A Film and an Exhibition: Text for the Catalogue

Singing Pictures – The Women Painters of Naya

A Film by Lina Fruzzetti, Ákos Östör, Aditi Nath Sarkar (color, 40 min, 2005)

For generations, Patua (Chitrakar) communities of West Bengal, India have been painters and singers of stories depicted in scrolls. The Patuas tell the stories of Muslim saints (pirs and fakirs) as well as Hindu Gods and Goddesses, and offer devotion to saints at Muslim shrines. In the past they used to wander from village to village, receiving rice, vegetables and coins for their recital. They would unroll a scroll, a frame at a time, and sing their own compositions. But competition from other media eroded this way of life and now the Patuas are trying to adapt to changing conditions.

In response to this cultural crisis and as a means to make extra money, recently a group of women from Naya village near Calcutta formed a scroll painters' collaborative. Lina Fruzzetti, Akos Ostor and Aditinath Sarkar set out to film their story in the fall of 2001. They returned every year till 2004 when the filming was completed and the process of editing began. The film was released a year later.

The film follows the women's daily lives as they paint, sing, cook, tend to their children and meet with the cooperative. They discuss the problems and rewards of practicing their art, and speak freely about the social, religious, and political changes in the village and the world beyond. Their wisdom, artistry, and good humor amidst many difficulties illuminate the lives around them.

The Exhibition

The exhibition and the catalogue comprise the work of the Naya Patua Mahila Unnayan Samiti (Naya Village Patua Women's Self Help Association). Many members of the cooperative are represented here. The original scrolls are complemented by the recorded recitals of the stories depicted in the pictures. In addition, each of the artists sings their favorite scroll on unedited video sequences. These recitations are accompanied by edited texts of the painter-singers' life histories and the lyrics of the songs. Constraints of numerous kinds prevent us from presenting long scrolls by every member of the cooperative, but video sequences and life histories represent them all. The entire group sings several scrolls on video tape. Individual and group recitals can be seen and heard on monitors in the exhibition hall.

Scrolls cover a variety of themes: mythological and religious, social and especially women's issues, contemporary local and world news. The more recent themes are communal (Hindu/Muslim) harmony, Joy Bangla (the birth of Bangladesh as a country), the battle of Kargil (Kashmir conflict), and the September 11 events in New York. Women painters have also developed the figure of Satya Pir (revered by Muslim and Hindu alike) demonstrating how two communities can live in religious harmony despite mounting tensions in the rest of the country.

Painting and singing stories told in scrolls (patas in Bengali) go back to ancient times in India. In Bengal hereditary painter-singers (Patuas or Chitrakars) have been practicing their craft in the Midnapore district for generations. The exhibition and the

film introduce the viewer to the village of Naya, about three hours drive from Calcutta, where many Chitrakar women have taken up the Patua craft.

They use commercial paper for the scrolls but still make paint out of organic materials. They are poor, but they try to find new markets and sell their work at art fairs and to middle class families in Calcutta. In addition to itinerant singing, they augment their income by selling scrolls to urban buyers and government sponsors for campaigns in adult literacy, social welfare and public health. They also participate in juried handicraft competitions in Midnapore and Calcutta, and elsewhere in India.

The History

The tradition of painting narrative scrolls, called *pata* in Bengali, is very old in South Asia. The classic Sanskrit play *Mudraraksasa* ("The Minister's Seal") speaks of itinerant performers who display *yama patas*, or painted scrolls that display the punishments of hell. References to *pata* can be found in the *Raghuvamsa*, and to literature dated to the time of Emperor Harsha and down to the early Delhi Sultanate. Even earlier, the first biographies of Mahavira, one of the founders of Jainism, indicate that the scroll- painters' profession was recognized early in Indian history. The classic Orissan temples of Bhuvaneswar, such as the *Mukteswara*, have figures in bas-relief showing that painted scrolls were popular in Orissa in the 12^{th}-13^{th} centuries. Orissa has a living tradition of *patacitra* painting, but even far away Rajasthan has a vigorous tradition of the *padha of* the martial hero Pabuji. Indeed, the widespread distribution of narrative scroll- painting traditions indicates its antiquity in South Asia. The Great North Gate of Sanchi stands at the very beginning of India's cultural history, having carried the

Buddhist *Jataka* stories for 2000 years, displays three horizontal architraves ending in spirals to indicate *pata* scrolls transferred to stone.

The Medinipur Patuas

Patuas, also known as Chitrakars (*citrakaras*) are a caste of painter-singer-performers who traditionally paint and show narrative scrolls and sings the song appropriate to the scroll being shown. They may still be found in several West Bengal districts: Murshidabad, Birbhum, Bankura, and Medinipur. The Murshidabad patuas are supposed to have been the most refined due to their closeness to the Nawab's court. The Birbhum Patuas were an inspiration to the artists around Rabindranath and Abanindranath Tagore, in the cultivation of painting and fine-arts at Santiniketan .The Patuas of his natal village in Bankura directly influenced the artist Jamini Roy in simplifying his style. However, the patuas of all these West Bengal districts are largely vanishing artists. The patuas of Medinipur have survived as the most vigorous of all these localized groups, probably by virtue of their proximity to the Calcutta metropolitan area to which their village is well connected by rail and road.

