

THE SCROLL OF THE FLOOD

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Bless thee Bottom! bless thee! thou art translated.

Midsummer Nights Dream, III.1.

In a series of papers¹ ranging far outside the conventional borders of "South Asia" studies, and comparing History and Anthropology as forms of knowledge sharing a common epistemology and a common subject matter--"Otherness," Bernard S. Cohn discusses the practice of what he terms "proctological history," or the study of history from "the bottom up." Such history "is the study of the masses, the inarticulate, the deprived, the dispossessed, the exploited," ignored by earlier, more elitist historians as passive subjects, whose history till recently was perceived as intractable, and whose source materials were thought to be outside conventional organization. Those persons, in short, against whom Croce so clearly warns his fellow historians:

The historian . . . must not give primacy to the negative element, to the inert and heavy and reluctant mass (which exists in every people . . .) but to the active element, to that intellectual class which represented the developing nation and which alone was truly the nation.²

And regarding whom Croce's countryman Ginzburg has expressed the regret, that even in our more generous and enlightened times:

Although the lower classes are no longer ignored by historians, they seem condemned, nevertheless, to remain "silent."³

¹I mean chiefly, "History and Anthropology: The State of Play," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22, 2 (April 1980), and "Anthropology and History in the 1980s," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 12, 2 (Autumn 1981).

²Benedetto Croce, *History of the Kingdom of Naples*, edited by H. Stuart Hughes, translated by F. Frenaye (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 195-196 (orig. Italian publication, 1915).

terminal. The Anthropologist most often seeks to recover what might have been. In the different styles of social and cultural Anthropologists, the natives live in a never-never land of structural-functionalism, outside change and history. The special modern sub-set known as "Symbolic" anthropology seeks ever-deeper structures underlying the flux of living. And it is the Anthropologist who is the final arbiter of this structure, for frequently it lies too deep for the native ken. The "Symbolic" Anthropologist's informant lives in an even more timeless, unchanging place than those of the others. Because his/her methodology is synchronic, the Anthropologist presents us with an objectification and a reification called "Authenticity" which for him/her is something natural that has always been there and therefore has no history.

What authenticity is for the Anthropologist, Chronology is for the Historian. This "Chronology" Cohn views as a transformation of the indigenous European theory of linear, divisible time:

Chronology, the capacity to sort events, ideas, persons, and lives into before and after statements, is the basic methodological assumption which underlies the practice of all historians.⁶

Chronology allowed Europeans to construct a "real" world out of the past, that was also natural and all-encompassing. Everything had a history; discovering this history was to "explain" it. The history Europeans thus constructed for themselves, was also part of the growing process of control over space in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and related to the definition of European nation-states. Hence the hegemonic power of the kind of intellectual agenda indicated in the earlier quotation from Croce, whose focus in that study is a

⁶Cohn (1980), p. 228.

Historians, studying from the bottom up, venturing into areas more familiar to Anthropologists, have demonstrated, Cohn notes, the possibility of extending historical studies and producing more complex and rounded history.⁴ History and Anthropology both aim "at explicating the meaning of action of people rooted in one time and place, to persons in another. Both forms of knowledge entail the act of translation."⁵ They also share a common, critical problem, in that both aim to study change, but succeed only in developing theories of explanation which account for the *status quo*.

The Anthropologist always seeks to reconstruct an "ethnographic present," which is an ideal imagined state of "the people" that he/she may be studying, but at a stage prior to the advent of the modern age, that is usually represented by European colonialism. Through the process of fieldwork the Anthropologist establishes and reifies a special kind of authenticity for "the" people, who are "my people." What this means in practical terms is that when Hindu cosmologies are reconstructed the *śāstras* and *purāṇas* are studied, and the Brahman pundit consulted, but not the cosmology that is current at the local bus

³Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. J. and A. Tedeschi (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), p. xx (orig. Italian ed., 1976).

⁴This bottom, it would appear, has proved equally fertile for cultivators from both History and Anthropology. In counterpoint to the result of the historians, one must note, in the case of South Asia, the importance of the Redfieldian anthropological entry (into civilizations, through "the little community"); cf: the section "Civilizations from the Bottom Up" in Milton Singer, *Robert Redfield's Development of a Social Anthropology of Civilizations*. Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society, 1974. For Redfield's conceiving of Space as Time, see Cohn (1982), pp. 203-204.

⁵Cohn (1980), p. 198.

certain moment in the evolution of the Italian nation-state. From this ancestry too derives the enduring prestige of the study of "elite formation," whether of "the Men who ruled India," or of the Mughal *mansabdārī* system or of more generalized treatments of "elites in South Asia" or of more particularized ones, e.g., in Bengal.⁷

By the nineteenth century the European control over space included that over Asia, whose peoples were characterized as inert, non-progressive and "Oriental," and whose history was construed as "a reverse of the history that they (i.e., Europeans) constructed for themselves."⁸ As a matter of fact the "Orient" and the "Oriental" were two of Europe's deepest and most recurring images of the "other." The writing of history for Asian peoples came with the West's power to dominate, restructure and have authority over the "Orient," and is an aspect of what has now been described as "Orientalist" discourse.⁹ This basic distinction was made the starting point for elaborate theories of difference. Thus, James Mill found India to be a society that could not have history, for it had no chronology, its texts being "destitute of historical records," containing only "the miraculous transactions of former times."¹⁰ His even more famous contemporary Macaulay found it

no exaggeration to say that all the historical information which has been collected from all the books written in the Sanskrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgements used at preparatory schools in

⁷Philip Woodruffe, *The Men Who Ruled India*, 2 vols. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1953-54); E. Leach and S. N. Mukherjee, *Elites in South Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); J. H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth-Century Bengal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

⁸Cohn (1981), p. 228

⁹See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

¹⁰See Cohn (1980), p. 229.

England.¹¹

The rejection of India that is involved in nineteenth century British "Orientalism" is all embracing, and frequently includes the rejection of the Indian's ability to truly see, feel or represent the world at all. As Partha Mitter's study of the fate of Indian art in European taste points out, for the seminally influential critic Ruskin for example, an example of Indian art,

you may take as sufficient type of the bad art of all the earth. Fault in form, dead in heart, and loaded with wealth externally . . . may [it] rest in the eternal obscurity of evil art . . .¹²

About the causes for the Indian's aesthetic and moral blindness Ruskin--and here he truly represents his age--is clear,

*it [i.e., the art of India] never represents a natural fact [original emphases] . . . To all facts and forms of nature it wilfully and resolutely opposes itself . . . It thus indicates that the people who practise it are cut off from all possible sources of healthy knowledge or natural delight; that they have wilfully sealed up and put aside the entire volume of the world.*¹³

And Ruskin's condemnation ends in the rolling cadences fusing the moral and the aesthetic, possible, perhaps, to Victorian Evangelists alone:

for them neither their heaven shines nor their mountains rise--for them the flowers do not blossom--for them the creatures of field and forest do not live. They lie bound in the dungeon of their own corruption, encompassed only in their doleful phantoms, or by spectral vacancy.¹⁴

¹¹Thomas B. Macaulay's "Minute" on Education of the 2nd February 1855, quoted in R. C. Majumdar (ed.), *The History and Culture of the Indian People*, vol. 10, pt. 2 (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1965), p. 81.

¹²See Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters, History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 244.

¹³Mitter (1977), p. 245.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 246.

