




Research article

## From Tradition to Transformation: Exploring Broto Folk Art of Bengal

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### Abstract

Symbolic patterns and religious motifs are commonplace in Indian folk-art traditions such as in Broto Folk art, where floor design patterns were practised as a ritual relevant to the issues prayed to for well-being. As the designs responded to the shifting trends in society have impacted the motifs throughout time, and efforts to preserve and promote resulted in a cumulative action by artists as paintings or decorative art pieces. Broto Folk art, one of the oldest indigenous crafts from India, has been a testimony to the evolving times of history. Often linked by its roots to the Indus Valley Civilization, this ancient craft- its motifs, patterns and design can be studied to explore the thematic representation of time. Through analysis of the designs from various times in history, much information can be uncovered about the lifestyles, and aspirations of the people at the time and society. Using motifs, floor arts such as Broto folk art reflect the aspirations of society at the time. To mirror the aesthetic aspirations of the populace in the present times, contemporary social practices ought to dictate floor designs. An analysis of the materials, symbolism, and hues of a work of art can provide insights into the culture where it was created. As a result of the shifting social dynamics, aspirations have also evolved, impacting the motifs and designs utilised to portray the same. Considering the evolving lifestyle and societal value systems, this study examines the thematic representation of society in Broto Folk art designs via interviews with a group of selected folk artists and surveys.

**Keywords:** Floor line art, Broto-folk art, elements and composition, contemporary design, and society



[Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions](#)

### Introduction

Traditional practice reflects the status of society. Folk art, a line drawing floor art form with varied elements from nature depicts a distinct identity. Bengal boasts of many social themes in "Broto

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Folk art" patterns. Any art, to stay relevant, must adapt itself to the changing times while maintaining a distinguished identity. With the advent of civilization, knowledge and skill advanced and so did technological aspects of society, changing the lives of the denizens drastically. Jacques Ellul argues that every part of a technical civilization responds to the social needs generated by the technique itself and progress consists of adapting to these changes. Art, as a form of expression, reflects the changing thought process of society (ELLUL, 1940). It is through careful reading of art that a lot can be deciphered about the times the art was made.

This happens in a two-way process: Art tells us about society just as society gives background to the art. In other words, a study of society renders us knowledge that helps us decipher the art generated from society, giving it context in a similar manner as studying art helps us understand society. One ceases to be relevant without the other (Parikh, 2020).

Amongst the art forms that reflect society in the most descriptive ways spread throughout the Indian subcontinent, floor designs have been one of the most relevant ones (Wadley, 2000). The floor design traditions reflect various aspects of society, particularly the women in the society, as the sole claimants as the designers (Thakur, 2014). Floor design in India has been predominantly an art form dominated by female artisans and a study in floor designs renders knowledge about the aspirations of the women in society (Cruea, 2005). In this study, the Broto Folk art from Bengal has been taken as a reference to study how and why floor designs reflect the aspirations of women in society and why the art form should be updated to render modern context.

Broto Folk art, a traditional folk art form originating in Bengal, India, has been widely practised for several ages (Majumdar, 2017). Broto Folk art holds a significant historical legacy and has served as a means for women to establish communication with their deities over the course of several centuries (Susan.S.Wadley, 1977). The heritage of Broto Folk art exhibits distinct characteristics and has undergone modifications in response to contemporary influences. The art form is practised by married women as a means of expressing their desires and aspirations to their deities, while also showcasing their creative abilities (INTACH Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2016). The practice of creating Folk art designs is said to serve as an invocation to the goddess, seeking her blessings for the household to be bestowed with abundance and prosperity (Biswas R. 2019). Broto Folk art pertains to the traditional customs (ritual-based) observed by women, commonly referred to as 'Brotos' in the Bengali language, which bears resemblance to the Hindi term 'Vrat'. Folk art motifs are meticulously crafted by skilled artisans and are representatives of the traditional art forms believed to be originating from the Nadia area of West Bengal. The patterns and designs employed in Broto Folk art have undergone a process of evolution throughout history (Mukhopadhyay, 2023).

