

beneath the banyan tree

Ritual, Remembrance, and Storytelling
in Performed North Indian Folk Arts



bengali patas

ADITI NATH SARKAR

*Jai! Jai! Goddess Manasa
Jai! O remover of poisons
Beautiful and seated on Eight Serpents.
Serpents for bed and mattress,
Serpent Throne,
See the goddess seated on the snake named Mangala Bora...¹*

You can still hear sometimes the high-pitched voice of a *patua* singing his song on a fall afternoon in a Medinipur village in West Bengal, as he slowly unfurls his painted scroll while telling the story of Manasa (figures 35 and 37), goddess of snakes, and the ordeals of the devout bride Behula. His hands dance in united motion as the roller in his right hand unfurls the scroll and the roller in his left, held lower, takes up the slack. He is a professional painter or *chitrakar* (picture-maker) and singer, more commonly known as a *patua/patidar*, whose occupation is to paint stories on *patas* (rectangular sheets of paper stitched into vertical paper scrolls) and move from village to village, and especially to markets and fairs, displaying the picture scrolls and reciting the narratives connected to them in exchange for uncooked rice, lentils, vegetables, clothes, and sometimes money.

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy has long pointed out that such 'picture show-men' have an ancient ancestry in Indian art history, and it seems they are the oldest surviving tradition of 'performance artists' in India. One is tempted to say that the *patua's* craft is "as old as India," as old as the Indian earth on which he squats as he sings. In fact, the ceremonial gates of the Sanchi *stupa* (Buddhist shrine) in central India have distinctly scroll-shaped finials, indicating the popularity of narrative *pata* scrolls in the India of perhaps even the first century C.E. and also the prestige that this medium enjoyed at that time. The subject matter of Sanchi sculpture was nothing less than the life of the Buddha.

1. A nonpoisonous variety, hence a tranquil member of the serpent family.

The patas of Bengal are unrolled vertically (unless otherwise noted). Dimensions for the scrolls shown in this collection are given in inches; length precedes width. If unrolled horizontally, height precedes length. When known, the artist's name is listed in italics. Unless otherwise noted, the following objects are from the private collection of Geraldine Forbes, Syracuse, New York.

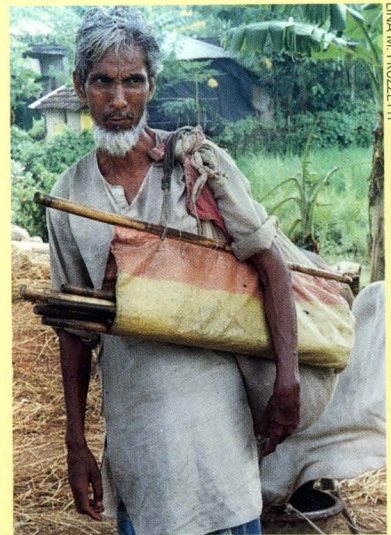


Figure 35 (facing page)
Detail of Manasa from The Story of Goddess Manasa and Behula-Lakhindar, see figure 37.

Figure 36 (above)
Alauddin Chitrakar, also known as Elabdi Chitrakar, is ready to travel to neighboring communities with part of his *pat* repertoire rolled up in the canvas bag slung under his arm. This bag is locally called *gilip*, from English 'grip' or handbag. (Naya Village, Medinipur, West Bengal, 2001)



Figure 37
The Story of Goddess Manasa and Behula-Lakhindar
 Gurupada Chitrakar
 State of West Bengal, 1983
 Tempera on paper
 147 1/4 x 22

1.
 Victorious, Victorious! We worship you, O Mother.
 Victorious, Victorious One, who takes away the poison.
 Your bed was made of serpents, your throne
 was made of vipers,
 The snakes on which the goddess' seat is made
 are enchanted by good words.

2.
 The bark is shaken with fury,
 The ropes are pulled,
 Who is the fool abusing Mother Manasa?
 Who is he but the husband of a woman who
 will be a widow.

"If I get hold of that woman of easy virtue,
 I will beat her with a *hental* stick
 And break her bones forever"
 (Curses Chando, the Merchant)

But altercation and enmity are never really good;
 Think of Ravana of Lanka who nursed enmity
 And this was the cause of his death.
 His ten thousand sons died
 And fourteen thousand grandsons,
 Now there is none in the city of Lanka
 To keep the family light burning.

Wicked Merchant Chand, he did not understand
 anything.
 He abused Mother Manasa
 Calling her "sister-in-law."
 That abuse Mother heard with her own ears
 In wrath, did she eat Merchant Chand's six sons.
 Six sons did she eat, six sons' wives became widows.