The Indian Mind's--and for this discourse, that is a single entity--ability to perceive events in the changing external world and to grasp "truth," especially historical truth, always remains suspect. As a modern British historian remarks with reference to the class of Sanskrit literature included under *itihāsa* and *purāṇa*, and most usually utilized by historians, in these texts "historical truth slowly becomes absorbed and dominated by aesthetics."¹⁵ And these "aesthetics," supposedly shared by most educated men in medieval Hindu India, are of a particular kind and have a distinct effect:

All these writings rest on the fundamental assumption that the universe changes through enormous cycles of time, and against this background they inculcate the supreme lesson of history for man as *śānta-rasa*, the sentiment of calm resignation.¹⁶

The cultural distinction of the West from the "Other," and hence also the rejection of the latter, is founded on perceptions of deep epistemological differences, perceptions which persist to this day, as Said's references to an essay by Henry Kissinger clearly illustrate. In that essay the former Secretary of State divides the world into the developed and developing countries. The developed West, the inheritors of the Newtonian epistemology,

is deeply committed to the notion that the real world is external to the observer, that knowledge consists of recording and classifying data--the more accurately the better.¹⁷

Contrasted to this is the non-Western world whose characteristics Kissinger describes in words that vividly remind us of the words of Ruskin:

¹⁵C. H. Philips, ed., *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 4.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁷Said (1979), pp. 46-47.

Cultures which escaped the early impact of Newtonian thinking have retained the essentially pre-Newtonian view that the real world is almost completely *internal to the observer*.

In Kissinger's view then, "empirical reality" has a much different significance for these societies "because in a certain sense they never went through the process of discovering it."¹⁸ From this the distance to MacDonnell's grandly summarizing statement¹⁹ is not very great:

Early India wrote no history because it never made any. The ancient Indians never went through the struggle for life, like the Greeks and Persians and the Romans in the Punic Wars, such as would have welded their tribes into a nation and developed political greatness.

It may very well be the case that denying Indians a historical sense was part of the British Imperial desire to deny India the bases of self-sufficient nationhood. In any event, it has been experienced as a real enough aggravation by M. N. Srinivas, and leads him to exclaim with some exasperation:

It is indeed surprising that though the existence of castes of genealogists and mythographers has been known since the publication of James Tod's famous *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (1829-1832) statements have been made ad nauseum by European observers of Indian life that Indians do not have any sense of history. This myth has obtained such wide currency that even Indian intellectuals subscribe to it.²⁰

As this essay,²¹ as well as Fürer-Haimendorf's survey of bardic literature²² make clear, professional chroniclers have been common in

¹⁸Said (1979), p. 47.

¹⁹A. A. MacDonnell, *A History of Sanskrit Literature* (New York: Appleton, 1900), p. 11.

²⁰See his Foreword to the essay by A. M. Shah and R. G. Shroff in Milton Singer, ed., *Traditional India: Structure and Change* (Philadelphia: The American Folklore Society, 1959).

²¹A. M. Shah and R. G. Shroff, "The Vahīvacā Bārots of Gujarat: A Caste of Genealogists and Mythographers," in Singer (1959), pp. 40-70.

²²C. von Fürer-Haimendorf, "The Historical Value of Indian Bardic Literature," in Philips (1961), pp. 87-93.

many Indian societies, and have had a most important legitimizing function in those societies and have also enjoyed the fame due to artists. Moreover, this activity has not always been limited to high-caste Hindu groups, but can be found in lower and tribal communities as well. Data about this has not been lacking from the nineteenth century onward, as the full bibliographies of these two articles attest. The reasons for not considering this activity historiographically is also revealed in one of these essays, when Fürer-Haimendorf presents as a given that ". . . historical writing in the western sense begins in India only with the Mughal period." He further argues that such records as the "bardic" compositions are centered on the narrow interests of a caste or princely clan and therefore cannot tell us anything useful about larger social units, presumably meaning a people at large or a nation or a state. Their usefulness for Fürer-Haimendorf is finally limited by their insignificance as "chronology."²³

A great deal of praise, much of it well deserved, is lavished upon the chronicles that appear in India with the Muslim conquest, especially with the advent of Mughal rule.²⁴ However, these too were almost always dynastic histories kept by a courtier or state official on orders from the ruler or on expectations of patronage.²⁵ They were seldom intended to be informative about any other than the rather limited elite sponsoring the writing. They are thus, not generous sources for the

²³See Philips(1961), p. 93.

²⁴See Fürer-Haimendorf in Philips (1961), p. 87; and especially S. M. Ikram, *Muslim Civilization in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), pp. 117-118, 242-243.

²⁵Philips (1961), pp. 5-6; Ikram (1964), p. 117.

history of those, whom, some historians have now identified as the "subaltern" in the Indian historical context.²⁶ Cohn is critical of a certain tendency towards trivialization and towards reification of technical-environmental aspects, that seem to be inherent in the new style of micro-social history, hence his less than enthusiastic formulation regarding the "hyphenated histories."²⁷ "Proctological" history is hardly a complimentary term! It would indeed be ill-judged to reduce the cultural to the level of dependent epiphenomena. But there is an active historical discourse at the "Bottom," definitely cultural, and our task is to become aware of its character. Being of the cultural order, it is sustained, and long-term. It is neither mystification or false-consciousness about what should rightly come under practical realities nor is it created *ad hoc* through day-to-day decision making, but it holds the interpretation of events in its purview. R. Guha²⁸ criticizes the domination of elitism over Indian historiography, and its failure to present or interpret "the politics of the people." His focus, however, is the politics of Indian nationalism, since he wishes to address what he regards as the central problematic of the historiography of colonial India. But there is a more general domain of history that is part of the broader culture of the subaltern classes. It is my purpose here to study the foundations of historiographical knowledge in the culture of one area in deltaic western Bengal, and the methods used by a caste of local cultural

²⁶For the application of this viewpoint definitely derived from Antonio Gramsci to the study of India, see Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies I: Writings of South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 1-8.

²⁷Cohn (1980), pp. 215-216.

²⁸Guha (1982), pp. 1-8.

specialists--the *paṭuās* or *paṭidāras* of Tamruk--to legitimize their epistemology. Our present venture is into History at the "Bottom."

Like all the southern districts of West Bengal, Medinipur is always seriously affected by the annual monsoon flooding of the rivers of the Bengal delta. In addition to flooding by the great silt-laden outflows of the Gaṅgā, the district is also affected by the fast streams that flow down from Chota Nagpur and other neighboring hilly tracts. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries devastating floods are recorded with monotonous regularity in Medinipur.²⁹ In the single decade of 1830-1840, for example, serious floods occurred in '31, '32, '33, '34, '39 and '40! "The agriculturalists . . . were overwhelmed," a contemporary administrator notes,

in two successive years by tremendous visitations of Providence. By the first of these, more than half of the crops were swept away, more than half the population was destroyed, and the fertility of the soil annihilated.³⁰

The danger from the flooded rivers in this season is exacerbated by the operation of the immense tidal system of the delta of the Gaṅgā. With the incoming tide funnelling silt-laden water upstream into progressively narrower channels in a "tidal-bore" and finally colliding head-on with the swift downward flow of the flooded rivers, an immense wave is created that breaches all embankments and inundates the district for weeks at a time. Being located in the North West corner of the Bay of Bengal, the district is further subject, during the monsoons, to cyclonic storms with their accompanying storm waves. The following contemporary description brings home the sudden, deceptive and merciless

²⁹See W. W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, vol. 3 (London, 1876); and L. S. S. O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Medinipur* (Calcutta, 1911).