However, it is worth noting that some designs and motifs utilized in ancient periods have persisted and continue to be incorporated in contemporary iterations of this art form such as the utensils depicted in the presentations of the kitchen (Rannaghor) or the presentation of material aspirations of women in the society as depicted in the creeper designs in Mandal Folk art. Throughout antiquity, the women of Bengal have employed Folk art, a traditional artistic practice involving the application of pigments on floors and walls using their fingers, as a means of establishing communication with their deities (Tapanmohan Chatterji, 1962).

The practice of creating Folk art designs is believed to serve as an invocation to the goddess, seeking her blessings for the household's success and plenty. The Nabanno (new paddy harvesting) Broto Folk art is traditionally created close to rice bins as a means of offering prayers for a bountiful crop and prosperity (Das., 1948). The tradition of Broto Folk art in Bengal exhibits distinct characteristics that set it apart from other cultural practices. The prevailing belief was that the force was created from the ritualistic practices of 'magic'.

The practice of creating Shejuti Broto Alpona designs is an interesting practice as seen Fig. 1. This Alpona encompasses the depiction of 52 themes from all the folk art designs, which encompass commonplace objects such as home utensils and equipment utilised in many contexts (Biswas, 2015).



**Figure 1:** Example of various elements and the Folk art composition- Shejuti Broto Alpona (Biswas, 2015)

In the context of this discussion, it is noteworthy to mention the presence of several motifs, including the owl, lotuses, paddy bins, footprints of Gods, and climbers in various folk arts about various Brotos. The artwork consists of abstract and stylized representations of many natural elements, including flowers, fruits, trees, leaves, animals, and birds. Notable examples include the lotus flower, fish, tree, and plant (Chatterjee, 1948). In general, the patterns and motifs of Broto Folk art have undergone a process of evolution throughout history. Notably, the repertoire of ancient Broto Folk art encompasses a variety of themes, including ordinary objects, religious iconography, and elements derived from the natural world (needs citation). In Bengal, Broto Folk art holds a significant historical legacy and has served as a means for women to establish communication with their deities over the course of several centuries. The heritage of Broto Folk art exhibits distinct characteristics and has undergone modifications in response to contemporary influences of the times.

However, in the recent past, along with modernization as a response to westernization and the rise in popularity of the more syncretic, ornamental 'Shantiniketani' Folk art (School of Shantiniketan, West Bengal), there has been a sharp decline in the usage of Broto Folk art (Jayakar, *The Earthen Drum An Introduction to the Ritual Arts of Rural India*, 1980). Several reasons can be cited from the many probable causes:

- Broto Folk art originates from “অশাস্ত্রীয়” or unscriptural sources; mostly practised as local culture. The rise in popularity of Vedic gods in later periods changed the ways of worship.
- The subsequent urbanization and city-centric turn in civilization led to the cities dictating cultural norms. As families tended to move to cities for livelihood, the traditions were slowly forgotten, and larger adaptations from others to their own culture flowed in.
- Urbanization and Westernization changed the societal structure. The aspirations were to be grasped through action and prayed for. (Papanikolaou, 1991)

These, along with various other causes, led to the status of the Broto Folk art as a nearly “forgotten art.” Though the Folk art motifs depict the times in the ancient past with depictions of the fishermen and trader communities in Bengal, one may notice an absence of motifs of the industrial age. Hardly any motifs have yet occurred that portray the aspiration of the recent past. As an art form ceases to portray its current times, its relevance dwindles. Broto Folk art is currently encountering difficulties in reconciling with the evolving societal landscape while simultaneously safeguarding its deeply rooted traditional principles. Despite these issues, it is important to note that Broto Folk art has not been sent to oblivion, as it continues to be actively practised at religious ceremonies in the Bengal region (Chandra, 1985)

Traditional practices reflect the societal position, while Folk art, a line drawing in the style of floor art, showcases many themes and carefully chosen components from nature to depict individuality. In Bengal, the prevalent artistic practice of creating thematic Broto-folk art holds significant societal significance. This research examines the feasibility of upgrading or adding value using modern artistic filtration of social elements to understand how the artistic mind describes social issues/ themes into motifs and if such value additions can be used for contemporary design applications.