3.
 The old man does not have the wisdom to offer
 her a token flower [in worship].
 His youngest son is named Lakhindar.
 He [the old man] says, "Let's go to Nichaninagar
 to marry him off."
 In Nichaninagar lives Amulya, the Merchant.
 He has a daughter, he calls her Behula Ballarina.
 The old matchmaker went to finalize the match.
 His teeth are like black pepper from taking pan.
 At the wedding, Lakhindar rides a palanquin,
 Bandmaster Ray Harimohan's band plays with pomp.

The room for the newlyweds is made of iron,
 In it sleep Behula and Lakhindar.
 Like a thread, Kalia [venomous snake] gets
 into the room.
 Seeing how beautiful Lakhindar is,
 he begins to think,
 "Such a beautiful body, where shall I sting?
 When the gods ask me, what shall I say?"
 Then an unlucky thing happened to
 the Gentleman Chando's son.
 He turned on his side, slack with sleep
 (And struck the snake with his foot).
 Then, calling the moon and sun as his witnesses,
 the snake bit Lakhindar.
 The burning venom made Lakhindar senseless.
 He cried, "Wake up, get up. O daughter of Saya
 the Merchant, what has bitten me?"
 Tearing her sari, she made a wick and lit the lamp.
 Seeing the snake, she threw the betel nut cutter at it.

People came running to the merchant and said,
 "Your son is dead."
 The Merchant Chand listens,
 "It is good my son Lakhindar is dead."
 And saying this, he took up his stick and
 began to dance.
 "When the day dawns, I will roast a fish
 and eat it with day-old rice."

4.
 [Behula said] "O father-in-law, I did not live
 even twenty days in your house.
 There are so many gods, what made you quarrel
 with Manasa?
 You gave me conch shell bangles and saris.
 Take them back as compensation.
 Cut up banana tree trunks and put them in the water."

Taking the banana plant,
 the old man cut them and made a raft,
 Behula set sail.
 Say how many ports she missed.
 Her six brothers followed her.
 Her brothers called out "O elder sister, our beloved
 one, why are you drifting with a rotting corpse?
 Come back home, we'll take care of you.
 You have six brothers' wives, we'll make them
 work under you."

Behula: "The parental home is not for me anymore.
 Your wives will always be fighting with me.
 I have become a widow at a tender age.
 I will not return to my parents' home."
 Consoling the brothers, she sailed on.

The corpse on its raft reached Goda's wharf.
 Goda is a clever fellow.
 Sitting on the sandy banks of the Dangra,
 He doesn't eat rice, only *ru* carp.
 Seeing a young woman, Goda mocks and teases:
 "Tell me woman with vermilion on your forehead
 [*sindur*, a sign of an auspicious married woman],
 where do you live?"

Behula: "Ash in your mouth, Goda,
 ash in your mouth.
 I am the handmaiden of Mother Manasa.
 I float downstream."
 And she floated away.

5.
 In this fashion, she passed by the landing places.
 For six months, they traveled in this fashion.
 Arriving at Tamluk Port, the corpse begins to dance.
 Netai goes and washes clothes, flowery draperies.
 Behula also goes and washes clothes as bright
 as the sun.
 Taking these clothes, Behula goes to the city
 of the gods.

She asked a boon from Brahma, Vishnu,
 and Maheswar.
 "We bless you [little] Mother Behula,
 we bless you with a boon.
 Take your six brothers-in-law and your husband
 and depart to your father-in-law's house."

Joyously, she prepares six rafts.
 Resurrecting her dead husband,
 Behula went back to her native land.
 She worshiped Mother Manasa back home.
 Merchant Chand gave Manasa a flower offering
 with his left hand.

No woman is as virtuous as Behula.
 The old man had seven sons and
 their seven wives all at home.
 From that day on, people began to worship
 Manasa in every house.

Even earlier, the Ajivika teacher Makkhali Gosala (sixth century B.C.E.) one of the contemporary religious rivals of early Jainism, is described as the son of a mendicant who showed religious pictures and sang to them. The classical Sanskrit play *Mudraraksasha* by Visakhadatta (sixth century C.E.) mentions such wandering artists employed by the statesman Chanakya to spy upon the opposing chancellor, for such performers freely entered, then as now, the inner courtyard of any household to entertain the women and children of the family.

The *Tarikh-I-Feroze Shahi* that records the reign of Sultan Feroze Shah Tughlaq (1351–88 C.E.) of Delhi relates the sultan ordering the burning of an 'old Brahman' near Delhi who had a wooden tablet that was covered with paintings of demons and other objects with which he 'perverted' the populace, especially women. As this man refused to convert to Islam as required by the judges, even under threat of death, he and his 'tablet' were set on a woodpile and burned outside the court of the Muslim king. The tenth-century C.E. Mukteshwar Temple in Bhubaneswar, the capital of the state of Orissa that adjoins Medinipur in West Bengal, has exquisite carvings of female figures holding *patas*, indicating the temporal and geographical continuity of this craft and its performance.