³⁰O'Malley (1911), pp. 93-94.

onslaught of a cyclonic storm in the last century (1864):

The fury of the cyclone caused a fearful destruction in the villages of the interior; indeed the raised plateaux on which many stood were swept clean. It appears, that the people, believing the lull in the storm to be the sign of its having passed over, proceeded to bring in their cattle, and while so engaged they were overtaken by the waters, which topping the lowest part of the dyke or entering through the breaches, drowned man and beast; while many, standing on the high ridges separating the fields, were, during the height of the cyclone, literally swept into the water and drowned.³¹

In the town of Tamruk only twenty-seven out of fourteen hundred houses remained standing. In the entire district 33,000 deaths were ascribed to that one cyclone. An equal number died from the famine and disease that came in its wake, and between October and December 1864, the loss of life in Medinipur totalled 66,000.

Even against this kind of a backdrop, the floods of September-October 1978, stand out for unmatched severity. The floods came in three separate ordeals. The first round was owing to the overflowing of the Gangā caused by unexpectedly heavy rainfall in its upper reaches. This was followed by a second round caused by heavy downpours coming before the waters had receded. While the whole state was still recovering from this double deluge, heavy rainfall started again on the 27th September, bringing down in three days more rain than ever recorded for a similar period in the previous hundred years. This was followed by a cyclone on the 3rd October. The flood control dams of the Damodar Valley Corporation, under severe and unprecedented stress, suddenly released huge quantities of water into already overflowing channels, resulting in a flash flood of catastrophic extent. Vast areas of the districts of Medinipur, Birbhum, Burdwan, Murshidabad, Nadia, Hooghly, Howrah and Twenty-four Parganas were inundated and remained under water

³¹O'Malley (1922), p. 95.

for nearly four months. A large portion of metropolitan Calcutta went under water for several weeks. The daily relief expenditures of the state government, which were Rs 1 crore a day for September, and rose to Rs 2.5 and Rs 3 crore a day in October, give some indication of the calamity with which the state had to contend, to survive.

Let us now follow these events on the front-pages of the form of popular chronicles with which we are more familiar--the daily newspaper.³² Though, as we shall soon see, the song that we are to analyze begins with a reference to the 14th of Bhādra, śāl 1385, or the 31st August 1978, the crisis in the State starts earlier with the newspaper headlines reporting unprecedented rain on 14th, 15th, 16th and 17th August. On the 18th, the Bhagirathi and the Padma rivers flood the districts of Malda and Murshidabad (to the North of the town of Tamluk and of Medinipur District) and 500,000 are critically affected. The Chief Minister of West Bengal asks the Indian Army to go on "Alert." The Indian Army starts rescue operations in Murshidabad district on the 19th and in Malda on the 20th August. By the 22nd and 23rd, the town of Berhampur is inundated, the critical and expensive river barrage at Farakka is in danger of being swept away, its surrounding embankments are breached, and (a new note), Provash Roy, the Minister for Irrigation for West Bengal State accuses the Central government at Delhi, of faulty planning of Farakka. "Malda and Murshidabad in the grip of terrible Flood," "Thousands trapped by Flood Waters," "Farakka Barrage in Danger," "Floodwaters enter Town," the headlines tell this story. Large scale rescue operations are started, and the State government asks the

³²I quote mainly from the Calcutta English language daily, *The Statesman*, and the two leading Bengali dailies, *Ananda Bazar Patrika* and *Jugantar*, for this period.

Centre government for Rs 2 crore for flood relief work. Accusations of "favoritism," and "Party Politics" in the distribution of relief are raised. By the 25th of August the waters are reported as "receding."

Then the situation takes a turn for the worse, following the three days of continuous rain. The Sunday peace of the 3rd September is disrupted by such headlines as "Lakhs endangered, at least thirty dead, Army and Airforce to the rescue," and "Sudden, unprecedented destructive floods have descended on three districts of West Bengal--Medinipur, Bankura and Hooghly." Medinipur town is completely cut off by waters, the nearby town of Ghatal goes under six feet of water, all arterial road links are equally submerged. The Air Force using planes and helicopters makes aerial food drops, and the Army conducts what rescue operations it can. "Frightening, Horrifying," the Chief Minister Mr. Jyoti Basu is reported as saying after an aerial survey on the 4th September. "Everywhere I look," reports a journalist after a helicopter ride in Medinipur, "it's only water, like the ocean. Some areas are under 20 feet of water."

By the 7th, the districts of Burdwan, Nadia and Howrah have additionally gone under the flood. Cholera cases are reported from Medinipur. Several crores of rupees worth of crops are presumed destroyed, mainly "aman" rice, jute and seed-rice. The Minister for Agriculture puts the State on a "war footing" and deploys officials throughout the area to help cultivators. Crowds raid the hospital in Ghatal in search of food. Corpses of the dead line the streets of that town. Slowly the relief efforts impose some measure of control. The water levels stop rising. Military helicopters are able to make landings and reestablish communications. The crisis shifts to other

districts to the east of Medinipur. The enduring impression left by a reading of the headlines is the total helplessness of humanity in the face of a natural disaster of such magnitude. There is also an extreme distortion of familiar reality at times of such disasters. When such disaster strikes, no one, certainly not the administration, seems to know the extent of the calamity and the damage it has caused.

The role of the Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC) and other modern arrangements put in place to control floods, comes up for serious questioning. "Why this sudden Flood?," a secondary story headline asks. Prior to the floods, exceptionally heavy rainfall had been reported from the upper reaches of the Damodar and Barakar rivers, in the Chota Nagpur plateau. The DVC released 100,000 *cusecs* of water from the reservoirs at the Maithon and Panchet dams. This water would eventually flow east and south and would add significantly to the disaster. What Medinipur suffered from the most was twelve days of continuous rains. The dam on the Kasai river in the adjoining district of Bankura started to show cracks, and 180,000 *cusecs* of water were therefore released. The Silai, Kasai and Dwarkeswar, major components of the river system in western Bengal were completely flooded. Sometime after midnight of Saturday, the 2nd September, the water levels in Maithon and Panchet reservoirs suddenly shot up beyond the crisis point, according to the report published by the West Bengal Government Secretariat. No one had paid serious attention to this danger till Saturday. "Dams had to release waters," the General Manager of the DVC pled to the journalists, or they would have collapsed and caused a worse disaster. Public opinion, as expressed in the papers, was divided over where the responsibility lay--in the twelve days of unceasing rain or in bad planning. One thing

became very clear--Maithon, Panchet, Konar, Tilaiya, the stellar dams of the Republic of India's flood control and irrigation projects, the pride of the Indian planners, and the "temples" of modern India (according to Jawaharlal Nehru), were failures in controlling Mother Gaṅgā. It is of this then, that Dukhushyam Chitrakar sings, in his *Scroll of the Flood* which is the focus of our analysis.

