombre and sincere an outlook. The term “graphic novel” was first used by fan historian Richard Kyle in an essay published in the comics fanzine *Capa-Alpha*’s 1964 edition. The phrase gained prominence in comics literacy after the publication of Will Eisner’s *A Contract with God* (1978). Based on the known parameters that constitute comics, the American *Yellow Kid* is popularly acknowledged as the earliest recorded comics, first published as a four-panel strip in 1895 in the Sunday segment of the New York World newspaper. However, *The Adventures of Mr. Obadiah Oldbuck* (first published in 1837 in Geneva, Switzerland) can rightfully claim its recognition as the first of its kind, which was

crafted by the Swiss caricaturist Rodolphe Töpffer. The 1865 German creation of *Max and Moritz: A Story of Seven Boyish Pranks* by Wilhelm Busch is another document which has bolstered the urge to speak through pictures though not in the line of comics proper.

The tradition of *patachitra* is embedded in the folk fabric of the eastern regions of India: namely, Bengal and parts of Odisha. It is basically a bardic tradition, much in the line of rural minstrels from varied parts of the world. The singers are called *patuas*, who orient their performances around hand scrolls depicting various episodes of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and the *Manasamangal Kabya* (a popular Bengali mythical text). As any other folk practice around the world, it is implausible to trace the earliest record of a *patachitra*. The *pata* paintings and *pater gaan* i.e. *patua* songs negotiated with every change that came their way, adapted themselves to the purpose and survived. The social universe represented by the contemporary Bengali *patua* is not an age-old formation; rather, it is historically anchored in the nineteenth century. It emerges from the hierarchical network between peasants, artisan communities, and the *zamindari* order that shaped rural life under colonial rule. This structure functioned through semi-feudal relations of power, where dependence and authority were mutually constituted. Its economic base remained tied to pre-capitalist modes of production, while its ideological legitimacy was sustained through a resilient traditional culture that continued to dominate the superstructural domain (Guha 1983).

The Commonality between Pata Scrolls and Graphic Novels

What interested us, in the first place, to delve deeper into the cultural negotiations between the two is the juxtaposition of words and images or the verbal and the visual. Will Eisner in *Comics and Sequential Art* observes:

“Comics deal with two fundamental communicating devices: words and images. Admittedly this is an arbitrary separation. But, since in the modern world of communication they are treated as independent disciplines, it seems valid. Actually, they are derivatives of a single origin and in the skillful employment of words and images lay the expressive potential of the medium”(7). Similarly, Scott McCloud defines comics in his ground-breaking study as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud 9). In a similar vein, in the *Pata* tradition the *patua* community explains the painted scroll to the audience with a song.

The recent craze for wordless comics might question the insistence on the ‘marriage between words and images’. The Kalighat genre of *patachitra*, like wordless comics, much later a development, is known specifically for its break from the bardic narration and scroll painting.

Secondly, and most importantly, Time is another determinant where the two forms, verily distinguished in attitude and distant in time, coalesce. Both genres are used to depict sequential narratives and both are cross-discursive. The story is told through a combination of words and images without, however, blending the two into a unified whole (Imamura 1953). The images are not merely illustrations of the story as it is told in the text. Instead they tell a separate story using the verbal or textual story as a ‘diegetical horizon’ — that is, they gesture towards the text without allowing themselves to be fixed by it (Chute and Koven 2006: 769). Hilary Chute comments:

“Comics might be defined as a hybrid word-and-image form in which two narrative tracks, one verbal and one visual, register temporality spatially. Comics moves forward in time through the space of the page, through its progressive counter point of presence and absence: packed panels (also called frames) alternating with gutters (empty space). Highly textured in its narrative scaffolding, comics doesn't blend the visual and the verbal?or use one simply to illustrate the other?but is rather prone to present the two nonsynchronously; a reader of comics not only fills in the gaps between panels but also works with the often disjunctive back-and-forth of reading and looking for meaning”(452).

In both the cases, therefore, the visual schema evolves slicing the picture space into separate units allowing the viewer to enter each specific incident of the story. Like the back and forth movement across the comics’ pages, the scroll painting, monitored by the artist narrator arranges a specific rhythmic entry for the viewer by the repeated motions of the rolling and unrolling of the painted scroll.