## Methodology

The study was undertaken in Kolkata, West Bengal, in June-July 2023 consisting of interviews with select practitioners, and Folk art experts, and secondary samples of work prevalent were observed to investigate the possibility of transformation of aspirations into modern context and subsequent the necessary modifications to update the motifs of Folk art. The work of Biswas, referred to during the initial meetings was taken as a base to study. Multiple interviews were conducted with specialists in Broto-folk art (purposive random sampling), to opine on this during which a consensus emerged in favour of updating the motifs of Broto-folk art to reflect contemporary times and aspirations. Several exhibitions on Broto-folk art were also examined, and the experts unanimously agreed that updating the motifs in respect to contemporary relevance is necessary. For the reference of this study, four specific design forms were randomly picked by the practitioners to represent the art form for further study:

- Bhaduli Broto Design
- Tara Broto Design
- Sholo Ghor

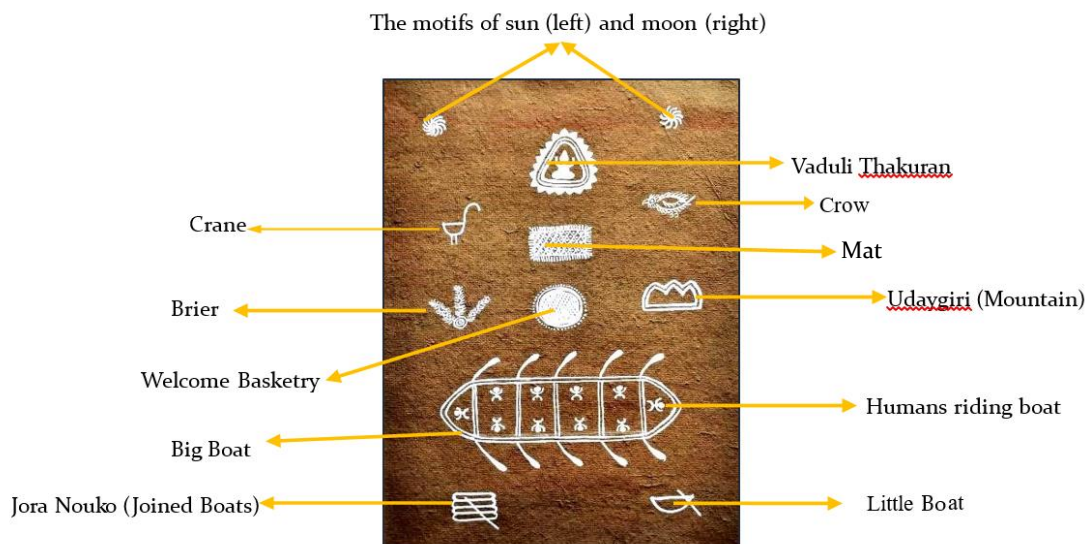
- Ranna Ghor (Kitchen) Design

The patterns (as presented by Bidhan Biswas, Fig. 2-5) were then content analysed following a qualitative assessment through discussions with practitioners and experts about their constituent presence in specific Folk art.

## Result & Discussions

The tradition of Broto-folk art in Bengal possesses certain characteristics that set it apart from other cultural practices as opined by the respondents. The prevailing belief posited that the force created by the mystical nature of such ceremony. The artistic tradition traces its origins back to the Indus Valley culture and has probably undergone a gradual transformation, including many patterns and designs throughout its development (Dutta, 2011). In order to comprehend a society, it becomes imperative to get insight into the underlying designs thoughts and structures that shape that specific culture. Some observations were recorded during the discussions about the selected Designs and the theme behind, i.e., elements representation as art form.