What I refer to here as a "scroll" is a *paṭa* (cfr: Skt *paṭa*, and *paṭakāra*: a painter), or painted paper scroll³³ prepared by stitching together four sheets of 14" x 22" factory made paper, locally known as "cartridge" paper. It is the work of Dukhushyam Chitrakar, a painter of scrolls from around the town of Tamluk in Medinipur District. This scroll is divided into ten panels of pictures of different sizes, designed to be unrolled vertically. (This is something of a deluxe edition, the more common *paṭas* of the area being painted on smaller [13" x 16"] and thinner, white foolscap writing paper.) The painted panels are uniformly 11" wide and come in two sizes--the first and last being 11" x 12" long, all others between 6 and 7 inches in length. The first panel (11" x 12") unrolling from the top, that is from the direction in which it would be opened while the accompanying song was sung, shows the four-armed, three-eyed figure of the Goddess Gaṅgā seated on her mount, the mythical aquatic beast *Makara*, surrounded by a blue expanse of water with waves. In these waters can be seen floating human heads with closed eyes signifying death. Also around her are floating heads of cattle, as well as fish. On all four sides of every

³³Collected from Tamluk, Medinipur in 1981. The research is part of the Folklore Project of the American Institute of Indian Studies. I am grateful to its officers, Mr. Tarun Mitra and Dr. Tarasish Mukhopadhyay, without whose generosity and advice this paper would not have been possible.

panel is a border one-and-a-half inches wide of flowers and leaves, effectively fixing the width of each frame to eleven inches. On the inside edges of this border, on all sides except the bottom is a red line. The second panel, a narrow one (6" x 11") shows two married couples in two houses, one thatched and the other constructed of brick. The third panel, slightly wider (6 1/2" x 11") shows floodwaters, floating heads (signifying corpses), floating thatch and fish, but what is of the greatest interest here is the depiction of a floating raft made from trunks of green plaintain trees, carrying a married woman in the act of giving birth. The next panel shows three seated men, one of them bare bodied, and one holding an unidentified object in his hand as if in the act of handing it over. Along the right margin are again three heads with closed eyes signifying their death. The next panel is probably the one that may well strike us initially as the most interesting and shows a tapering tube-shaped object with a window with a male face at one end, two black disks below the tube, and above it, attached to the tube some distance in from the two ends what appear to be two four-petaled flowers. These flowers turn out to be rotor-blades and the whole a depiction of a helicopter, the face in the window being that of Mr. Jyoti Basu, Chief Minister of West Bengal, inspecting the initial disaster from the sky. On some scrolls not one but two faces are shown at the window, the second being that of Mr. Morarji Desai the then Prime Minister of India. The next two panels with male figures seated on chairs and others standing with joined palms before them represent the distribution of emergency aid by the officials of various governmental agencies and charitable organizations, to the local people. The next two panels, the first 7" x 11" and the last a large (11" x 11")

panel, bring the scroll to a close. In the first we see the boatman, standing barebodied at the tiller of his boat as it rides the blue waters marked by a solitary fish. The final panel with the Goddess Gaṅgā on her *Makara* mount, floating over the fishy deep, repeats the first panel, but this time without the human corpses and dead cattle floating around her seat.

Such a *paṭa* is painted by a *paṭuā*, or *paṭidāra* or *citrakara* ("picture-maker"), who goes from house to house with his repertoire of *paṭas* and sings the song relevant to the *paṭa* while unrolling the scroll from panel to panel, in exchange for money, food or some other form of payment. The *paṭuās* are an endogamous caste living in the Tamluk area of Medinipur. Found scattered over most of West Bengal, except the more Northern districts, they are most numerous today in Medinipur and Birbhum, and appear to be organized in mutually exclusive circles in the two districts.³⁴ There are clear differences in the painting styles of the two districts, and the Birbhum *paṭuās* appear to be more conservative in their choice of themes, restricting themselves to the epic and *purāṇa* materials. The status and origins of this endogamous caste are unresolved mysteries of the ethnography of Bengal. Mainly on the strength of citations in the *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa* (*Brahma Khaṇḍa*, X:21,X:90) they are viewed by some as members of the *nava-śākha* or "nine-branches" of the *sat* or "good" sudras, together with potters, blacksmiths, barbers, garland-makers and the like. Others ascribe to them a more recent tribal origin. However, it is clear that their situation is somewhere between Hinduism and Islam. *Khātṇā* or circumcision is universally practiced, a Muslim *kājī* attends their

³⁴1951 Census, vol: *The Tribes and Castes of West Bengal*, ed. A. Mitra (Calcutta: W. Bengal Government Press, 1953).

weddings and funerals, and *tālāk* or divorce is possible. However, their life-cycle rites are arranged by consulting the *pañjikā* or almanac like all Hindu and a few other Muslim groups,³⁵ and such Hindu wedding rituals as *aṣṭamaṅgalā* and *vadhuvārāṇa* are observed. They venerate all the gods and goddesses of Bengali village Hinduism, and sing in Hindu and Muslim households as invited. Their repertoire clearly contains much more Hindu than Muslim material. As a final mystery, most *paṭuās* have two given names, one Hindu and one Muslim. Painting scrolls and singing with them hardly provides a sufficient living nowadays, and it is doubtful that it ever was in the recent past; thus they practice a variety of other trades, from related ones like making the clay images of Hindu deities, making ornaments and decorations for their rituals, making and selling clay dolls and toys, to more distant ones like peddling cheap goods, quack medicines, or working at housebuilding and day labor.³⁶

³⁵The *pañjikā* is based on the Hindu astrological text the *Suryasiddhānta*.

³⁶For discussions regarding *paṭuās* see, Sankar Sen Gupta, ed., *The Patas and the Patuas of Bengal* (Calcutta: Indian Publishers, 1973), and (in Bengali) the special issue of the journal *Anviṣṭa: paṭaviṣayaka saṁkalana* (Calcutta B.S. 1381), ed. Birendranath Bhattacharya; *Arts of Bengal: the Heritage of Bangladesh and Eastern India* (an exhibition organized by the Whitechapel Art Gallery), ed. R. Skelton and M. Francis (London: Trustees of the Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1979); for the Birbhum tradition in particular (in Bengali) Devasish Bandyopadhyay, *Birabhumera Yama-paṭa o paṭuā* (Calcutta: Suvarnarekha, 1972). We should also note here the other popular style of painting on paper, that of Kalighat in Calcutta; these often have associated stories, see W. G. Archer, *Kalighat Paintings, Victoria and Albert Museum* (London: HMSO, 1971), and the brief but well illustrated book by Nikhil Sarkar (*Śrīpāṇtha*), *Mohānta-Elokeśī saṁvāda* (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 1984) which presents a group of paintings relating one such nineteenth century story, and conveniently summarizes findings of Archer and the Czech scholar H. Nitskova.

The antiquity of this type of artistic activity and the origin and history of *paṭuās* are undoubtedly intriguing issues. Sanskrit *paṭa* meaning "woven cloth" and *paṭṭa* in the sense of "cloth, woven silk . . . cotton cloth" is well attested in the *Mahābhārata* and in texts in Pali³⁷ and many North Indian languages, though Turner suggests a non-Aryan source for the words. In Rajasthan, cloth paintings, relating for example the heroic stories of Pabūji, sung by groups of professional singers comparable to the *paṭuās*, are popular even today.³⁸ In the *Bhagavati Sutra* of the Jainas, the rival Ājīvika leader Makkhali Gosāla, respected by later Ājīvikas as their greatest teacher, is described as the son of a *maṅkha*. Basham takes the alternative form of Gosāla's second name Mankhaliputta, to indicate that he was possibly the son of a *maṅkha*, or an ascetic "whose hand is kept busy by the picture board," according to Jaina commentators. Summarizing the evidence, Basham states that "It is not impossible that the *maṅkha* filled both the functions of an exhibitor of religious pictures, and a singer of religious songs." That such mendicants existed in ancient India is proved by Viśākhadatta's *Mudrārākṣasa*, one of the minor characters of which is a spurious religious mendicant described as a "spy with a yama-cloth" (*yama-paṭena caraḥ*), that is one carrying a picture of the God Yama painted upon a cloth. He habitually enters the houses of his patrons, where he displays his Yama-cloth, and sings songs, presumably of a religious type."³⁹ This

³⁷R. L. Turner, *A Comparative Dictionary of Indo-Aryan Languages* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 433-434.

