

# Making a 'Play-text': Innovative Uses of Traditional Arts

Rimli Bhattacharya

University of Delhi

## Introduction

This paper explores the possibilities of reworking visual and oral traditions of the Indian subcontinent into new material that can become part of regular classroom practices at the primary level and beyond. We illustrate this from a series of 'play-texts' that were designed, trialed and tested over a period of two years (2000-2002) in the West Bengal District Primary Education Programme (DPEP). The primary play-text discussed here is centered around the Behula-Lakhindar narrative popular in Bengal, Orissa and elsewhere. It is inspired by the traditions of the vertical pictorial scroll or the *pata*. The form of the scroll lends itself to a rich range of experiments in narrative; working with time and space on the one hand, while moving between different linguistic registers on the other. Along with the ordinary wall calendar and the *baromashi* in Bangla (*baramasa* in Hindi), such play-texts can be effectively used to work with variations in time and space, numbers and words, the registers shifting from the stylised to the colloquial. For reasons of space, here we shall only be looking at the many moods and uses of the scroll.

## The play-text

The defining concern with which we began was: If play represents the possibility of infinite generation, then the play-text is that material artefact of whatever size, shape and texture that is *open-ended*. It challenges in every way normative and prescriptive notions of space and pedagogy. In Bangla, the name we gave these

texts was *khola-khata*: *khola* means 'open' and *khata* is a notebook or an exercise book. These are texts that children and perhaps, teachers and other local participants, would be creating together; therefore, always open. The texts will emerge in relation to the local environment (nature, work, climate, languages, art and craft forms, technology), but also with a view to expanding the experiential and subjective world of the child. The contents — whether of image or word, would straddle the known and the unknown, the familiar and the fantastic, and perhaps the fantastic in the familiar?

If we want children, parents, teachers and the community to interact with the play-text and generate new ones, *variability* is an essential feature. This quality may be built into the play-texts to ensure participation by a range of children across ages and capacity levels, including children with special needs.

As will be immediately apparent, the *pata* or the scroll presents a stark contrast to the textbook. Its dimensions are also very different from that of the chart paper which uniformly adorns the walls of most classrooms, whether in government or private schools. Any length of material — paper, cloth, jute or canvas — which can be wound and unwound, actually *invites* different ways of handling. A strip of material which moves, or is capable of being moved, demands a different relationship to the eyes and to the body. So both the medium and the material of the scroll are potentially of greater interest to the child than is the textbook on the lap or the desk, or the chart on the wall.

The *pata* is usually composed on a vertical axis, with the topmost segment constituting the first part of the narrative. It is slowly unwound by the teller (*patua*) so that the narrative emerges both in the images as well as through the accompanying *pāla* which is sung. The narratives may be stories of origin as in the *Jadu patas* of the Santhals, or more popularly, themes from the body of texts known as the *Puranas*. In the latter instance, the *patas* focus very often on an episode involving a god or goddess who, for the most part, behaves very much like a mortal! Scrolls can also be based on contemporary events such 9/11, a theme described as ‘*Laden pata*’, after Osama Bin Laden!

The theme for our *pata* was traditional, derived from the Behula-Lakhinder story. Many decades ago I had heard a young woman from Medinipur sing this *pāla* at my parent’s home in Calcutta, where she was then working. Snatches of her moving rendition stayed in my memory. In my case, it was the *sound* of the song, rather than the written text or even images that formed the starting point of this venture. As for children, we know that when they play with concentration they learn and absorb more than they ever will from routine textbook instruction or rote learning for examinations.

Contrary to popular perceptions of the traditional being fixed and unchanging, one notes that improvisation, variation and reinvention are central to this traditional form. Multiple versions of the *pata* and of the song circulate even now in West Bengal and Bangladesh. Multiplicity of versions is an integral quality of narratives in the subcontinent. The best known examples are of course the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*; there is an extensive scholarship documenting the range and variations in even the so-called central episodes of both epics.

That ‘a story’ need not be fixed, but can thrive in many versions has major implications for the pedagogic practices we may wish to follow in formal education. For one, it frees the listener/viewer (and the future creator) to believe in and cultivate his/her own powers of improvisation. In all such contexts, improvisation is based on grasping certain elemental or central principles of the narrative, while a certain license is given to elaborate on or deviate from them as well.

More importantly, the *pata* and other similar traditions destabilise the notion of only one ‘correct’ version. Our play-texts were conceptualised to do away with the idea of one correct version. Real learning takes place when both the child and teacher are free to experiment and to make mistakes. Listening attentively to different versions encourages interpretive skills and naturally brings in multiple perspectives into the classroom, without any overt preaching about tolerance.

