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Hell of a Scroll: Cultural Translation of the Travelling Hell from India to Asia

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Abstract: If the word ‘hell’ serves as a ‘representamen’ or a ‘sign’ then immediately it connotes mental images of different forms of punishment that a sinner must undergo after death. Hell in non-Christian Asian traditions is more visualised than referred to and the dread, consciously or unconsciously, comes through horrific images that have been fed by the culture(s). As it is generally assumed, hell and its King, Yamraj, have their origin in Hinduism. Buddhist concept of hell, *naraka*, is not different from the Hindu concept and retains the presence of Yamraj as the ultimate judge. As Buddhism has travelled from India to other Asian countries, the concept of *naraka* is carried over. On reaching China, a certain amount of cultural reformulation has given rise to *diyu* (hell in Chinese) having ten kings to look over. In Japan, *jigoku* (hell) is reigned by the King Emma-ō who is none other than Yama himself. As the concept of hell crossed boundaries, it resulted in different manifestations. The Buddhist sutras gave all the necessary descriptions for the reformulation of hell in new lands. Apart from the textual sutras, the pictorial agent which made hell accessible and comprehensible to the common mass is the scroll painting. The images of hell that those ancient scrolls had depicted, has created a cultural imprint. The research at its end tries to establish the fact that the practice of hell painting is still living through the patachitra of Birbhum, West Bengal, India. This article uses cultural translation as a framework which analyses the process of transferring the concept of hell as a cultural form between Asian countries where scroll painting serves as the agent doing the moving.

Keywords: *handscroll, hell scrolls, Buddhist hell painting, Yama, Asian art, Birbhum patachitra*

Introduction

Representations of hell are omnipresent in the Indian cultural sphere from books for children to television for the family. In Hindu mythology, hell is said to be ruled by Yamraj and the accounts of virtue or sin of an individual is kept by his accountant Chitragupta. After the judgement, if sin is not found then the spirit is sent to heaven and if sin outweighs virtue then the spirit gets befitting punishment. Thus, the judgement day is the crucial period in afterlife and to get a good verdict one must stay away from the things that religion forbids. Afterlife is the ideological apparatus that religions of our day use to control the unbridled animalistic desires in humans that are considered to be deviations from the accepted norm. In other

words, activities that are marked as sinful are efficiently curbed. If hell is viewed as a mortifying agent then the power that hell exerts onto the believers can be classified as 'fear'. The fear of hell, the troubles of afterlife or even the trouble in the next life pose a dread and functions to curb deviant attitudes marked as sin. It becomes a matter of enquiry on how the hell as a trope made its place in the Indian society and how it achieved its purpose. Hell is not a modern concept but an ancient one from the Vedic ages. The mass media that did facilitate the propagation of the fear of hell and the passages of time that hell has travelled socially and culturally are the objectives of this research.

The dread of hell is successful because of the horrific representations that are presented to the participants of a culture. The illustrations give form to the fear that rests in an imaginative space. The fear, henceforth solidified with illustrations, induces the fear of omnipotent and can be used to direct the course of action for an individual. The fear as an instrument was used by Buddhist monks of ancient days to rectify behaviours and activities. In India, China, Japan and other places of Asia where Buddhism had travelled, it employed the concept of hell with the objective of moral policing. At times, the dread of hell materialised the propagation of Buddhism in foreign lands. Not only among the Buddhist monks, but in the days of antiquity the paintings of hell were present among the Jain and Hindu monks and mendicants as well. The medium for presenting such hells were scroll paintings which the priests used to carry with themselves. Scrolls could be easily rolled up when not in use and unrolled again at the time of preaching. Making painted scrolls do not require any great expense as the equipment are naturally obtained. What is interesting about as morbid a thing as hell is the fact that such hell scrolls are still found to be made and used in the present day. Such hell scrolls today have lost their older significance and have been presented in a different way as a cultural artefact. Hell scrolls are drawn in Birbhum area of West Bengal, and also found in Chinese and Japanese paintings. Researches from old to new have focussed on the history of painting, history of monks and saints and history of picture showman but in this research the focus is shifted to the side of hell and the transnational cultural phenomena that hell scrolls have incurred, is the subject of this research.