In Bengal, Bhaduli Broto, with a specific Folk art style, Fig. 2, is observed post-monsoon. The Broto is performed to wish good luck for the men at sea and rivers, their well-being and safe return (Biswas B, 2015). In the days of yore, travel at a distance was possible through waterways and the journey was tedious, more so during the late monsoon. The design depicts the folk goddess Bhaduli at the top middle, to whom the "Broti (Vow-maker)" offers her regards and asks for wish fulfilment. The other motifs include various kinds of birds and animals that may threaten the men. Another of the notable features are the various kinds of boats and the men in it. The "Broti" held flowers and re-iterated her wish in rhymes and threw the flowers on the motif related.



**Figure 2** Elements taken from nature for alpona Bhaduli Broto

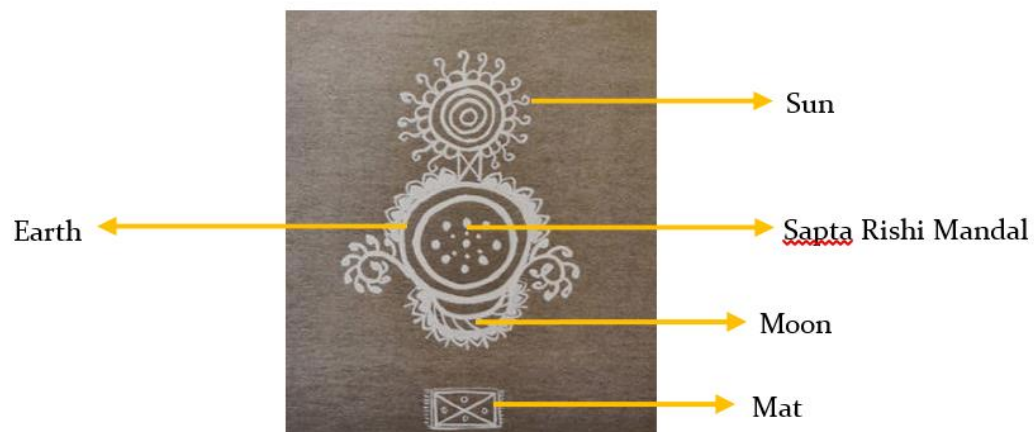
The flower thrown on a motif stated that the avatar has witnessed the "Broti's" plea. Such as, in case of a river motif, the "Broti" rhymed-

“নদী, নদী! কোথায় যাও? বাপ-ভাইয়ের বার্তা দাও!”

(Script in Bengali original vernacular version, it says- O river, river! Where do you go? I yearn for news of my loved ones, Father and Brother!)

Like this, the Broto delivered her wishes to all the motifs and closed the ceremony paying respects to Goddess Bhaduli. This Folk art design is very important in this context as it tells us about the times. Bengal is a predominantly riverine state, where the livelihoods in the earlier times were, majorly dependent on the river and the sea. Bengal was widely known as a land of seafarers with shipbuilding being a prominent industry for hundreds of years, as early as the early days of Egyptian and Greco-Roman empires (The Heritage Lab, 2019). Alongside ship-building and mercantile activities, another occupation dominated the Bengal shores-fishing. Not surprisingly, the Bhaduli Broto practice can be found majorly in the fishing community of Bengal (Biswas, 2015). Thus, it can be inferred that it was a time of major maritime activities with little security in the ventures of the seamen, giving rise to one of the widely practiced specimens of Broto Folk art. Closely related to the Bhaduli Broto is the Tara Broto.

Tara, in Bengali, means a “Star”. Throughout history, humans have relied on celestial navigation, namely the Pole Star and the Big Dipper, to lead them. Consequently, depictions of these constellations are included into the Broto Folk art (Gupta, 2016). In the morning, the seafarers might find their way home by deciphering direction by the sun, but at night, the Pole Star (Dhruvotara) and the Big Dipper (Saptarshi Mandal) were their resort. Assumptions may be made that to spread the knowledge of the constellations, Tara Broto Folk art, Fig. 3, was brought into the popular culture.