LINA M. FRUZZETTI

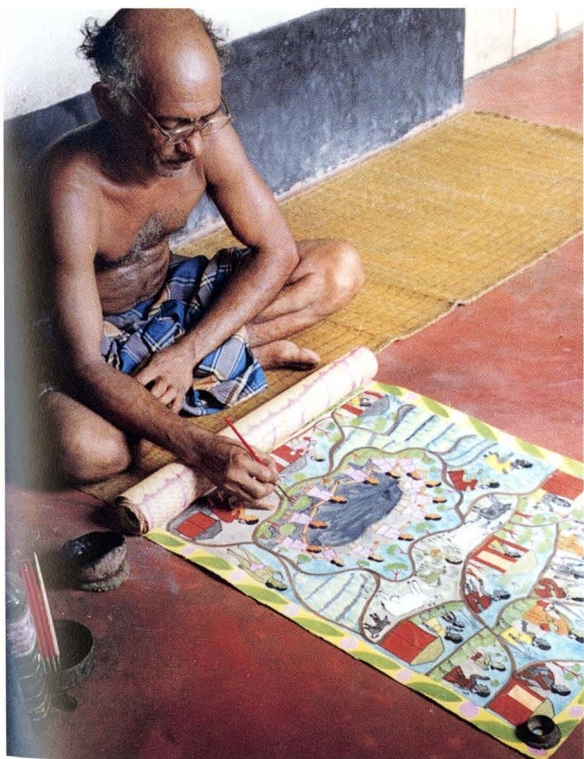


Figure 38
The *patua* Shyamsundar Chitrakar, painter of the Chandimangal scroll (see figure 39), at work in his home. (Naya Village, Medinipur, West Bengal, 2001)

Figure 39
Chandimangal
Shyamsundar Chitrakar
State of West Bengal, c.1999
Tempera on paper
109 x 22

1.
Kali-Ma, save me. I take shelter at your feet. You must save me or I will be lost forever. I am a sinner, you know that, I am entangled in *maya*. Chandi has ten arms at her sides and a third eye. Lakshmi, Saraswati, Ganesha, Kartik, Joya, Bijoya, all go with her.

2.
One day, Ma-Durga [i.e., Chandi] was pleased as she sat under a pomegranate tree. Kalketu got his wealth from her and made a kingdom. He also hid some of his wealth and then, carrying some heavy things, went to his wife who was waiting for him.

Meanwhile, Srimanta was born to Khullana. He wanted to find his father (Merchant Dhanapati) and went in search of him. His mother said, "I have only one son, if he goes, I will lose my son. But if you really want to go, pray to Durga."

3.
Durga came. Khullana gave her son to Durga. Srimanta went in a boat, and in the sea, they saw a woman swallowing an elephant. It was the goddess [Chandi] on a lotus, and Srimanta bowed to her over and over.

4.
Finally, Srimanta came to a ghat and went on shore. When he arrived, he was arrested by a policeman. He was taken to the king. The king was sitting on a jeweled throne. Srimanta told him, "In your kingdom, I saw a woman swallowing an elephant." The king said, "If you can show that to me, then I will give you half of my kingdom and my daughter in marriage. But, if you cannot show me this, I will kill you."

5.
The king went on the ocean to see the promised vision. Chandi hid herself in the lotus grove. Then the king called his people to tie up Srimanta, who began to cry but then remembered Durga. He sang in praise of Durga, "Will I die here in this place where people are executed? I have heard that calling the name of Durga stops all problems." When he remembered Durga, she flew in the sky like a kite. Then his handcuffs fell off and the policeman couldn't understand what was happening.

6.
To whose house did you go today, Mother? Indra offered *puja* to you, and he became a king. Durga gave a boon to Srimanta, and he married the princess. Then he came to his home. He made everyone offer *puja* to Durga. Everyone offered *puja* to Durga.





Making Patas

Originally, *patas* were probably painted on fabric (*patta*) or as suggested previously, on boards, but they are now essentially an ephemeral art painted on modern mill paper in the standard foolscap size, sometimes backed with cloth and stitched together to form a long, continuous roll. The tattered sheets show signs of the thousands of times they have been rolled and unrolled. There is hardly a *pata* scroll today that dates to the early nineteenth century, as this was never a prized courtly or aristocratic art but rather one that lived in the villages, thrived in the weekly markets, and perished from floods, fires, and termites.