In order to comprehend the representations of hell it is necessary to understand the medium upon which hell has been painted and thus represented. This calls for the art of scroll painting tradition. This art form involves a display of narrative painting along with a recital performance that narrates the story presented by the painting. The narration is presented by the artist known by various local names. Such picture showmen, as Jyotindra Jain uses the

term in all his researches, have been showing their pictures and singing songs from ages in the villages of India and entertaining people. The practice is still present in different parts of India such as the Chitrakathi tradition of Maharashtra, Gujrati Garoda scroll, Rajasthani phadchitra, Cherial Scroll of Andhra Pradesh, and patachitra of Bengal.

Indian History of Hell

It is evident from various researches that the art of showing pictures had been present in ancient India. The contributions of Victor H Mair *T'ang Transformation Texts* (1980) and Jyotindra Jain are phenomenal in this field. The art can be traced back through literary evidence to at least the second century BC and are known to have existed almost all over the subcontinent. Jain in his book *Picture Showmen* (2019) proves that ancient literature, which are religious texts in nature, contains references to the art of painted scrolls (*pata chitras*). Classical Sanskrit literature has several references to *yama patas* or *yam pattis*. These are the painted scrolls that deal with Yamraj's dominion.

Bhagavati Sutra, a canonical Jain text of third century AD, refers to the life of Mankhali Gosala, the three greatest of the Ajivika teachers. There it is said that Mankhali Gosala was the son of a *mankha* (picture showman) named Mankhali. *Aupapatika Sutra* (3 to 5 century AD) also mentions a *mankha* along with other performers. The text states that the shrine of God was always visited by people from all classes of society including *mankhas* or scroll painting presenters. (Jain 8-10)

In Buddhist literature there are references to *charana chitta* or paintings that can be carried to places. *Samyutta-Nikaya* mentions *charanam nama chittan* as, "There are Brahman heretics who, having prepared a canvas booth (*pata kotthaka*) and painting (*lekhapitva*) therein presentations of all kinds of happiness and misery connected with existence in heavens or hell, take this picture and travel about (*vicharanti*), pointing out: 'If you do this you will get this'...." (Jain 10) It can be conjured that the theme of *charana chitta* was nothing different than the illustrations of punishments given in hell.

Two such texts deal with the concept of reward and punishment in the afterlife. *Lakkhana Sutra* deals with karma and punishments, and *Devaduta Sutra* (Dulva text) is a description of the kingdom of Yama. Though there is no proof to arrive at an accurate

description of historic scroll paintings but it can be assumed, as does Ananda Coomaraswamy, that the illustrations of hell were inspired from these texts. He even goes further in his book *Figures of Speech or Figures of Thought?* (2007) to state that these charana chittas are similar to what Buddhist texts refer to as *yama pata*. (184).

Kuvalayamala, an eighth century Jaina text, tells of a religious preacher who shows a painting of *samsarachakra*, the wheel of life from birth to death and rebirth. The painting had contained the suffering of human world, various karmas good and bad, and the different types of punishments in hell. Buddhism believes that there are six realms in the universe. These are the places of gods, demi-gods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts and hells. Souls take birth in human and animal kingdom and depending on their karma they are reborn in either hungry ghost realm or in *naraka*. Six Buddhas preside in these six realms. Naraka is supervised by the enlightened Buddha Yama Dharmaraja. (Jain 11)

It should be noted that naraka is different from the Christian concept of hell. Souls in naraka undergo a punishment in proportion to their sin and takes rebirth when the suffering is complete. In Christian hells souls are damned for eternity. As Jain lists, there are references from Sanskrit literature as well. In Vishakhadatta's *Mudrarakshasa*, a character who works as a spy, takes a guise of *yama pattika* and showed scrolls of hell. In *Vaddaradhane*, a tenth-century Kannada collection of stories there is a reference to a picture showman performing in the marketplace of a town. Both Vishakhadatta and Bana mention a type of picture showman known as *yama pattika* which literally means the "carrier of Yama-board", and refers to people who conventionally earned their livelihood by exhibiting painted panels of punishments rendered in hell. (Jain 15-18)

Buddhism had spread from India to the other parts of the continent from around 206 BC. On its route, Buddhism had travelled from India to China and then to Korea and finally Japan. In its transmission, along with the sutras, the religion has carried its artistic heritage too. As a corollary, the hells and the art of describing hells are carried over to China and Japan. The Chinese and Japanese concepts of hell, as can be seen today, are derivative of *naraka* but slightly different with other subsidiary gods under Yamraj or along with Yamraj. Keeping in view the nuances of culture, hell has changed its representations and illustrations but the dread was always the same.