³⁸Personal communication from Mr. Komal Kothari, Jodhpur, Rajasthan (India).

³⁹A. L. Basham, *History and Doctrines of the Ājīvikas: A Vanished Indian Religion* (London: Luzac and Company, 1951), pp. 34-36.

activity is very much in keeping with that of modern *paṭuās*. Also, the play refers to a "*yama paṭa*," a type of *paṭa* still common in Birbhum, and found to a lesser extent in Tamluk.

The grammarian Patañjali, in the *Mahābhāṣya* (3.2.111), while elucidating the rules for the use of the imperfect tense, especially the historical present, justifies this mode in the case of (1) dramatic or pantomime actors, called *Śaubhikas* or *Śobhanikas*, representing the Kṛṣṇa story; (2) painters, or *Citrālekhaka* whose paintings (*citra*) represent, for example, again the Kṛṣṇa story especially with reference to the slaying of Kāṁsa; and (3) the class of reciters called *Granthikas*. Keith,⁴⁰ who discusses this section fully, rejects the idea "that artists occasionally explain their own pictures to others," as "wholly impossible," and he finds the possibility of the existence of a profession, "that of showing and explaining . . . pictures, in this respect again without any support from tradition"! Coomaraswamy,⁴¹ on the other hand, agreeing with the earlier published opinions of Hillebrandt and Lüders whom Keith dismisses, states that,

the practice of picture showmen explaining their own pictures has been so general and widespread in India and Further India that the possibility that Patañjali had in mind a performance of this kind cannot be altogether rejected.

This is how Coomaraswamy translates the relevant lines in the *Mahābhāṣya*:

How in respect of Paintings? [Here too the historical present is employed, for] in the pictures themselves men see the blows rained down on Kāṁsa, and how he is dragged about.

⁴⁰A. B. Keith, *The Sanskrit Drama in Its Origin, Development, Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924), pp. 31-36.

⁴¹A. K. Coomaraswamy, "Picture Showmen," *The Indian Historical Quarterly* 5 (1929):182-184.

The differences come to a head over Haradatta's commentary on these lines, which to Coomaraswamy "seems to imply no more than that the canvasses are living speeches, and that the historical present is framed in the spectator's mind." Keith understands Haradatta as saying

that when men look at a picture on which is shown the Death of Kaṇsa at the hands of Vāsudeva they interpret the picture as the slaying of the wicked Kaṇsa by the blessed Vāsudeva, . . . this is the conception which they form as they gaze . . . this explains the practice of saying of artists that they cause the slaying of Kaṇsa . . .

It would appear to be attractive to agree with Lüders that all three cases cited here in the *Mahābhāṣya*, the *Śaubbhikas*, the *Citrālekhakas*, the *Granthikas*, are but "different sorts of narrators by words." *Paṭuās* in Bengal today seem to certainly create one effect by their narration, a sense of immediacy towards the events described. And the imperfect or simple-present is quite the verb form most frequently used to achieve this effect. Coomaraswamy gives some other references to "picture showmen," the most interesting of which is this from Bāna's *Harṣacarita*:

In the bazaar street amid a great crowd of inquisitive children he observed an Inferno-showman (*Yamapaṭṭaka*) in whose left hand was a painted canvas stretched out on a support of upright rods and showing the Lord of the Dead mounted on his dreadful buffalo. Wielding a reed wand in his other hand, he was expounding the features of the next world . . .⁴²

Examples of *paṭas* from western Bengal ascribed to the 1800s, are already painted on paper, and the repeated references to cloth in the classical references cannot escape our notice. It is not worthwhile to suggest that the *paṭuās* of modern Bengal are yet another example of "timeless India." But "picture-showmen," to adopt Coomaraswamy's happy

⁴²Coomaraswamy (1929), p. 185, quoting the translation of Cowell and Thomas.

phrase, of various sorts, have existed all over Indian society, and for a long time.⁴³ And if the Jaina *Aupapātika Sūtra*⁴⁴ is any indication, they have been classed with actors, dancers, story-tellers and other entertainers at the limits of society. Surely all the hints of their shadowy antiquity and their liminality to both Hindu and Muslim societies make *paṭuās* today intriguing, even mysterious to us.

Dukhushyam, a member of this caste, is a man of about fifty, well-known as a *paṭuā* around Tamluk. He is also well-known to those from outside the district who interest themselves in such matters.⁴⁵ One encounters Dukhushyam Chitrakar--in a very real sense--as a contemporary, even "modern" man, and above all--a historian.

This is Dukhushyam's song:

Listen! O Listen! all you people, listen attentively,
I have brought out a new book--"Description of the Flood."
[They say], in śal 1385 on the 14th of Bhādra,
[Then] a calamity took place in the district of Medinipur.
The water from the *DVC⁴⁶

⁴³For an impressionistic but well illustrated survey of "portable" cloth and paper painting traditions (some with narrative associations, like Pabūji) see Pupul Jayakar, *The Earthen Drum: An Introduction to the Ritual Arts of Rural India* (New Delhi, National Museum, 1981); the *pichhawai* tradition of temple hangings from Nathdwara, Rajasthan dates from the seventeenth century; R. Jindel, *Culture of a Sacred Town: A Sociological Study of Nathdwara* (Bombay: Popular, 1961); Jyotindra Jain, *Painted Myths of Creation* (New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1984) studies the tribal art of Eastern Gujarat; closer to Bengal the now well-known Madhubani painting tradition of Mithila, Bihar, is studied by Upendra Thakur, *Madhubani Painting* (Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1982); E. Fischer, J. Jain and H. Shah, *Tempeltücher für die Muttergöttinnen in Indien* (Zurich: Museum Rietberg, 1982) is an excellent catalog of an exhibition of Chandarvo printed temple textiles from Gujarat.

⁴⁴As quoted in Coomaraswamy (1929), p. 183.

⁴⁵Dukhushyam Chitrakar is one of the two living scroll painters represented in the prestigious *Arts of Bengal* Exhibition, London, Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1979.

⁴⁶Damodar Valley Corporation, a modern irrigation and flood control system modelled on the TVA. * marked words in English, in the original.

[Brother!] comes with terrible swiftness, Sheep, goats, cows, calves come floating down.
 [They say] Floating down comes⁴⁷ *Rui*, *Kātlā* [Oh!] and many kinds of farm-raised fish,
 I am unable to write all, there is no rice in my belly.
 The Elders say, [they say], *Gahgā* has emerged,
 It is, as it were, Mother *Gahgā*'s play of demon-destruction.
 Seeing the flood the government came to give aid,
 [Then] Rich and Poor, all had to accept assistance.
 In our lifetime [O Brother], we have seen no (such) Flood,
 For that reason we have no dinghies or boats.
 We have had to get (Flood) *Relief on rafts made of the trunks of plaintain trees,
 In the midst of all this a young woman gave birth.
 Seeing scenes like these [Brother], tears come to the eyes,
 Men or goods and chattel, come floating down.
 Everyone clamours at the prospect of the approaching flood,
 At daybreak I hear again the sound of loud weeping.
 In the morning I look around to see everything under water,
 Old and young ask "What will we eat to stay alive?"
 [Oh!] The price of carp comes down to only two or three rupees,⁴⁸
 How many eat this fish and go to the next world.
 For this reason *doctors were sent from the Government,
 [That] *vaccine, *injection they gave from house to house.
 Oh where are you Mother Kamalā⁴⁹ mother of the world,
 [They say] you provide food to the mouths of 60 crores of living beings.
 Where are you O Chief Minister!⁵⁰ a second *Bhagabāna*,
 Have mercy and save the lives of our children.
 Where are you O Prime Minister Murārji Deśāi!
 To you we all address our plea.
 Give us *loans, give us fertilizer, give us seed rice,
 So that we can plant and save everyone's life.
 Everyone says there is Flood in 12 *jelā*'s,⁵¹
 Men a hundred years old say "We have never seen the like."
 They gave us *cirā*,⁵² *guṛa*,⁵³ they gave us rice and wheat,

⁴⁷Types of carp.