### **Behula’r *pata***

The basic story in the *Padma-Purana* goes as follows: Chand Banik, or Chand the Merchant, draws the wrath of the snake goddess, Manasa Devi, as he chooses to be a votary of Shiva. (Manasa is a wayward daughter of Shiva’s.) According to one interpretation, the merchant is trapped in a battle between the gods — an older goddess who cured snakebites (particularly relevant to the watery terrain of Bengal, with dense vegetation) and Shiva, who is considered a later entry into popular worship. Anyway, after a series of disasters that overtake the haughty merchant, and despite every precaution — as in preparing a ‘snake-proof’ iron bridal chamber, Chand’s son Lakhinder (called Lakhua in the song) is bitten to death by one

of Manasa's snakes on his wedding night. The young bride-widow Behula then decides to set sail with the dead body of her husband to Indra's court in heaven.

The part of the story we emphasise is of her journey along the river, braving untold dangers and horrors, and finally arriving at the court of Indra. Here, she pleases the gods with her dazzling dance and thus earns a boon to have her husband back. At the end, Manasa is acknowledged. But it is Behula's moving lament and the vividness of her heroic quest that one remembers most.

We called our *pata* 'Behula's *pata*' after the questing protagonist who literally brings her husband back from the dead. There are many descriptive passages about what she sees on her way — the towns along the river, the people, the water life and so on. These find place alongside her expression of grief at her loss. One of the great charms of this *pāla* is this aural-visual voyage, weaving in geography, social history, myth and natural history. Children from diverse backgrounds and differing abilities can relate to the sights and sounds of the river voyage meaningfully, individually, straight from the heart.

We chose to make our *pata* a horizontal rather than a vertical one, keeping in mind the limited resources and large numbers of learners in most schools. The horizontal scroll would make it easier for many children to simultaneously interact with one scroll between them. Two children may each hold either end of the scroll and — improvising on the tradition of the usual *pata* performance — may unfold one end and keep folding it slowly as the verses are sung or read out. It could even be 'news' read out in the manner of a television commentary.

The horizontal *pata* could also be laid out on the floor and a cluster of children may engage with the pictures and the couplets, looking at it from above, sideways, and from multiple perspectives as it were. The *pata* could also be pinned on or hung on a wall, though not so high that children cannot see the details of the visuals or the couplets. (This is often the case with charts and other visual displays in classrooms.)

Most of our government schools are impoverished in almost every respect other than the children's own potential; here, the scroll can become a low-cost, multipurpose, many-layered play-text. For optimum use of the play-text, children must be encouraged to create their own narrative on the other side of the *pata*. We have therefore the possibility of two narratives (related or independent of each other) which two sets of children can access from either side. This option deals with the problem of limited floor space. Alternatively, it is possible to continue the same narrative from one side to another, in clockwise or anti-clockwise fashion. This too can lead to amusing scenarios as we found in the course of trialing.

### **Image, letter, sound and rhythm**

In our *pata*, we chose couplets from the nineteenth century poet Ketakadas Kshemananda who lived in western Bengal. Traditionally, the couplets are not written on *patas*, since singers usually themselves choose or compose the verses they wish to recite or sing. (Each rendering in some sense, is a new one!) For our purposes the couplets were added to help the teacher and students, irrespective of whether they actually knew the song. Where children or teachers are already familiar with the song, visual recognition of the scene or of the particular dramatic moment

would be easier. To some extent, this would also help in the recognition of the letters/words in the couplets which we placed below each segment of our play-text. Simple words that occur repeatedly, such as the name of the protagonist, could be picked out by the teacher and made part of visual recognition exercise.

In a context where the story is completely new, both to the students and the teacher, several options present themselves. A free-flowing participatory session could be initiated with the barest outline of the story being set out. The subsequent interpretation of the visuals, either as individual frames or as a sequence, may generate new sets of narratives by students. These in turn could be collated or juxtaposed and used to generate exercises by the attentive and innovative teacher.

Clearly, only some scenes of the long narrative could be selected for our play-text. This apparent lack can be turned into an advantage and enable the spinning out of many creative exercises. For one, it makes possible a game of missing links, and creates a fill-in-your-own-narrative kind of situation. Children are free to imagine and interpolate the scenes not present, which may or may not be sung in the classroom. The 'gaps' may ideally be sequences or situations that they fill in with incidents from their own lives. It is their sensory and emotional world and their powers of observation which are privileged. Or, a narrative may be spun from any one of the individual frames, generating an unconventional ending. Exercises or tasks could be set depending on the level of the child or his or her individual capabilities. Group work, with a mixed range of children, can be most exciting as well.

What about the relationship between seeing and listening or seeing and telling? In traditional performances, the unraveling of the

horizontal scroll is *in relation to*, but not necessarily in exact synchronisation with the telling. Thus, the viewer may be creating a story from the sequence, while the oral narration may offer something different, even unexpected. For these and many other reasons, the seeing-listening-reading continuum in the *pata* is very different from the way the comic strip with the speech bubbles work. The scroll carries the possibilities of many loops, returns, repetition and surprise and can become most rewarding from a pedagogical point of view.

In every way then, even our adapted horizontal scroll offers a strong contrast to the framing of the lesson as 'a unit' that is composed of so many pages in the textbook. More excitingly, it incites the possibility of multiple closures. The last frame/segment of the *pata*, may well become the first in a new sequence to generate a new narrative. This exercise may actually be tried out with children (and teacher) by quite literally adding new frames/segments to the existing *pata*. The additions are potentially endless! Thus the temporal is given a new dimension through play and group work.