Chinese history of hell

The art has travelled to China and proliferated in a new way. The extant Buddhist paintings of hell in China date from sixth century onwards. In Chinese mythology, Shiwang or Shih Wang stands for Ten Kings who reign in hell. Hell in China is known by the name *diyu* or earth prison/ underground prison. Diyu has ten chambers where souls are punished and tortured. Each of these regions or chambers is ruled by a King.



¹Fig: 1: A part of a Chinese Hell Scroll

Buddhism had been taken to China through the hands of merchants and monks who had their trade in the East involving China. The settlers in China from the trader community or even the travelling monks had to deal with the religious beliefs already present in China. “The Buddhist monks, who needed to confront those popular beliefs in society that people were engaged to or accustomed to, tried to show how they, the Buddhist monks, could provide people with reliable services, to expel evil spirits and ghosts from their lives, and to ensure a happy future, whether in this world or in the netherworld.” (Poo 165) As a result much of the early Chinese Buddhist texts show a preoccupation with ghosts or *gui*. Different from the English meaning of ghosts, the Chinese term *gui* refers to both souls of dead people and non-human spirits.

Different Buddhist sutras comment on different forms of ghosts and how they can be propitiated. Apart from hell, condemned souls can also take birth in the world of Hungry Ghosts. These are spirits whose mouth is small but the stomach is big. They belch out fire and are eternally thirsty. Only the prayers of mortals can reduce the punishments of Hungry Ghosts. In the case of hell itself, it is an unavoidable fact that there are different degrees of hell in different Chinese sources. On account of the presence of eighteen hells in *Wen diyu jing* (Sūtra on Questions on Hells), Frederick Shih-Chung Chen (2014), in his article comes to a conclusion that such a number of hells came from a Daoist inspiration. The story has it that when King Bimbisara was defeated in a battle, he vowed to be reborn in hell. His eighteen ministers also followed him to hell. The eighteen levels of hell are ruled by these eighteen ministers who have become kings of their own dominions. Bimbisara is reborn in the underworld as Yama. Chen notes that it was a Daoist belief of early medieval China that dead kings and soldiers take birth in the underworld and spread deadly disease among humans if not propitiated. He assumes that Buddhist writers responded to the Chinese customs and tethered Buddhism to the Chinese beliefs through formulating a similar story. On another account of the presence of Three Kings of hells, Xiao Jiang in his article “Dizang and the Three Kings” comments that the three levels of hell are modelled on the three levels of judiciary system in the early Tang period. The Three Kings are King Yama, the Magistrate of Mount Tai and the Great Spirits of the Five Paths. The cult of Ten Kings of hell developed in the mid-Tang dynasty and refused to be swayed over by any more representation of hell. Stephen F. Teiser in his book *The Scripture on the Ten Kings* (2003) attempts a comprehensive study on understanding the development of Ten Kings of hell.

The discovery of Dunhuang manuscripts in the twentieth century played a key role in understanding the importance of hell in classical China. These manuscripts are estimated to have been written in between fourth to eleventh century and were sealed in a cave. Since its discovery, the manuscripts have been the object of various academic studies. Victor H. Mair in his book *Painting and Performance* (2019) traces all fragmentary hints from Dunhuang manuscripts and other extant sources and relates it to the Indian tradition of picture storytelling. He reaches to a suggestive standpoint that picture showmen had existed in ancient China who used to paint and sing Buddhist transformation texts or ‘pian-wen.’ The exorbitance of Buddhist texts on hell provides a reasonable understanding that hell was a favoured topic among such painters. In the case of India, long before the Chinese Han period,

the existence of hell picture showmen is already proved. When Buddhism reached China, it sought the help of occult to propagate the new religion among the Chinese people. Such sort of Buddhist preaching is more pronounced in the case of Japan which will come later in the study.