The *patua's* watercolors are even now traditional organic and vegetable dyes. Derived from his rural environment, they have proven to retain their brightness and clarity after years of continuous use. Their binder is gum arabic and an adhesive prepared from the fruit of the *bael* (*Aegle marmelos*) or wood-apple tree. The leaves of the local broad bean (*Dolichos lablab*) provide green. Indigo is used for blue. Grated, undried turmeric provides the basic yellow. Powdered conch shell provides white and brightens other colors. The extract of betel leaves (*Pipex betel*) mixed with lime and catechu (*Acacia catechu*) supplies shades of yellow, orange, and brown. The burnt clay from the inside of the domestic oven and roasted grains of rice, mixed in different proportions, provide darker earth tones. Lamp-black and burnt grains of rice provide blacks and grays. The roots of the *gab* tree (*Diospyros peregrina*) are burnt to make the deepest black. Vermilion creates the brightest red. Flowers provide some of the brighter parts of the palette, e.g., *palash* (*Butea monosperma*) and hibiscus (*Rosa sinensis*) blossoms create beautiful reds and pinks, while the ground seeds inside the flower of the humble domestic *pui* (*Basella alba*) make a delicate red. The *patua's* very fine brushes may be made from the tails of the *kathberali* (Indian woodchuck) and, so legend has it, the fine hair from the tail of the jackal. Hair from domestic goats provides thicker brushes. Nowadays, however, *patuas* buy commercially made brushes quite freely.

All the *patas* in the exhibition have been collected from the district of Medinipur in West Bengal, from the village of Naya and its neighbors in the Tamruk area. That and adjoining areas of Medinipur is where the *patuas* thrive the most today. The traditionally male *patua* draws

Figure 40
Lankadahan (Burning of Lanka)
Yakub Chitrakar
State of West Bengal, c. 1999
Tempera on paper
106 x 14



Figure 41
Sita Haran (Abduction of Sita)
Madhusudan Chitrakar
State of West Bengal, c. 2001
Tempera on paper
135 1/2 x 22

the main outline, while women and children fill in the drawing and border. Carrying his repertoire of scrolls in a canvas bag slung under arm (see figure 36), the *patua* strides from village to village across the rice fields. Women, given purdah restrictions, were not meant to play the itinerant singing role, but now with the growth of the scroll itself as an item to sell, and less and less as a medium to earn with, individual women painters are emerging in their own right.

The *patuas'* designs and songs have always been communally owned. Once a song is heard and memorized, it may be used by any and all. *Patuas* have even been known to buy a scroll from another *patua* and show it from village to village if they think that it is better than the effort that they could themselves make. They believe that the line(s) sung as identification at the end of the song relate to their relationship to that performance only. No larger 'ownership' of the song is implied or claimed.

Pata Stories

Pata subject matter today is from the Hindu epics of the *Ramayana* (figures 40 and 41), the *Mahabharata*, and canonical Puranic and other scriptural narratives. Especially popular are narratives of the deeds of Krishna, the incarnation of the Vaishnava godhead as a loving cowherd, widely popular all over India. But they also sing of Bengali cults of the greatest importance to local Hindus and Muslims alike, as well as historical or news tales of "Murder on the Train," "The Ferry to Kakdeep" (figure 45), and the "Atom Bomb" (figure 47).

The *patuas'* craft is not as common today as it was at one time due to the movement of cinema and television deeper and deeper into the rural interiors of West Bengal. *Patas* are not simple, static pictures but "singing pictures," and it is when they are performed that this craft is complete. In breadth of subject matter and in 'picturization' of a given script, the *patas* most closely resemble cinema.

The religious epic in the *Ramayana*, for example, has long been divided into three parts in the Medinipur tradition: namely Sita Haran (Abduction of Sita), which may be said to be the central motif of this epic; Lankadahan (Burning of Lanka); and Ravanabaddha (Slaying of Ravana), which concludes the cycle. A *Ramayana* narration is seldom completed in one sitting. Look at the Lankadahan scroll (figure 40) to see the methods adopted in *pata* narratives to handle what is commonly referred to as 'continuity' in cinema. The first frame is a key frame, showing the death of the valiant bird Jatayu, the point in the story at which the preceding story, Sita Haran (see figure 41), has ended. The last frame is also a key, for it indicates in pictorial shorthand that the 'coming attraction' will be the story of Ravanabaddha.

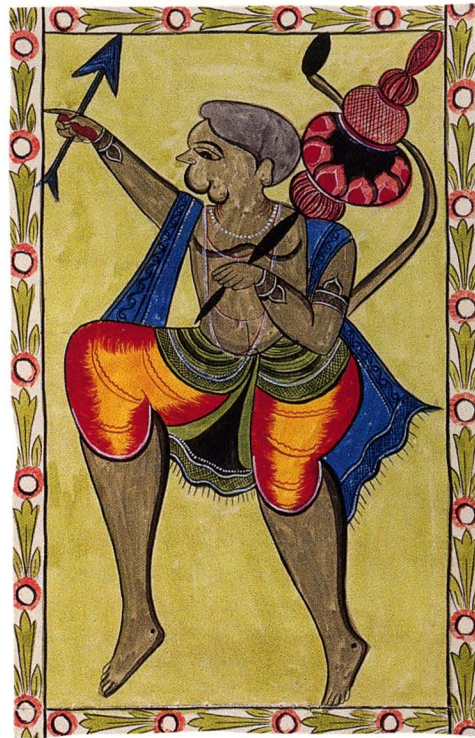


Figure 42

Sugriva said, "What are you waiting for? We can start a war." Detail from Lankadahan (Burning of Lanka), see figure 40.



