

Filming in Naya Village
Akos Ostor

We have been working and filming in West Bengal for many years before we began The Singing Pictures project in September 2001. Our friend and colleague, Aditinath Sarkar, has been telling us about the Patua scroll painters of Naya being a compelling subject for a film. He has been visiting the village over three decades, recording compositions, collecting scrolls, and studying painting styles. He was also helping the artists exhibit and sell their works in Calcutta. Finally, the opportunity came and we began what turned out to be annual trips for the next five years, filming, studying, and just spending time in the community. Aditi's long term involvement, our facility in Bengali, and our own extensive field experience in other Bengali towns allowed us to dispense with the early phase of research, the long slow process of getting acquainted with a new community.

In 2001 we had planned to carry out exploratory work on 3 projects, knowing that one or another of them will become the sole focus of our attention. We started with Bishnupur Lives, in the town where we have been working over the past 35 years. The film was to be about the transformation of the town mainly through the eyes of the people we have come close to over the years. We had several ideas and worked quickly, but in a few weeks I developed a detached retina and had to rush to Calcutta for an operation. The treatment was successful but because of the required rest we resumed filming at a slower pace. Still within a week or so, we went to Naya with Aditinath and filmed extensively, completing the introductory phase of the work we had planned.

The third film, Magic Forest, about village life in the mangrove forests of the Sunderbans, had to be called off for another reason. The September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center occurred just a few days before we were to start, and our collaborator, Mike Pandey, a noted environmental film maker, was asked immediately to film for Indian television. So, instead, we went to Naya. Later on we did make a short trip to the islands of the Sunderbans and spent considerable effort to secure the necessary permissions to film (from various authorities in New Delhi, Calcutta and 24 Parganas

District), and although we did some filming and were fascinated by the subject we ended up pursuing the other 2 projects over the next five years.

In Naya we started working with some elder men, established artists whose career Aditinath has been following for years. Among them was Dukhushyam Chitrakar, a remarkable and charismatic figure: a mystic who drew on Muslim and Hindu spirituality, a composer and painter of great originality, and a chronicler of Patua life and traditions. We were also drawn to a group of women who were encouraged by Dukhushyam to paint and sing. They had to face considerable obstacles in learning their craft especially since the idea of women painting and selling scrolls, appearing in public, was frowned upon by both the Muslim and Hindu communities. Here we found the stories we would make the film about. It was a tense time in the village after the September 11th, not because of Hindu and Muslim differences, rather the endemic political party conflicts that afflicted the whole region for the past generation. Violence flared up occasionally and although our presence was sharply questioned by some local party workers we were able to film without incident. We secured all the necessary permissions from the national, state and local authorities. We had the consent of all the villagers. Nevertheless, the District Intelligence Branch kept an eye on our activities throughout the years we stayed in Naya.

It was another year before we could return, and having discussed the results of the first season we could define our tasks more precisely. We also brought in Alfred Guzzetti, an accomplished documentary and avant guard filmmaker (PICTURES OF A REVOLUTION, FAMILY PORTRAIT SITTINGS) with whom we have collaborated on two previous films, one of which, SEED AND EARTH was filmed in a Bengali village about 50 km from Naya.

In many ethnographic filming projects the extremes are an overly literary orientation in the manner of written anthropology and a kind of visual-aural style and form that would neglect cultural complexity. The former would occur at the expense of the cinematic, the latter at the expense of the anthropological. If in our discussions Aditi tended towards the former and Alfred towards the latter, Lina and I would argue, with somewhat different emphases, for a context based merging of the two. In all these endeavors we strove for a combination of perspectives, enlisting cinematic form and style to convey anthropological meanings, and giving ethnographic substance to visual and aural

images. Aditi was inclined to work more closely with the senior men, emphasizing the historical, literary, and esthetic contexts, while Alfred was fascinated with the more formal possibilities of Patuas' musical styles. Intense discussions served us well in finding the form and style appropriate to the themes we were pursuing, while preserving the integrity of the people and the culture. Every evening after the day's work, we would talk about what the film is about, what kind of structure is emerging, and what we should film next.