The story of Mulian contains much of the pointers through which researchers have reconstructed the past. Mulian is the translated Chinese name of Maudgalyayana in Sanskrit. The story appears in the *Ullambana Sutra* which is a Mahayana Buddhist text on filial piety. The translated text in Chinese is known by the name *Yulanpen Sutra*. Mulian, a disciple of Buddha, achieves enlightenment and through his spiritual powers finds that his deceased mother has become a Hungry Ghost after death. With guidance from Buddha he comes to know that prayer of the living descendants can reduce the suffering of the dead. Mair in his article “Notes on the Maudgalyayana” asserts that the story of Mulian, found in a Dunhuang manuscript, is a ‘pien-wen.’ (83) According to Mair, ‘pien-wen’ are transformation texts or the stories of Buddha. In his book *Tang Transformation Texts*, he states that these transformation stories supplied fodder for vernacular fiction and drama based on Buddhist themes. Stephen F. Teiser states that the ancient painters use to paint the vernacular Mulian story and included various depictions of hell in it. They used to roam various places and display their pictures. (446)

The legend of the monk Tao-ming, found in the Dunhuang manuscripts, is an addition to the understanding of hells in ninth century China. The monk had been wrongly taken to hell and on realizing the mistake, King Yama releases him back to earth. On returning to earth, he had an accurate knowledge of how hell looked like. He had also met Ti-tsang bodhisattva in hell who is believed to have an observatory role there.

The twelfth century scroll painting, *Ten Kings of Hell* by Jin Chushi (Fig:2) gives a clear understanding of how hell was imagined during the Tang Dynasty. The painting depicts the workings of hell as a bureaucratic process. To strengthen the presence of hell paintings in ancient China, Teiser recalls the biography of a sixth century monk Ching-ai who is said to have been deeply moved by a painting of hell in a monastery when he was a boy. Observing the sufferings of sinners in the afterlife, he decided to adopt the life of a monk. It all points to the fact that illustrations of hell had been present in monasteries from sixth century or before. It is plausible that paintings in monasteries were for religious purposes and the itinerant

painters did not carry them. The paintings by such painters should be one of a vernacular or folk kind whereas the temple art should be more of a court like painting. Such assumptions can lead us nowhere, but it is undeniable that *naraka* had travelled from India to China and had a firm ground in public belief and imagination.



²*Fig: 2: Ten Kings of Hell*

Japanese History of Hell

Buddhism has reached Japan through the Koreans immigrants in the sixth century. “The indigenous beliefs of the ancient Japanese included animism and Shinto and neither were particularly challenged by the arrival of Buddhism. Shinto, especially, with its emphasis on the here and now and this life, left a significant gap regarding what happens after death and here Buddhism was able to complete the religious picture for most people.” (Cartwright

2017) The ideas of afterlife and of divine retribution were the areas which made the people welcome the religion. As a corollary, hell takes an important place in Japanese Buddhism.

The Buddhist hell in Japan is known by the name *Jigoku* and Yama is called as Emma-ō. Paintings from the late Heian period that are still extant today, illustrate the layers of hell and different forms of punishment conferred upon sinners. The anonymous *Gaki-zoshi* (*Scroll of the Hungry Ghosts*) from late twelfth century Heian period in Kyoto National Museum, Japan, illustrates the plight of Hungry Ghosts called as *gaki* in Japan. The painting is done in a handscroll format and is often considered to be a part of another temple painting. The scroll has different sections, and all the parts together narrate a story. The painting narrates the plight of Hungry Ghosts and how they can be saved by the prayers of the living. It also includes the story of Mulian or Maudgalyayana and depicts how Buddha saved the Hungry Ghosts.

A scroll of seven painted scenes along with text, called as *Hell Scroll*, presents another proof of classical Japanese preoccupation with hell. The scroll is based on *Kisekyō* ("Sutra of the World Arising") which states that there are sixteen lesser hells around the eight greater hells. Some of these hells are depicted in this scroll. The accompanying text informs the nature of the sin for which one is sent to that particular hell.