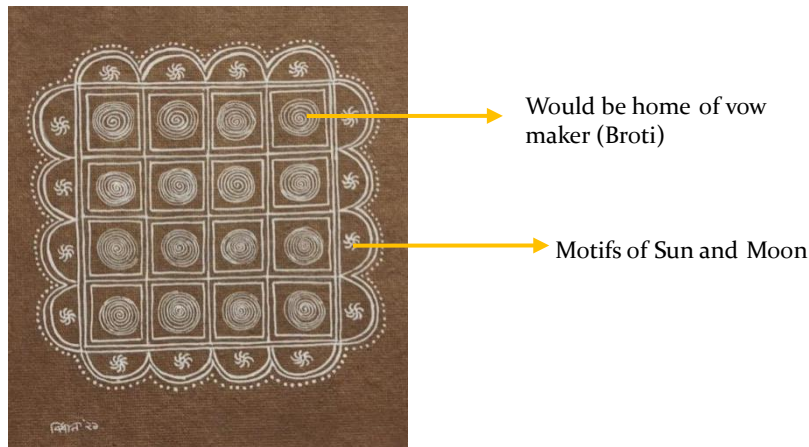


**Figure 3:** Tara Broto Folk art with specific elements (Biswas, 2015)

Tara Broto is performed during the month of Falgun (Bengali term for a month of Spring). Through this design, the Sun God is invoked to marry the daughter of Earth. This Broto is performed to teach unmarried girls about the rituals of marriage and married life. This Broto depicts the time of a patriarchal society, when women were taught to manage homes and that solely, was considered their major responsibility (Susan.S.Wadley, 1977) Such portrayals of aspirations have been observed in various other Brotos, including the *Shologhar* (sixteen rooms) Folk art, Fig. 4,

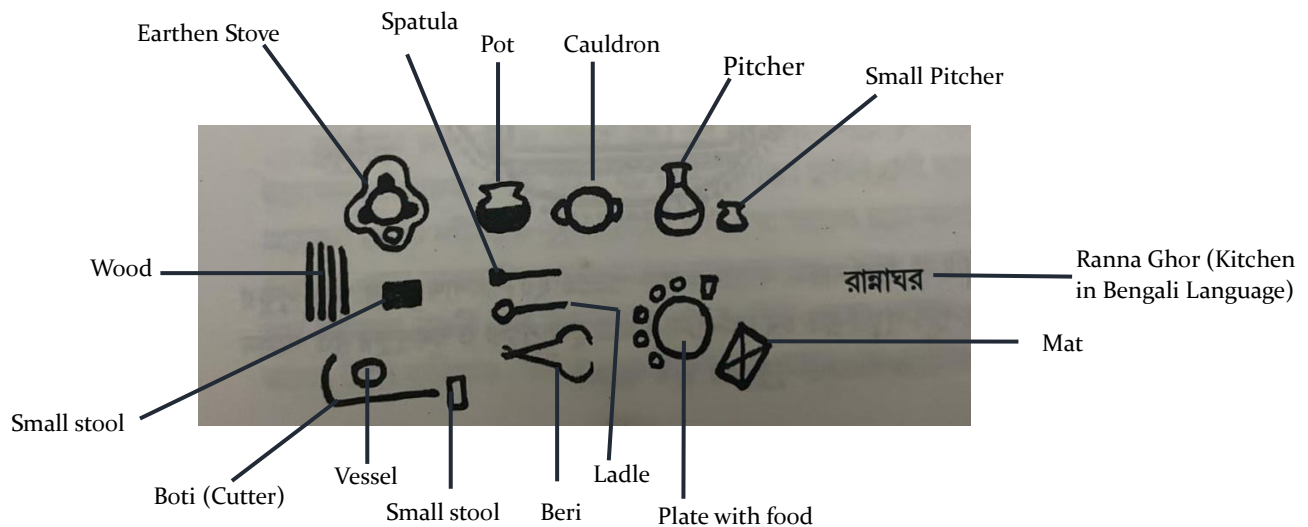


performed by sixteen unmarried girls, aspiring for a happy and prosperous married life (Chandra, 1985).