Sequentiality

The comparison between *Patachitra* and comics becomes more interesting when sequentiality is understood not simply as the presence of a series of images, but as a mode through which a narrative is distributed across space and activated through time. In a conventional printed comic book, the page establishes a relatively stable field in which panels are encountered in a determined order. The reader moves from one boxed image to another, inferring actions, transitions, and temporal relations from the juxtaposition of panels and the spaces between them: “Comics is a word-and-image form in which words and images create unsynthesized narrative tracks; that is to say, it is not an illustrative form in which each is redundant of the other. It is also a form that fundamentally relies on space to represent time, carving punctual moments out of the space of the page. Comics locates the reader in space and for this reason is able to spatialize memory” (Chute 108). The *Pata* scroll, on the other hand, establishes a comparable relationship between spatial arrangement and temporal progression, but it does so through a materially different technology of viewing. The images are not presented simultaneously as a complete page. Instead, the scroll is progressively exposed, while the *patua*'s song and narration regulate the pace at which the visual sequence becomes available to the audience. This difference is crucial because it prevents a simplistic equation between the scroll and the comic panel. The *Patachitra* scroll does not become a comic merely because it contains sequential pictures. Its sequentiality is embodied and performative. The narrative is distributed among painted image, verbal performance, gesture, movement of the scroll, and the responses of the

spectators. In this sense, the scroll possesses a temporality that is simultaneously visual and performative. The act of unrolling becomes part of the narration itself. A scene does not merely exist on the scroll; it is encountered through an event of showing. The temporal order of the story is therefore inseparable from the social conditions under which the story is viewed and heard.

Scroll, Performance, and Narrative Time

The performative dimension of Patachitra also complicates the assumption that visual narrative is necessarily silent. In the traditional Pata practice described in this study, the painted image is accompanied by *pater gaan*, through which the *patua* interprets, extends, and animates the visual sequence. The song does not merely duplicate what is already visible. It supplies voice, rhythm, emphasis, and a bridge between individual visual units. Meaning consequently emerges from the relation between what the spectator sees and what the performer says or sings. This relation is particularly significant for a study of graphic storytelling because it demonstrates that the verbal and visual components of narrative need not be fused into a single undifferentiated message in order to function together.

The *patua*'s performance also establishes a distinctive form of spectatorship. In the printed comic, the reader ordinarily controls the pace of reading: pages can be turned rapidly, reread, paused over, or revisited. In the scroll performance, by contrast, the performer participates in determining the rhythm of visual disclosure. The audience receives the narrative through a shared temporal event. The scroll therefore produces a form of collective reading in which the boundaries between reading, looking, listening, and watching become fluid. This is one of the most significant differences between Patachitra and the modern printed comic, but it is also one of the reasons why the comparison is theoretically valuable. Both forms organise narrative through sequential visual units, while differing in the mechanisms by which those units become temporally available.

Patachitra as a Mnemonic and Vernacular Narrative System

The sequential arrangement of Patachitra can further be understood as a mnemonic strategy. The painted episodes provide visual anchors through which a larger narrative can be recalled and reconstructed. The image does not function only as an illustration of an already completed verbal story; it becomes a prompt for the performance of the story. The *patua*'s song, in turn, activates the sequence and gives it duration. The scroll can therefore be approached as a portable mnemonic archive: a material object that stores narrative episodes while simultaneously requiring performance for their full realisation. Ratnabali Chatterjee in her research *Representation of Gender in Folk Paintings of Bengal* studies the historical, religious and community remembrances archived in the form of *pata* scrolls and *pater gaan* (songs of the *patuas*).

Such a formulation shifts the discussion of Patachitra away from the question of whether it is or is not a comic. The more productive question is what kinds of narrative work sequential images have historically performed. The abstract of this study already proposes that human cultures have repeatedly spatialised time and memory through images. Patachitra provides a particularly rich example because its images are not isolated works of visual art. They belong to a system of narration in which memory, performance, materiality, and spectatorship are mutually dependent. The scroll's portability allows stories to travel across communities, while its episodic organisation makes complex narratives available through recognisable visual units.