'Etoki' is the name for studying scroll paintings in Japan. In ancient days, not before tenth century, the abbot of a monastery would elucidate the meaning of a Buddhist painting to the followers in his monastery. He would use a stick and explain the narrative painting hung on a wall. Listening to the story is considered auspicious and a part of religious service. Later around twelfth century, the laymen of the temple, called as 'hoshi' started narrating 'etoki' to the common people. Their narration was both entertaining and educative. The thematic concern centered on hell and preached the people about the consequences of sin. It is believed that in Japan, Buddhism had spread through the displaying of these pictures. Ikumi Kaminishi in her book *Explaining Pictures* (2016) traces the proofs of historical 'etoki' displays and comes to an opinion that such hell illustrations had helped to propagate the religion profoundly. (74) Afterlife was the new domain in religious thought which Buddhism had offered. While the scriptures gave information, the 'etokis' helped to realise and witness the supernatural. The monks, abbots, hoshis were successful in spreading Pure Land Buddhism in this manner.

Indian Roots

It is surprising to note that the patachitra (scroll painting) of West Bengal still preserves the tradition of showing hell pictures. The art of making scroll paintings and singing, is present in many states of India in different forms and known through different names. In West Bengal alone there are different places where this form of art is practiced by artists who have taken the art form as a hereditary tradition. In West Bengal, the art of scroll painting has emerged and evolved in different clusters thus making distinct schools of art, each differing in the treatment of figures and colours. The list includes Kalighat patachitra, Birbhum patachitra, Medinipur patachitra, jadu pats of Bihar. Among them, the patachitra of Birbhum excelled in painting hell scrolls. Patachitras by artists of Birbhum include a lot of themes such as the stories of Ramayana, Mahabharata, Krishna, Chaitanya, Kali Kattayoni and some stories of folk deities of Bengal. In the present day, much of the artists have changed profession and the vigour in art has gone but still there are artists who are practicing their hereditary profession.

The patuas or artists narrate the story in a scroll by singing a song on it. Most of the scrolls contain a story and ends in the dominion of Yamraj. It is the place where the sinners in the story are punished for their wrong deeds. The narrations that they present are simple and easy to relate, not like a *shloka* in scripture. They would sing and narrate that if someone steals the food offered to god then in hell his tongue is ripped out. Those women who do adultery are made to climb a thorny palm tree. There was once a prostitute but she did charity such as *go daan* (gift of cows) and *jol daan* (give water to a thirsty person) and hence she is taken to heaven.

Gurusaday Dutt has worked in Birbhum as a Collector from 1930 to 1933 and documented as many patua songs as he can get in his book *Patua Sangeet* (2016). In the book Dutta records a particular song by a patua named Panchanan Chitrakar who had lived in the village Panuria, Birbhum. (92) The song narrates a part of Ramayana from its early stage to the part where Ram breaks the bow and wins Sita for marriage. The narration stops here to this point and jumps to the King of hell and describes his office. The last few lines of the song are translated below:

Son of Sun is Yama known by the name
Who never punish one without infame.
Yamdut and Kaldut are his two messengers
Chitragupta the clerk is keeping ledgers.
To take one from earth two messengers engage
Holding him tight before the King they place.
By an iron staff they crush sinner's head
Who steals money from other's homestead.
He who in court speaks untrue
With a hot plier his tongue they isolate.
He who gives bad water keeping good water elsewhere
Is made to drink soap-water from a water bag made of leather.
Who owns one but never shares her ³dheki
Her breasts are threshed with a hellish dheki.
...
A harlot named Heera had a life of sin
Did charity of rice, clothes and cows to Brahmin.
When the woman dies, messengers of Vishnu
Takes her in golden chariot and heads to Baikunth.

(My translation)

The songs are composed in couplets and in this translation such rhythmic quality is maintained. This very ending stanza, addressing Yamraj, has not changed from times immemorial. It is also surprising indeed that a more recent performance by Shantanu Patua of Birbhum, recorded and shared on the internet by Daricha Foundation, ends with the same story. The words in Bangla are minutely changed here and there but the entire description of hell is kept intact. From 1930 to the present day, the narration of hell in scroll has not changed a bit. The narration of the main story of the scroll have either shortened or incorporated new themes in response to the changing audience. Such rigidity for hell illustration, that negates any change, has no explanation. If the narration has denied any change in the recent years, it is plausible that the narration had been the same for some previous centuries as well.