⁴⁸This can often be Rs.20 in normal times.

⁴⁹The Goddess Lakṣmī who gives good harvests and prosperity.

⁵⁰At this time Mr. Jyoti Basu, a leading politician of the Communist Party of India (Marxist).

⁵¹Districts.

⁵²Dried and flattened rice.

⁵³Molasses.

Had we not received (these) our life-breath would have left us.
 They gave us thatching, tarpaulins, they gave us clothes,
 The *babus* came, looked things over, and left saying it was like(?) Fortress Laṅkā.⁵⁴
 The *babus* came by *helicopter and gave assistance,
 [In this] no one is to blame, O Brother! Mother Gaṅgā has struck.
 A certain boatman took a boat and went fishing,
 In mid-river he came to see a woman.
 The woman says, "I have eaten all three sides."
 Says that boatman, "Oh alas! what a calamity this is!"
 "I will make all the people from all four directions, settle on only one,
 Do not touch me child, I entreat you.
 I am that Gaṅgā," thus she spoke to the boatman,
 The boatman came back and revealed (*prakāśa*) all of this.
 _____? Holland,⁵⁵ came to Medinipur,
 [And they] gave *vaccine, *bleaching (powder) to the flooded countryside.
 With amphibious craft, Oh! they rescued the people,
 The Ramakrishna Mission gave cooked *Khicuri*.⁵⁶ The Bharat Sevasrama assists with food and clothing,
 Babu Niranjana's nick-name *jeṭhu*⁵⁷ became revealed.
 Bikram Sen and Jainal *sāheb*⁵⁸ came to give assistance,
 _____? Fertilizer, seed rice they distributed to all households.
 I wish to inform all that I have read only the *Prathama Bhāga*,⁵⁹
 If there are errors, please pardon this humble creature,
 Here I end my poem of praise (*vandanā*),
 My name is Dukhusyāma Citrakara, and my address is Nayā.⁶⁰

⁵⁴I.e., an island surrounded by an ocean.

⁵⁵? Probably a Dutch philanthropic church organization distributing flood-relief.

⁵⁶A dish prepared from rice and pulses.

⁵⁷Literally--Father's Elder Brother. As eldest male of extended family is the authority figure and also the person who maintains the welfare of the family. The individual named here is a well-known public benefactor of Tamluk.

⁵⁸Members of the West Bengal State cabinet of ministers.

⁵⁹The Primer of Isvar Chandra Vidyasagar's *Varṇa paricaya* or "Introduction to the (Bengali) Alphabet."

⁶⁰A village near Tamluk, in P.S. Pingla, Medinipur district.

The two characteristics of Dukhushyam's song that immediately attract our attention are the copiousness, the richly circumstantial reporting, and the peculiar way in which this is arranged. One risks irrelevance by accusing him of missing "empirical reality" because he supposedly "never went through the process of discovering it."⁶¹ Or worse, one may be motivated by hegemonic tactics to delegitimize the "Other's" epistemic system. Reading the Calcutta newspapers of those weeks, or a standard periodical of commentary such as the *Economic and Political Weekly*, we can hardly find more detail regarding the facts and issues involved, in a report of comparable length. For example, within weeks of the inundation, the DVC's failing to prevent, and indeed in some instances causing, the disaster, had become a major issue.⁶² The inadequacy and politics of disaster relief, and the wrangling between the State and Centre cabinets over this, were also issues that almost immediately reached national level politics.⁶³ About the physical circumstances of the calamity, Dukhushyam reports as only a participant-observer could, with exact first-hand details. But he is also aware of the DVC's role, though only to the extent that he has immediate experience. He notes in much greater detail the persons or groups involved in relief measures, and the nature of these measures. He also echoes very accurately the clamour about the politics of relief operations that were being voiced all around, directed to the State's Chief Minister and eventually to the Prime Minister of India.

⁶¹See Said (1979), pp. 46-47.

⁶²"Man-Made Calamity," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Bombay, 14 October 1978; "DVC and Flood Control," *EPW*, 11 November 1978.

⁶³"Some Self-Help Too?" *EPW*, 14 October 1978.

What appears, however, much more remarkable, are the principles of organization (or what may seem to us the lack thereof), of this great wealth of detail. Each detail, usually complete in one line, never needing more than two, is juxtaposed to another, without anything resembling a consequential organization, and this mystifies us about the nature of the work. Our expectations are certainly not sympathetic to this type of narrative, without the elements organized in any hierarchical logic. We look vainly among the detached, declarative sentences, in search of an explanatory principle. The real alienation to be felt in a work such as this is not in its contents (though they may be strange enough), but in its form. It is identified as a *vandanā* or Song of Praise, and we understand it fully, only when we understand the form and Dukhushyam's style.

The numerous different details--the individual scenes of destruction, the plight of the people, the prayers to the powers that be, the different measures to alleviate suffering, are combined here, more or less indiscriminately, to create the total picture. Each separate detail is joined to the next with a simple conjunction or interjection, and often not even with that. The verb forms, frequently the simple-present, combine to create a picture that is evolving, as if in the dramatic present. A direct effect of this style is a replication of the feeling of being caught in the middle of the calamity, when events come hard upon one another, and the mind is hardly able to distinguish them. No individual detail or theme is built up significantly to stand out from the rest. The separate details are individually lost, and the impression is of a flat landscape of inundation spreading to the horizon, with numerous disconnected and small bits of activity scattered

indiscriminately over it. The poem does not move in any particular direction.

The poem however, does have four different kinds of statements, and understanding the whole is helped by separating out each and noting these differences. The first kind are those addressed directly to the audience. Most significantly they occur at the beginning and end of the poem. The first lines ask the audience to listen to this "new" and therefore different work, and set the exact date of the happenings. The last four lines are the usual *bhaṇitā* or signature lines, identifying the author. But in a way all the lines may be considered included in this first category, for the narrator with his constant interjections (marked in square [] brackets) keeps up the level of immediate contact with the event for his audience. The interjections also serve to link up the individual, independent and discrete declaratives that so abruptly follow one another. The style does not proceed through events preceding and succeeding one another, and no event explains or is explained by another event. It is true, for example, that the overflow from the DVC begins the story of the calamity, but it is barely suggested as a material cause, and is nowhere near to being a final one.

It is merely to be included, more properly, in the second category--which includes the greater number of declaratives, the sentences that describe the infinite variety of discrete events taking place. Without exception these statements are descriptive of actions, either of natural forces or of men and women individually or in groups. In this group we may also note a sub-set--reportage of overheard statements--which are also treated as events. These are really only three in number, the second and third begins as follows:

Everyone says, there is Flood in 12 *jelās*,
Men a hundred years old say, "We have never seen the like."

These are "factually correct" statements in our sense, since all twelve districts of the southern tier of West Bengal were more or less under floodwaters, which were caused by a rainfall unmatched in the meteorological records of the preceding hundred years. What is most revealing is the other piece of reported conversation, which points us in the direction of understanding the nature of the work as a whole:

The Elders say, [they say], Gaṅgā has emerged,
It is, as it were, Mother Gaṅgā's play of demon-destruction.