Figure 43

When Sita stepped out of the circle, Ravana captured her and took her away in his chariot. The bird Jatayu, a friend of Rama's, began to fight with Ravana. Ravana shot a special arrow and Jatayu fell to the earth. Detail from Sita Haran (Abduction of Sita), see figure 41.



Figure 44
Anti-H.I.V. Campaign
Rani Chitrakar
State of West Bengal, 2001
Tempera on paper
107 x 14

The American Center in Calcutta commissioned Rani to create H.I.V./AIDS scrolls for AIDS Awareness Day in 2001. Rani says she knows about the disease but does not personally know anyone infected with it. This is not a song; the patua narrated what was in each frame.

1. Listen.
2. In the last twenty years, one million Indians were affected by AIDS.
3. Both women and men can be infected.
4. Transmission is through blood, through the mixing of blood.
5. If you use condoms [she named the brand "Nirodh"], you will not be infected.
6. Microscopes can examine blood, so if you get a blood transfusion you won't get it.
7. Addicts who share needles transmit H.I.V.
8. Needles to give injections must be sterilized before injection.
9. If the mother has it and breast feeds, then the baby will get it.
10. If pregnant, women should be tested for H.I.V.

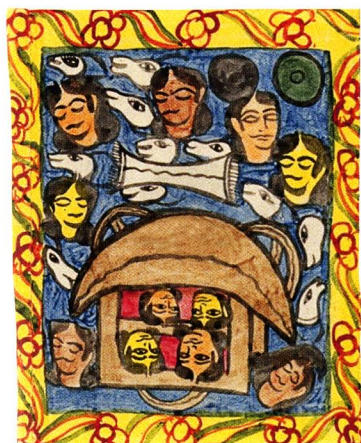
Whereas stories from the *Ramayana* are known all over India, perhaps the most characteristic tales that the *patuas* paint and sing belong to the Bengali cultural area and are well-documented in the pre-modern Bengali language literary and manuscript traditions. Recital of these narratives is expected to induce *mangal* (well-being) and both material and spiritual benefit. They outline the culture's central concerns regarding social, especially sexual, relationships and relationships to the gods. They adumbrate the reciprocal expectations of devotion and blessing that harmonize heaven and earth. They concern, for example, goddess Manasa (figure 37), who rules over snakes and poisons, and narrate her attempts at finding recognition and worship all over the world, especially the world dominated by males. Her antagonist is the merchant Chand Sadagar, or Chando, a worshipper of Shiva (one of the three primary male divinities of Hinduism), whose benevolence had protected Chando in the past from many dangers. Chando ignores the worship of this 'new' divinity and is simply a very tough customer who refuses to bend even when Manasa kills his six sons by snakebite and makes widows out of all their wives. He begets a seventh son, Lakhindar, and employing priests, astrologers, and matchmakers, marries the boy to Behula, the perfect daughter-in-law. At Manasa's bidding, a black snake sneaks into the iron chamber where the newlyweds sleep, and Lakhindar dies. His corpse, following the custom for victims of snakebite, is put on a raft made from the trunks of banana plants and floated down-river. Exceptionally, and this makes her unforgettable in the annals of rural Bengal, Behula accompanies her husband's corpse past entreating relations and dangers lurking in the water and on shore—her choice also gives the scrolls their characteristic design of a river flowing down the center, joining one frame to the next. Behula arrives finally at the City of the Gods, and her devotion wins back the lives of her husband and his brothers. She also brings a rapprochement of sorts, when her father-in-law finally gives in to worshipping Manasa but "with his back turned."

The scrolls of the goddess Chandi tell the tales of her various manifestations to different parts of Bengali society. She first manifests herself to a powerful but rapacious hunter and teaches him to be a king. Next she manifests herself to the young merchant Srimanta (see Chandi-mangal, figure 39) while he is on the high seas en route to Sri Lanka. In the vision, in a grove of lotuses upon the bottomless waters, he fails to recognize Chandi whom his own mother dearly worships and in whose express care she has placed him for the dangerous voyage. He is nearly executed by the king before the goddess takes her eighteen-armed form and saves him at the last instant.