What was the narration at any definite point of time in history? From when did the narration take this present shape? There is no answer. Any synchronic study is never possible without dire assumptions. Debasish Bandopadhaya in his book *Birbhumer Jompot o Patua* (1972) contends that the patuas showing hell pictures are descendants of those ancient Buddhist teachers who used to paint and sing pictures of *naraka*. Bandopadhaya has taken clues from the thematic structure of the scroll stories for his purpose. He records that Fa Hien on his visit to Kapilavastu has seen pictures where Buddha comes in a white elephant and enters the mother's womb to be born as Goutama. He find that in Krishnalela scrolls, the patuas narrate the story of Krishna's birth where Vishnu takes the shape of a white fly and

enters the mother's womb. The similarity in both the stories makes Bandopadhaya think that the tradition of scroll painting is formerly a Buddhist tradition. However such similarities in stories may dive towards a common origin but the proposition is not devoid of vulnerability.

The description of hell in Birbhum patachitra, if studied closely, points to the various layers of hell. There are separate places where tongues are ripped and foul water is made to drink. Each division of hell in Chinese and Japanese paintings has a particular form of punishment. In case of Birbhum pata too, such a division is apparent. The paintings of each punishment are separate and never overlap. The use of *naraka* as a purgatory device is undeniably a Buddhist application. It is also very much possible that some remnants of that tradition may still sustain in a different form, considering the rigidity of the narration of hell that refuses to change.

Chinese hell paintings from Tang period mimic the judiciary system of the prevalent period. In the particular song as recorded by Gurusaday Dutta, two Bengali words used in context of the helpers of Yama, raise suspicion. The two messengers of Yama who bring souls to hell are called as *peyada* or bailiff or a footman. The book keeper Chitragupta is referred as a *mohuri* or a clerk. Both of these words are still in use in the court and judiciary system. The scriptures, whether Buddhist or Hindu, never make them court personnel. The art of representation has made them so. Discreetly enough, Birbhum patachitra has similarity with Chinese and Japanese hell paintings.

Conclusion

In this research hell scrolls are viewed within a trans-cultural ambit. The hell viewed in India is similar to the hell viewed in China and Japan. Such instances prove that the Asian people transcend their culture and mix into one another. It is also pertinent that the Buddhist influence from India has shaped the way in which other cultures in Asia have manifested. The dread of hell is both purgatory and entertaining at the same time and scroll performers have put it to use. It is possible to contend that hell and its art of representation is spread across countries and cultures. The process of translation involves clearing of outer garb and finding similar inherent characteristics in two seemingly remote cultural phenomena.

The future of scroll is assured because of renewed public interest in folk and government's plans for upliftment of the craft. It is rather not known whether the illustration of hell will be capable to rouse fear in modern audience and whether the audience will really

get a moral education or not. Scrolls are now considered as an artefact, a representation of culture and its historicity. Scrolls will now fail to teach the tenets of religion. It is also notable that scroll painting and their narrators have never abstained from the job of instruction. Scrolls are now used to create awareness on AIDS, corona virus or proper sanitation, deforestation and judicious use of water. From illustration of hell to illustration of COVID-19, patachitra of Bengal has shown a remarkable elasticity.

Notes

¹Fig 1. The artwork *Hell Scroll* is in the Public Domain in Wikipedia Commons. Copyright rules of Japan do not apply.
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Hell_Scroll_\(Nara_National_Museum\)#/media/File:Hell_Scroll_Nara_Iron_Mortar.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Hell_Scroll_(Nara_National_Museum)#/media/File:Hell_Scroll_Nara_Iron_Mortar.jpg).

²Fig 2. The artwork *Ten Kings of Hell* by Jin Chushi is preserved by Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The image is in Public Domain. According to the Museum's policy, copyright rules does not apply.
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/44510>.

³A traditional grain-grinding handcrafted machine.

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