The third type of statement, all examples of which occur successively, are in the nature of apostrophes to "Higher Powers." The first is an appeal to Lakṣmī, Goddess of wealth and prosperity, whose most frequent symbol, after all, is a basket filled with unhusked rice. Next an appeal goes to the Chief Minister of the State, "a second God," to save the lives of the children. And the final appeal is to "Prime Minister Morarji Desai," presumably the "No. 1 God," for loans, and fertilizers that would make the rehabilitation process successful through self-help. All three are most certainly "Powers that Be," all three work in direct and powerful ways upon the fates of common creatures, and all operate beyond the access of the common man's knowledge. And each is being equally appealed to for the appropriate blessing--Lakṣmī for Food and Fertility, Basu for immediate aid, Desai for long-term rehabilitation. Dukhushyam clearly knows who can deliver what.

Finally, the fourth class of statements has but a single example, but it ultimately provides the model for understanding the whole poem. Very early in the poem, immediately after describing the onrush of waters, when we hear that: "The Elders say, [they say], Gaṅgā has emerged," we must note carefully, in what follows, that what has come to pass is

like the "play" (*kheḷā*) of Mother Gaṅgā. These then are the lines which are the only members of the fourth category:

A certain boatman took a boat and went fishing
In mid-river he came to see a woman.
Says that woman, "I have eaten all three sides,"
Says the boatman, "Oh alas! what a calamity this is!"
"I will make all the people from all four directions, settle
on only one,
Do not touch me child, I entreat you.
I am that Gaṅgā," thus she spoke to the boatman,
The boatman came back and revealed (*prakāśa*) all of this.

This is the one place where the final cause of the events is presented. Mother Gaṅgā has "eaten" the three directions. The cause of the Flood is her desire to force the people of the other three directions, to live on only one. No further reason is suggested but that this is her purposeful "play." Once these terms are accepted, there can be no need for other reasons. For Dukhushyam and his audience at least, such further need does not appear to exist. But the essential nature of these lines is that it is a revelation (*prakāśa*) and though it explains the other events in the poem, it is itself not explainable, but is merely described. Once we understand that, the rest of the poem, narrated, by and large, in a series of declarative sentences, is but the penumbra of this epiphany. The Goddess Gaṅgā has revealed herself following the numerous particular events of the calamity. Dukhushyam has described in great circumstantial detail a particular and exact set of events. If we feel a persistent nostalgia for "authentic facts" then his description would appear to tally quite well with the description from sources that we conventionally accept. The "how" of Dukhushyam's enterprise is not a mystery to us, really. It is the "why," the explanatory device, that is merely unfamiliar to us. Since the "why" also governs the aesthetic organization of the text, this bleeds the unfamiliarity into the text in a more general sense.

Dukhushyam has thus established a method for interpreting the events, and what historian from Herodotus to Toynbee, sought to do more? The individual elements of information are not random, detached events anymore, but have a recognizable cultural form.

The exact circumstances of the revelation are extremely important to Dukhushyam. Change and particularity are essential to his method. This is not the narrative for any unspecified revelation, but that of śan 1385, and the interpretation is that of Dukhushyam Chitrakar, resident of village Nayā. This raises the very interesting question: Is the idea "Gaṅgā" in the minds of the people of Tamluk, only an anthology, a collection, of a series of such *prakāśa*? Is history then the true medium that gods and goddesses inhabit? What does "Gaṅgā" mean to a professional intellectual and cultural specialist like Dukhushyam? Does the word only indicate that the observation of regularities over time is, after all, culturally ordered?

Dukhushyam describes his work as a *baī* or "book" and appears to establish proprietary claims over it. Through these two acts he would appear to be destroying two fondly and popularly held beliefs regarding "Folklore," that it is communal and oral. It is hard to judge the truth of these claims. Other scrolls painted by other *paṭuā*'s on this theme, and the accompanying song, both with minor variations, are available. But *paṭuās* freely admit to borrowing successful material within their caste. The repertoires of individual *paṭuās* resemble each other, some being merely larger than others. Moreover, very cheap printed books, locally produced, containing verse to mark extraordinary events like the Flood of 1978, are sold at local fairs and markets. The verse in them is not necessarily by *paṭuās*, but I have been unable to

locate such a book carrying Dukhushyam's song or a colorable imitation thereof. In any event, Dukhushyam's poem is too short to constitute a "book" which is minimally sixteen pages (or one printers "form"). *Bai* or "book" is being used here in a very different and revealing sense. Urban and rural cinema-goers alike, for example, will usually refer to a feature-film as a *bai*, or "book." No doubt the fact that the film was once probably a novel in book form, has something to do with it, but not all. For, nowadays, most films hardly have a prior existence and reputation in the print media. Here, as in Dukhushyam, "book" or *bai* merely indicates a number of concurring usages. Even if there was a printed book involved in the case of the poem about the Flood, the primacy of one form would be a particularly futile issue to raise, for the work reaches the world where it is heard/read/seen/"consumed" all at the same time, in whatever media. However, the quest for the primary form, the inaugural fact, the *ur* text, is a part of the folkloristic pieties that one may not be allowed to jettison without threat. Belief in the ontic presence of some originary essence, some "principle of principles," a thing whose presence "in flesh and blood" we may finally only intuit, is fundamental to Folklore's ontographic activity. This "principle" or "essence" is of course supposedly oral, but one senses in this quest the nostalgia for the even more primordial, if indeed that were possible. The nostalgia for the ontic and the primordial is the exact equivalent of the nostalgia for the "authentic" "empirical" fact that we encountered earlier. Dukhushyam puts a brick through all that by *singing* out loud at the very beginning, "I have brought out a *book*!"

Thus Dukhushyam's work may be oral or written, printed or in manuscript, painted or sung. In whatever form, it is part of a certain

discourse. The worthwhile task is not to pursue the mirage of the "originary," (that *svaṛṇamṛga* feeding on the sweet "bottom-grass" of Indian texts and contexts), but to consider the body of work and note the discursive regularities of the repertoire. For Dukhushyam, they are all, *gāna* or song, and *pālā* or theatrical "act" or "turn." The "lower classes" are not "silent" at all times. Nor is an absence of awareness of the "empirical" world any more a part of the discourse of Dukhushyam and his auditors, than of the readers of the Calcutta dailies. It should be amply clear that he is aware of the facts, such as they are, but is unwilling to make a fetish of them. His interest lies in investigating what it may all mean. Perhaps this is the just place to remind ourselves that in the "Introduction" to *The Philosophy of History* Hegel lists three methods of treating History, the first of which, "Original History" is the work of historians

whose descriptions are for the most part limited to deeds, events, and states of society, which they had before their eyes, and whose spirit they shared. They simply transferred what was passing in the world around them, to the realm of re-presentative intellect.⁶⁴

Typically such an author

describes scenes in which he himself has been an actor, or at any rate an interested spectator . . . And his aim is nothing more than the presentation to posterity of an image of events as clear as that which he himself possessed in virtue of personal observation or life-like descriptions.⁶⁵

Though Hegel notes the absences of reflection and comprehensiveness in such History and goes on to the other two methods of treating History, the "Reflective" and the "Philosophical," Herodotus, Thucydides and even Caesar and Guicciardini are of the first company. Also, rather

⁶⁴G. W. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), p. 1 (translation orig. pub. in 1899).