Figure 45
The Ferry to Kakdeep
 State of West Bengal, c. 1980
 Tempera on paper
 16 x 83 1/4

1.
The steamer to Kakdeep ferries people across.
2.
It became jam-packed with passengers. The captain says to the mate, "Listen to me, Sergeant. Let down the ropes, and fathom the waters once and again." They quarrel and speed the engines.
3.
The steamer goes where the water is 100 feet deep. The steamer to Kakdeep.



4. (left)
The skeleton of the motor explodes. Full fathom deep go bundles of notes. A pair of shawls is washed away. The steamer to Kakdeep catches fire. Some cry, "Mother, O Mother." Others cry, "Father, dear Father."
5.
The whole of Contai subdivision is mad with grief. Full of hope, we boarded a ship and now we die. The date: 1337 B.S., the third of Ashar [June 1930]. The day the steamer sank was

a Thursday. In the salty sea, under 100-foot-deep water, the ship sank. "O Mother Goddess Bishalakshmi: How you made us fall into woe. Giving us hope you have swept us into the water. You have done this, you have written it in our fate." The steamer to Kakdeep. Our lives are snuffed out. The steamer to Kakdeep.

6.
The steamer to Kakdeep fills its hold with 37 cows and 27 men. In the waters of the salty sea, in 100-foot-deep water, they cry out, "O God, my God." The steamer goes down, the steamer to Kakdeep.

7.
Sanatan Mondol was the world's stingiest man. His head is in the tiger's mouth, his legs between the crocodile's jaws. They both tug at him and his life's breath goes out. Everyone says the miser dies.

The steamer to Kakdeep, ferries people across.

The *patuas* are not, however, religious specialists; religious subjects are merely part of their repertoire. For them there is no necessary religious/secular opposition, everything is a story and grist for the narrative mill. They view the matters in the *Ramayana* as, in some sense, on a par with events that may have happened last year, or even continuous with them. It is all 'news' to be retold with artistry. "The Ferry to Kakdeep" (figure 45, a rare horizontal scroll), for example, recounts an actual disaster that took place in the 1930s and also teaches a moral. Such 'news' stories, now viewed as 'historical' stories, were painted horizontally because they were unfurled and displayed horizontally on two poles stuck into the ground at fairs or weekly markets to draw many viewers at once. The *patua* would stand in front, point from frame to frame, and sing. Ever since the War of the Liberation of Bangladesh (1971), government and nongovernmental agencies alike have employed the *patua* and his song to carry their messages into the less accessible rural areas. Hence, it is not uncommon to find *patas* used in the rural anti-H.I.V. campaign (figure 44), the campaign against the dowry system and cruelty to women (figure 46), or in campaigns to save the environment.

Natural disasters may continue to provide subject matter for scrolls, but the *patua's* network of information has expanded. Today, instead of the ferry disaster at neighboring Kakdeep, he sings of the atom bomb dropped on far-away Japan (figure 47). Because of his relative mobility in a rural society, the *patua* continues to be a cultural interpreter, and in "Kolkata" (figure 48, which won a prize for artistry at the 1997 district-level crafts contest), he leads his less sophisticated rural audience on a visit through Kolkata (Calcutta).

When interpreting the *patas* in the exhibition, however, we are at a disadvantage, for we see only the visual part of the total artifact; lacking is the aural component that explains, enlivens, and creates the final impact of the performance.

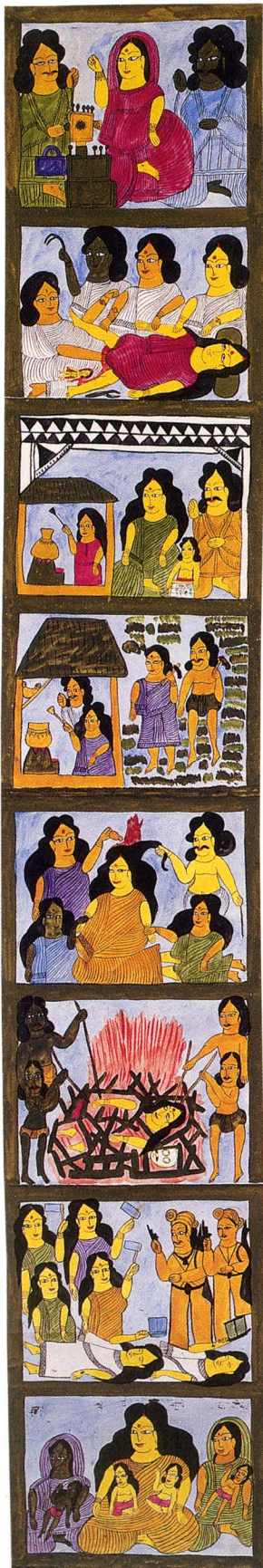


Figure 46
Torture of Women
 Rani Chitrakar
 State of West Bengal, c. 1999
 Tempera on paper
 85 1/4 x 14