**Figure 4:** Shologhar Alpana with a community feeling (Biswas, 2015)

The sixteen boxes represent the sixteen homes of the "Brotis" post-marriage, which she wishes to be filled with plentiful grains of crops. Grains represent prosperity, alluding to the major occupation being farming. Additionally, the kitchen, known as "Ranna Ghor" with elements shown in Fig. 5, used in 'Poush Parbon' and 'Belpukur Broto' practices showcases various appliances and utensils that serve as time capsules, providing insights into the kitchen tools of the past (Kapferer, 2004). Many of these items held aspirational value during their time, but in today's era, they have been updated and some of them are replaced.



**Figure 5:** Common kitchen items constitute design elements of Ranna Ghor (Biswas, 2015)

The society itself is marked by financial inequality, yet within the context of urban civilization, individuals aspire to possess sophisticated and modern possessions. Consequently, aspirations are influenced and modified by marketing strategies. In today's society, demand is created

through such societal dynamics. As a result, the concept of aspiration has also evolved in response to the current scenario. Considering this perspective, this paper argues on value addition in the motifs of Folk art to justify the depiction of contemporary relevance towards how's and what's.

## Conclusion

The experts and practitioners' views and the study of the Broto Folk art designs as seen can be expressed through simplified art forms that reflect the societal belief and context that led us to think for experimentation with varied layout and composition viewing newness in contemporary practices. Broto Folk art remained a distinctive art, without displaying much influence of the various waves of colonization through Bengal history. Some influences of Vedic culture, however, are prominent such as the designs depicting Goddess Lakshmi.

Aspirations related to occupation have had much influence on Broto Folk art. The Bhaduli Broto for instance, was practiced majorly by the merchant and fisherman communities (Biswas, 2015). With technological advancement and the rise of modern cities because of European colonization that started around 1757 to 1764 with the identification of Madras, Bombay and Calcutta- the port cities as new economic capitals, the aspirations of the people changed (Saxena, 2017). This change in aspiration and lifestyle left its impact on Broto culture. The obsolescence of Bhaduli Broto practice had been primarily due to the declining water travel. With the advancement in locomotion technology, seafaring decreased in popularity leading to the obsolescence of the Bhaduli Broto practice. Also relevant in this context is the increased opportunity in various occupational sectors, relieving the dependency on waterways. With the coming of mechanical, electronic, Information Technology and various other forms of industries, a lot of farmers have shifted to industrial works (Singer, 1958). Agricultural practices were influential in Broto practice. Many Broto designs such as Poush Parbon (the winter harvesting festival in Bengal) indicate the influence of the agrarian community. Though farming is still hugely relevant, other occupational aspirations have also gained considerable popularity. For Alpana to be relevant even today, it is important that the designs should communicate aspiration-specific themes relevant to modern-day context.

The influence of Western education in colonial Bengal had been instrumental in creating adverse situations for indigenous belief systems such as Broto culture, leading to its subsequent decline. As the experts have noticed, the leftist movements in West Bengal in the mid and late 19th century also had a similar impact as the rural populace slowly turned towards more scientific means than praying and performing Brotos to meet their aspirations.

While such a value-addition may be viewed through a sceptical lens taking into consideration cultural identity and sustainability, reference can be made to the theory of "Becoming" by Gilles Deleuze (Parr, 2005). "Becoming" refers to the continuous production of difference perceived within events- the dynamism of change tending towards no end-event. Culture and traditions are always 'becoming' in this notion. With every passing change in the society or environment, traditional and cultural practices are bound to evolve, by the intention of the designer or otherwise.



Alpana can be studied with reference to the context which led to its production. Considering this aspect of an art form, it is but necessary to render the art form of Folk art modern context leading to a value-addition in its motifs, making it a true representation of the current times. Such considerations on dying crafts emphasizes that time and context-relevant value-addition in design is essential for the continued sustenance of design practices. Such considerations can be useful in the production or usage of various designed products such as in the case of garments.

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The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest.

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