This mnemonic function is especially important when considered alongside contemporary comics. Comics also depend upon the reader's capacity to retain information across panels, pages, and sequences. A character's gesture, a recurring object, a change in setting, or a repeated visual motif may acquire significance only when it is remembered across multiple frames. The gutter is consequently not merely empty space; it becomes a site in which the reader connects what has already been seen with what is about to be seen. The Pata scroll achieves a related narrative effect through the controlled disclosure of successive painted sections. In both cases, narrative meaning depends upon an active memory that connects spatially separated visual units.

Why Patachitra Should Not Be Called a 'Proto-Comic'

A major implication of this comparison is the need to avoid the teleological category of the 'proto-comic'. Calling Patachitra a proto-comic risks positioning the tradition as an incomplete predecessor whose historical value depends upon its resemblance to a later Western form. Such an approach would reproduce precisely the hierarchy that an indigenous-alternative model of graphic storytelling seeks to question. Patachitra does not need to be validated by demonstrating that it anticipated the modern comic. It can instead be understood on its own terms as a sophisticated visual–oral narrative system with its own conventions of production, performance, circulation, and reception. Rounak Gupta and Partha Bhattacharjee in their 2026 study *Deconstructing the 'Gutter': A Decolonial Study of the Journey from Patachitra to Comics* in *Famine Tales* weaves an argument of the same mood by mapping the oft-overlapping graphic storytelling tendencies of the global north and the global south.

The argument, therefore, is not that Patachitra 'invented' comics, nor that modern Indian comics are directly descended from the Pata tradition. The claim is more cautious and more expansive: both belong to a much longer human history of organising narrative through spatially arranged images. By locating Patachitra within this broader history, the study opens a space for indigenous visual practices within comics scholarship without collapsing their cultural and material differences. The proposed continuum is thus a continuum of visual epistemology rather than a genealogy of direct influence.

Anthropological perspectives

Anthropology provides the primary methodological framework through which this study understands Patachitra not merely as an aesthetic object but as a lived cultural practice embedded in performance, labour, and community circulation. By

foregrounding ethnographic attention to the *patua* as both image-maker and itinerant narrator, the research moves beyond formalist comics analysis and situates sequentiality within a social ecology of patronage, caste location, and ritual economy. The shift from scroll to panel is therefore not treated as a simple medial transformation but as a reconfiguration of modes of storytelling shaped by changes in mobility, market access, and audience formation. Anthropological insights into performativity, material culture, and the gift-commodity transition help explain how the vertical, sung, processual temporality of the scroll becomes reorganised into the segmented, silent, and reproducible logic of the printed panel. In this sense, the project reads contemporary Indian comics as emerging from an already existing vernacular visual anthropology, where narrative sequencing, embodied spectatorship, and mnemonic image clusters prefigure the grammar of comics prior to their industrial codification.

This study adopts an anthropological methodology to analyse Patachitra as a performative and relational art form rather than a static visual text. Drawing on Richard Bauman's theorisation of performance, the *patua* scroll is approached as an event structured through voice, gesture, and itinerant spectatorship, where meaning emerges dialogically between performer and audience. This performative sequentiality is contrasted with the silent visual regime of the comics panel, allowing the project to trace how narrative temporality shifts from embodied duration to segmented visual consumption. Arjun Appadurai's framework of the "social life of things" enables an examination of the scroll's movement from a ritual-gift economy—circulated through patronage, alms, and seasonal performance—into the commodity circuits of print culture and the contemporary art market. Such circulation reconstitutes both authorship and audience, producing new regimes of visibility and value. Additionally, Alfred Gell's notion of art as a system of agency informs the reading of the scroll not simply as representation but as a mediatory object that indexes social relations, belief systems, and mnemonic knowledge. When translated into the panelled form of comics, this distributed agency becomes reorganised through mechanical reproduction and individualised readership, marking a shift from collective spectatorship to privatised visual literacy. Anthropology thus allows the project to theorise the scroll-to-panel transition as a transformation in modes of embodiment, circulation, and social address rather than as a purely formal evolution of sequential art.

Conclusion

Patachitra offers a productive point of departure for rethinking the history and theory of graphic storytelling. Its combination of painted sequence, oral narration, material movement, and collective spectatorship demonstrates that sequential visual narrative cannot be confined to the modern printed comic. The Pata scroll organises narrative temporality spatially while simultaneously activating that spatial organisation through performance. The painted episodes provide mnemonic structures, the song supplies duration and verbal interpretation, and the movement of the scroll regulates the audience's encounter with the story.

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