1. There is no happiness in a woman's life. This is the final word for the human race. Listen everyone! When a girl is born, everyone tortures her. They invented a machine so that they can see inside a woman's body.
2. If there is a girl child inside, they kill it.
3. Parents do not send their daughters to school but to the kitchen.
4. A woman can work in the field all day long, and when she comes home, she has to do all the household work.
5. There is no peace in a woman's life. They kill women for dowry.
6. Is this the fate of a woman? When her husband dies, she becomes a *sati*.
7. Women who worked for the country's independence, Rani Rashmoni and Matangini Hazra, were shot.
8. Both boys and girls get lots of love from the mother, so why do people kill a girl child? If there are no women, there will be no human race.

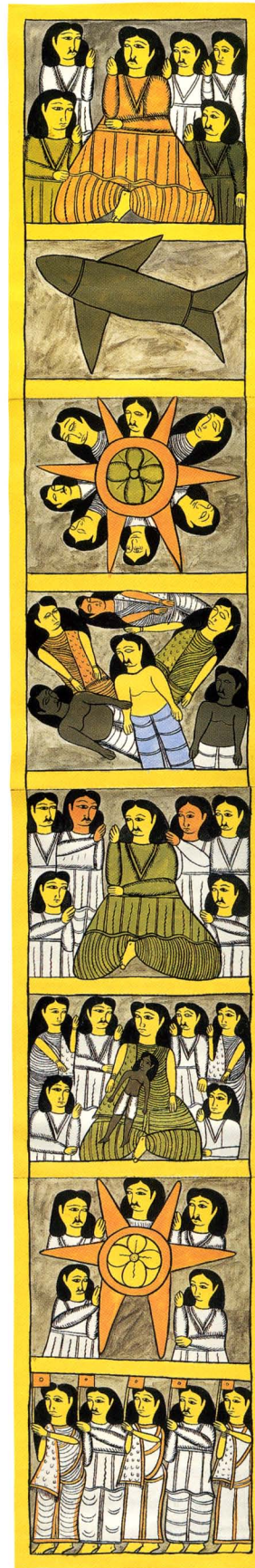


Figure 47
Atom Bomb
 Gurupada Chitrakar
 State of West Bengal, c. 1997
 Tempera on paper
 86 x 14 11/16
 Private collection of Joseph C. Miller

SUMMARY: Now I shall sing a new *pata*: the Atom Bomb *pata*. It is based on the bombs that were dropped over Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. O brother, what strange things are happening in America. Just by listening about that atom bomb, I, Gurupada, became almost half dead. In the year 1945, to test the bomb, when the Second World War was coming to a close, they dropped the bomb on two cities: Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It started on the sixth of August. There was smoke everywhere. Hundreds and thousands of people lost their lives. They could not even understand what had happened. The impact of the smoke was strong and affected so many countries. Whichever country the smoke reached, people grayed prematurely. So many people died in these countries, I cannot even begin to describe. Among those who survived, their offspring became handicapped. The disease spread all over the body. They could not develop properly.

So, women throughout the world have united and are carrying on movements against this. Listen to me, O Science: why are you becoming so ignorant? Your machines will boomerang on you. Then nobody will be alive. So think about it. Destroy these machines. The world human rights organizations are discussing this. Oh, what strange things are happening in America.

Now I am finishing this song. My name is Gurupada Painter. My address is Naya, district Medinipur, West Bengal. Strange things are happening in America. My salute to you.

The Patua

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, Balthasar Solvyns, presenting the professions of Calcutta in his series of colored engravings, showed the Calcutta *patua* among the characteristic signs of his trade: standing with paintbrushes and clay pots, and in front of a larger than life-size image of a Hindu deity modeled in unbaked clay. Of course, Solvyns's *patua* is probably a painter of the square, single-frame 'Kalighat' *patas* that are now relatively more well-known to museums and collectors and not a painter of scrolls. But Solvyns's *patua* was quite likely descended from the Medinipur *patuas*, since the two geographically separated communities still maintain regular marriage ties with each other. Indeed, the grandparents of some of the painters exhibited here had lived and worked in Calcutta as painters of 'Kalighat' *patas*. They had gone there seeking a living, and in talking to the older members of the *patua* community of Naya village, one understands the marginalized lives they have led and how ephemeral has been their stay in Naya. They speak of the terrible famine and war years of the 1940s, when *patua* families were broken up by starvation and wandered from village to village, managing only sometimes to reunite themselves when relative stability returned to West Bengal after 1947. It was about then that more and more *patua* families migrated to this village, because—and one senses their suffering from this one statement—they knew "rice was plentiful here."