### **Among school children**

Younger kids often found it difficult to handle the long vertical scroll, even when two of them were trying to manage it; whereas, they found it fun to work with the same scroll, unfolding it horizontally. This also meant they had the potential to keep on adding new units. The images were read sometimes as a single composition, but more often it was the little detail or the particular juxtaposition of figure and object that drew their attention.

Very few children (even older ones) could actually read the couplets, but once the verses were recited, a lot of them immediately

committed them to memory and made the necessary links.

Not all the children knew the story. Many did not seem to think that there was an existing story, already known or told. All of them were aware though that there were stories hidden in the images. They often started making up bits themselves. Nothing could be more rewarding and exciting. This kind of creative space inviting fearless interventions from children stands in sharp contrast to the routine mechanical exercises dished out by the standard textbook industry.

My experience shows that questions, functioning like cues, help a lot: Where do you think she (Behula) is going? Were you ever tossed in the stormy waters of a river? Would you rather use a bridge to cross a river, or go across in a boat or raft? How do you come to school every day? Is it a difficult journey? What do you see on the way? And hear? Would you like to make a *pata* about an adventure you had on your way to or back from school? (Another one of our play-texts has entire sections with maps and letter recognition based on this every day journey of the school going child.)

Above all, it is the actual art object and its manifold potential that comes into play in this interactive learning situation. The manifold potential can only be revealed in play, and without the usual forms of 'instructing' the child. By this I mean, children must have the freedom to handle the *pata* in whichever way they want. If there is some wear and tear in the process, so be it.

The materiality of the *pata* was quite wonderfully explored. Sometimes it was spread out on the floor, uncoiling like a snake in the next room or spilling over into the adjoining verandah, so that children were in effect

looking at it from multiple perspectives and distances, engaging with the detail or the frame.

I would urge teachers to encourage the children to roll and unroll the scroll, go back and forth, and so cover and discover, in as many ways they wish to, a tapestry of colour, sound and meaning. Already, this will set in motion glimpses of other worlds. Colours take on life and movement. Sounds metamorphose into chants and songs, sense and nonsense.

Rhymes form a crucial component of 'telling'. Lines or phrases from a contemporary jingle (even an advertising jingle or a film song) can be adapted into something new, and become part of the learner's own world. Classroom observations show how students are constantly trying to relate formal learning to what they have picked up or internalised in other spaces.

*Patras* work with stylised figuration, quite different from the same-looking global cartoon type figures that crowd our visual field today. It is possible that children may initially have trouble or even show resistance in responding to these figures. But, if the story is enthralling, the colours inviting, and above all, if they are given agency in exploring the composition, they are bound to *invest* significance to the frames. The use of primary colours can be a powerful source of stimulation, although I find black and white illustrations equally striking and capable of leaving a deep visual imprint, as in Rabindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose's creative collaboration in the *Sahaj Path* (Easy Reading or Easy Lessons) series which came out in 1930s.

The play-text *can* be turned into something unique through a blend of individual selection and critical questioning. Variability in its composition and flexibility in its use are the twin keys to its success. This way, the classroom

or any learning space — at home or outdoors — will invite an exchange between the local and the universal. And children will gift to tradition something of their own lives.

### **Acknowledgements**

\*The project was conceptualized, researched and implemented by Rimli Bhattacharya and Sibaji Bandyopadhyay along with a team of writers and in consultation with artists. The artist of the 'Behula' scroll and of all the other play-texts is Amitav Malakar.

\*This essay is abridged from an ongoing work on 'Children, pedagogy and expressive forms in India.' An early version was presented (with images) at the Fourteenth International Conference on Learning, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa, June 2007. I remember Pippa Stein and all my fellow travelers on that occasion. My warm thanks to Rama Kant Agnihotri for all his support through all these years.

Nature will not however, do all the work. The learning of a language can be helped and nurtured by the teacher who should at all times be aware of the opportunities given to him to explain to the children the generalization of form and meaning that arise in the course of working with the materials. At appropriate times the teacher will also want to draw together the strands of what has been met in the stories and dialogues and try to make clear the systematic regularities that underlie a language. We do not wish to handcuff the teacher to his materials – rather the reverse, we wish him to feel free to adapt them to the specific needs of his class. Our one request to the teacher is that he draws the language system out of the experience children have with the language and does not teach systems for their own sake. After all, the children themselves are making systems of their own in their contact with the language, and they must be allowed and encouraged to do this, even if at times their systems have to be modified by the teacher.

(From the *Epilogue of Language Teaching Texts* by H. G. Widdowson, 1971, Oxford University Press, London, p. 243-244)

*Rimli Bhattacharya's research and publication interests include performance studies, narratology and the visual arts. Among her translations from Bangla to English are Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's Making a Mango Whistle, a Puffin Classic (2002). Her work in primary education includes the creation of teaching-learning material for children.*

*rimlibi@gmail.com*