What do patuas do? They paint on mill made paper sheets stitched together to form scrolls. They use brushes made from squirrel hair and goat hair. They use organic material for paint: burnt rice grains for black, turmeric for yellow, leaves of particular plants crushed for different colors, and bael (marmelos) and babool (*gumma arabica*) as binders.

They compose their own songs. They have a set of traditional folk tunes common to all Bengali village music of this area but some of them compose their own melodies. Their words are often traditional, often composed by individual patuas but swiftly appropriated by the entire community.

They are performance artists. New compositions emerge in response to contemporary events and issues. A scroll is not completely utilized until it has been unfurled, one frame at a time, accompanied by its song. The same patua does the showing and the singing, though at times patuas travel in groups. However, the same patua may not have done the painting he/she sings. They is recognize that some are good painters and others good singers.

As the narratives of the women make clear patuas often receive nothing more than rice, dal, and uncooked vegetables as payment for their performance. But in villages, especially better to do ones, the coming of a group of wandering patuas is still an occasion with all the members of an extended family gathering together, special requests being made, the patuas being paid in kind and in firewood with which they cook for themselves.

The Repertoire

Ramayana and *Mahabharata* epics are two staples, though in different ways. The basic *Rama* story in a severely abbreviated form, but still visibly unified, is presented in three long parts, that tell the tale of Banishment, Abduction and Rescue of Sita. The *Mahabharata* is mined for individual narratives such as *Data Karna* and *Raja Harischandra*. The Radha -Krishna corpus is frequently utilized, as is the story of the

Vaishnava incarnation Sri Caitanya (1486-1533) especially his leaving home,"Nimai Sannyas". Then there are the stories typical of the region, such as *Candimangala* or Srimanta Masan, *Manasmangal* or Behula Lakhindar - stories in praise of particular divinities. Stories of gods and saints are very popular, indeed vital to both the Hindu and Muslim communities, narrative cycles such as Bonbibi, Gazi Sahib, Satyapir, and Satyanarayan. Historical events and figures of yesterday such as the Scroll of Manohar Phansure, or Manohar the Garrotter are also retold. Notorious events like "The Dacoit Killed by a Woman", and "The Murderous In-laws" are also commemorated. Finally, there are scrolls of social criticism, such as "15 August, 1947", where Independence is seen in an entirely negative light. During the national campaigns for population control patuas started being used by governmental agencies and NGOs to spread social messages. Birth Control, Saving the Environment, Plant more Trees, Communal Harmony, female education, personal and public hygiene, HIV/AIDS and many such campaigns have been beautifully interpreted by Midnapur patuas on their scrolls. But more than all that, there is a perception of "history" within patua practice. When Dukhushyam Chitrakar, (the elder who encouraged and taught the women to paint and sing) sings the "Scroll of the Flood "(of 1978) he knows that the "powers that be" are the ministers who arrive via helicopter in one brilliant panel. But the real "power" ("Sakti") is Mother Ganga who brought the Flood to teach a religious message (which in this case turns out to be also an ecological one): she has been tied down on all sides with dams and structures. She is a Divinity and will not brook such bondage.

The Religion

Midnapur Patuas are Muslims. They bury the dead and circumcise male children. They have both Muslim and Hindu names. Nevertheless, they compose, sing, and paint the stories of Hindu gods and goddesses. Indeed some make images of deities for Hindu Festivals in the neighboring villages. Many are deeply devoted to particular Hindu and Muslim shrines. Their origins may be tribal and their status have been kept low in Hindu hierarchy because of their manual work and handling of raw materials. They were converted to Islam some time perhaps in the 16^{th} /17^{th} century. Since the 1930s they have undergone changes in opposite directions, some have become more absorbed into local Hinduism other have become more orthodox Muslims. The Midnapur patuas provided one group that went to Calcutta and became the famed Kalighat *Pat* painters. The latter have changed their surname to the Hindu "Pal", and they marry into only certain Midnapur families.

Conclusion

The exhibition and the film pay special attention to women's problems, in particular those dealing with control over their own bodies. In the film and in their life-histories the women candidly discuss issues of Islam and birth control, victimization of women, gender relations, female education, poverty and work, religious tolerance and intolerance. Some of these ideas are depicted in the scrolls themselves.

The women painters and singers of Naya want to tell their own stories in songs and pictures, depicting their lives of hardship and endurance. These stories attest to what it means to be a woman in Bengal and India today, demonstrating how a small group of

determined women can empower themselves by adapting an ancient art to new conditions.