We still filmed Dukhushyam while he painted, telling us about Patua lore, the changing musical forms, melody and composition, painting style and practice, and the Hindu-Muslim conundrum. But interestingly our work took shape around the recently formed women's cooperative (the Patua Mahila Unnayan Samiti, The Patua Women's Self Improvement Society) Rani Chitrakar, the secretary and tireless organizer, Meena and her daughter Swarna Chitrakar, the two sisters Manimala and Mayna Chitrakar, accomplished painters and singers. We also filmed the meetings of the cooperative society, including discussions and recitals.

After much deliberation we settled for a central concern with the women, while providing as much of the daily living contexts as possible. Now it became clear that we could not put the footage of Dukhushyam and the Samity together in one film and decided to make a separate film of the former. The themes emerged from our day-to-day encounters, the formation and tribulations of the cooperative, the processes of painting and composition, the practice of Islam (the Sufi path), women's independence (the complexities of remuneration for work, birth control, gender and generational relations). All this is the context of everyday life, since the women themselves insisted on talking about the same topics, and spoke spontaneously as they painted, developing an easy conversational style with us, Lina being the primary interlocutor. We continued taping while they went about their household chores, prepared their material and set about to paint and sing.

We were delighted to work with the women of Naya: they are professional storytellers and accomplished performers. Despite their lack of literacy and formal education they are thoughtful, articulate, and oriented to the outside world. There was no

dearth of conversation, no prodding for a song, no lack of willingness to paint or sing in front of the camera.

By the summer of 2003 we were ready to begin the long process of editing. We were lucky to have Joseph Sousa, an aspiring young filmmaker to embark with us on the rough cut. Joe just graduated in Film Studies at Wesleyan and took my course on making Anthropological Video as a junior, becoming the Course Assistant the following year. Since then he went on to a career in filmmaking, having completed the award winning film FESTA (about the Feast of Holy Sacrament in New Bedford, Massachusetts and the island of Madeira, Azores). We created an assemblage, about twice the length yet many of the elements of the finished film. During this time Aditinath was able to join us for 2 weeks and we worked on the translations of the dialogue. One of the tasks here is not the literal translation but one that says more with less. Not every phrase appears in a subtitle and so the text has to be faithful to the original but shorter, contextual and pointed towards the connotative as well as the denotative meanings in a way complementary to the image.

By the end of the summer we had a rough cut and Joe had to leave to take up a post that set him on his way to become a professional filmmaker. Shawn Hainsworth, another accomplished filmmaker with several award-winning films to his credit (including SUNFLOWERS, and FLOATING HOUSES) was able to join us to edit the fine cut and bring the film to its final form and a release print. We worked together on our previous film, FISHERS OF DAR, when he did the sound editing. Shawn brought a fresh eye to the project and suggested numerous changes including substantial cuts in length.

Lina and I went back to India in December 2003 for two months to continue work on BISHNUPUR LIVES and do additional shooting in Naya. Throughout 2004 the task of editing continued, sharing time with Shawn's other professional commitments. The film was completed in 2005 and for the premiers at Brown and Wesleyan Universities we were able to bring to the USA the three artists prominently featured in the film. Securing visas was a saga itself with letters from senators and personal visits to the Calcutta consulate by Lina and myself, accompanied by a senior officer from the Brown administration, Kate Wolford. The visit was highly successful with hundreds of scrolls

sold, a complicated but not impossible chore to organize. We were surprised to find that in all of their visits abroad this was the first time that Naya artists were able to sell their scrolls. We gathered paintings by all 15 members of the cooperative and so everyone benefited from the sales that exceeded all expectations.

From the prizes won and the royalties generated by the film we continue to make substantial contributions to the women's cooperative. On a subsequent visit in 2006 we also purchased a DVD player and monitor for the cooperative and showed the film to the delight of the entire village. Recently, Wesleyan's Information Technology Services decided to create a web site around our work in Naya that will feature additional ethnographic materials, interviews, life histories, song recitals, print sources, as well as outtakes from the film. A well designed and executed website is uniquely suited to navigate complex connections among materials in different media, if only because of the non linear, sphere like combination of elements and numerous layers of reference a site may encompass.