In a somewhat amazing expression of hierarchy, the *patua* caste of Medinipur is subdivided again into at least seven subcastes. These were rather strictly endogamous at one time, perhaps less so now. On the whole, they give the picture of a community of people who own no land and make their living from performing a variety of craft-, performance-, and entertainment-related functions for society, but always from its margins.

What is perhaps much more interesting is their religious affiliation. Almost every *patua* has two names, one Muslim and the other Hindu. They perform Muslim birth and death rites. Yet they also worship the local Hindu village deities, make images of Hindu gods and goddesses, paint scrolls on Hindu themes,

and compose songs to Hindu deities. The *Brahmavaivarta Purana*, a thirteenth-century text rather authoritative for the Medinipur area at least, indicates that the Chitrakara caste had been one of the nine 'pure' craft castes, but it had been expelled for deviation from canons in their religious imagery. Local tradition indicates that the *patuas* became Muslims, like many other lower castes, to avoid paying taxes levied on non-Muslims by the Islamic rulers. But whereas other converted groups were wholly absorbed into Islam, the *patuas* remained betwixt and between as they continued to ply their 'idolatrous' craft. Today, growing religious fundamentalism in rural West Bengal is driving some *patuas* to adopt a markedly Hindu or markedly Muslim identity. But in earlier ages, the *patuas* composed the scroll of Satyapir:

Jai! Jai! Satyapir, in you I take refuge
Who else protects us from shame?
You are Narayan among Hindus
And Pir among Muslims.
You have manifested (*zahir*) yourself
in both communities
To receive the worship (*puja*) of both. ❀

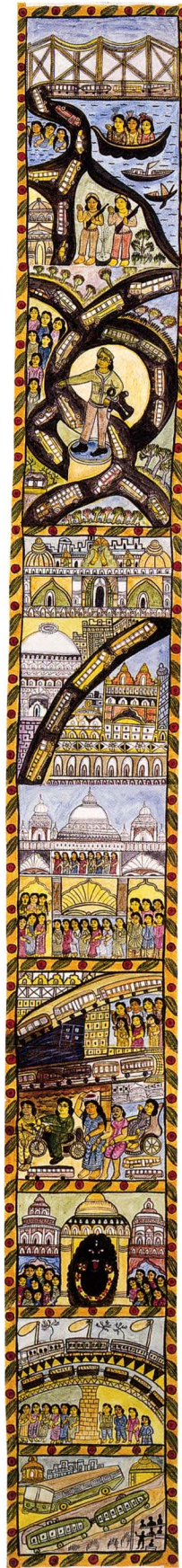


Figure 48
Kolkata
Madhusudan Chitrakar
State of West Bengal, c. 2001
Tempera on paper
127 x 14

There is no 'song' that accompanies this *patua*; the *patua* named what he had painted in each frame.

SUMMARY: Job Charnock [the *patua* called him Job Chanakya (*sic*), like the most famous political theorist of ancient India and founder of the Mauryan Empire], the founder of modern Kolkata, sat in a boat and stared in amazement at his handiwork:

Howrah Bridge, the Hooghly River, Howrah Railway Station; Curzon Park, with the statue of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose in the center, then the State Secretariat at Writers Building and the Calcutta High Court; the great Chowringhee Road, the Metro Cinema; Birla Planetarium and St. Paul's Cathedral; the Victoria Memorial with the dating couples on the lawn in front; traffic ("with the police guiding us through our lives") and the city's new underground railway; Kalighat Temple; and Tollygunge Metro Station.

On Bengali Patas

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Figure 58
The patua Meena Chitrakar at work.
(Naya Village, Medinipur, West Bengal, 2001)

Figure 59
Dasamahavidyas
(Ten Forms of the Goddess Durga)
Shyamsundar Chitrakar
State of West Bengal, c. 1999
Tempera on paper
17 x 93 1/2



This is not a popular traditional pata anymore. Shyamsundar said that a woman he knew had asked him to paint it. He did not sing a song but rather told a story about the pata. This is the story he told:

When the father of Sati arranged a fire ceremony, he called all the gods and goddesses, but he left out Shiva because Shiva lives in a burning ghat [where bodies are cremated] and he was not ready to accept him as his son-in-law.

Then Durga [another name for Sati] said, "This is such a big affair, I will go to my father's home." Shiva said, "No, don't go. You can't go. I won't go because I was not invited." Then Durga showed herself to him in the ten forms of Kali.

Then Shiva said, "It's okay, you can go." Shiva was thinking one form would stay with him and another would go. He would not stop her, but he would not go.

- | | |
|------------------|------------|
| 1. Bagala | 6. Kali |
| 2. Bhairavi | 7. Kamala |
| 3. Bhuvaneshwari | 8. Matangi |
| 4. Chhinmasta | 9. Sorashi |
| 5. Dhumavati | 10. Tara |