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 2.

interestingly for the present discussion, the "Original" historian operates on external phenomena, translating it into an internal conception in a way similar to the way a "poet" operates upon the material of his emotions. The root problem faced by our analysis too is perhaps here. For Hegel would dismiss all such "hazy forms of historical apprehension" as Legends, Ballad-stories, from such original history since they "belong to nations whose intelligence is but half awakened." Original history on the contrary has "to do with people fully conscious of what they were and what they were about." And it only requires for "nations [to] have attained a mature individuality" for the historical prestige of legends to vanish and for that domain of reality that can be actually seen, to start providing a firm basis for History.⁶⁶

By faith Enoch was translated . . .
(Hebrews, 11:5)

The groupings of the songs and scrolls in Dukhushyam's repertoire that follow are merely externally imposed, and there is no reason to suppose that Dukhushyam separates them in a similar way. Quite to the contrary, from the *Mahābhārata* tales to the Flood is one continuous discourse. The one common characteristic of the scrolls and songs is that each is very strongly oriented to an event, a dramatic circumstance that can form the content of a *prakāśa* or manifestation. The divisions suggested are merely the conventional attribution by source and "period," that is current in academic discussion. One type of source of the songs of Dukhushyam are events from the two Epics: *Tāṛakā vadha* (The Slaying of the Demoness Tāṛakā), *Setubandha* (Building the Bridge

⁶⁶Ibid., pp. 2-3.

to Laṅkā), *Rāvaṇa vadha* (The Slaying of Rāvaṇa), *Dātā Karṇa* (The Generous Karṇa). A second group are from the *Purāṇas*: the stories of *Sāvitrī-Satyavāna*, and *Rājā Hariścandra*. The Vaisnavite songs presented are of two kinds, first the different *līlā*'s or episodes in the play between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, and then the stories from the life of the great Bengali revivalist Caitanya (1486-1533). The narrative material, represented elsewhere in the genre referred to as *mahalakāvya* by literary historians, provide some songs and scrolls: *Caṇḍimahala*, *Manasāra Bhāsāna*, *Śrīmanṭa maśāna*, *Behulā Lakhindara pālā* relating to the Goddesses Caṇḍī and Manasā. We may see yet another different kind in the songs and scrolls relating the exploits of the Muslim warrior-saint the Gājī, and of Satyapīra, the Deity who is at once Nārāyaṇa and a Muslim *pīr*. (Here we may remind ourselves of the *patuās*' "anomalous" religious status in between Hinduism and Islam.)

However, two very important narrative cycles are absent from the songs Dukhushyam sings. Beginning from the end of the seventeenth century we have manuscript evidence of *mahalakāvyas* or a type of eulogistic verse narrative, of the Goddess Śītalā, in the southwest Bengal delta. In mid-eighteenth century there is some kind of an efflorescence of composing such narratives of Śītalā in a very limited geographical area of which Tamruk is an integral part. In a period of three decades as many as nine poets compose their *Śītalāmahalakāvyas*. This Goddess is of course most strongly associated with Smallpox. The epidemics of that disease that carried off millions in the disastrous decades of the mid-eighteenth century have surely something to do with this literary fact. Today, in most

villages in the Tamluk area, Śītalā is worshipped as the *grāmera mā* or Mother of the village.⁶⁷ If Śītalā represents a popular religious response to disaster, especially epidemic disease, the cult of Annadā, or the Goddess Durgā as "the Food-giver," preached by the texts of the *Annadāmaṅgala* in the mid-eighteenth century, is an elite response to crisis, particularly the parallel one of famine. Famine preceded epidemic disease, after the depredations of the invading Maratha cavalry in western Bengal, from 1742 onwards. Annadā has always been worshipped as Śīva's spouse in Benares, but the *Annadāmaṅgala*, the *locus classicus* for the Annadā cult in contemporary Bengali Hinduism, was composed in 1752-53 by Bhāratacandra Rāy, court poet of Kṛṣṇacandra, Raja of Nadiya. It represents a part of the effort of this Raja and his circle of court intellectuals to present a comprehensive intellectual and theological response to the chaotic times.⁶⁸

But the intriguing historical fact is that while scrolls and songs about the goddesses such as those to Manasā and Caṇḍī are quite common, Dukhushyam and his colleagues have no songs for the goddesses Śītalā and Annadā, who became popular in southwest Bengal only in the mid-eighteenth century. (Manuscript evidence clearly establishes the popularity of *Caṇḍī* and *Manasā* at a much earlier period.) This is a very curious absence, and one that is not satisfactorily explained. It is possible that the Annadā cult was never very well separated from

⁶⁷See R. W. Nicholas, "The Village Mother in Bengal," in J. J. Preston (ed.), *Mother Worship* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982), pp. 192-209.

⁶⁸D. Curley and A. N. Sarkar (forthcoming). For a partial translation see E. C. Dimock, *The Thief of Love: Bengali Tales from Court and Village* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

that of Durgā or Gaurī, who is worshipped with great pomp by the local landowning class, in Autumn.⁶⁹ It may have been not too widely known beyond the landowning elite. Śītalā, on the other hand, has her narratives popularly presented in an operatic form, in every village, each Spring. This may be the only culturally permissible style for presenting Śītalā narratives.⁷⁰ But both these explanations remain very unsatisfactory and the literary historian's truly significant quest should be to improve them.

Yet another scroll, that of Satyapīra, combining the Supreme Hindu divinity Nārāyaṇa and a Muslim *pīr*, may be said to be the iconic representation of the religious history of Bengal in our millenium. His song narrates the story of the childless King Sindhu, who subsequently obtains a son through Satyapīra's blessing and then forgets to worship him. Calamity in the form of shipwreck strikes, the King remembers, and is saved. But the story has a coda. The narration of the Satyapīra scroll jumps right after this, to the fate of Sanātana Maṇḍala, "the Miser" (*Kṛpaṇa*) who similarly neglected to fulfil his vows to the Deity. We find him *in extremis*, a tiger attacking him from above, a crocodile from below. Bystanders approve of his fate, to which the story leaves him. This unfortunate man is introduced by Dukhushyam, if we are curious, as a prosperous historical personage, of the Sunderbans area in the extreme south of the delta, who actually suffered this fate for his apostasy, and whose memory serves the function of being a

⁶⁹See Nicholas (1982), *passim*.

⁷⁰For examples of narratives of Śītalā see: R. W. Nicholas and A. N. Sarkar, "The Fever Demon and the Census Commissioner: Śītalā Mythology in 18th and 19th Century Bengal," in *Bengal: Studies in Literature, Society and History*, ed. M. Davis (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1976), pp. 3-33.

terrible example. To us, the switch from Rājā Sindhu to Sanātana Maṇḍala is an unexpected and startling shift "down" in time. But even so, or perhaps because of it, the point of Sindhu's delinquency is brought "home" with economy and directness by the modern example. And Sanātana, the modern man, continues to default in age-old ways when the older ways of compensating the gods are, apparently, no longer available. What is most revealing is that the Scroll of the Flood contains what would look like the exact mirror-image of the *Satyapīra* scroll, in the step "up" in time that occurs with the introduction of the segment of the boatman encountering the Goddess Gaṅgā.

Dukhushyam's bag of scrolls also contains--it is, finally, time to reveal it--a group that deals with individual and idiosyncratic figures and events that are not contained in the above categories (which are after all, only *our* categories). Some in this final group, like "Manohar the Garotter," or "Murder in a Taxi," tell of hair-raising careers in crime, ending in divine disclosure (*prakāśa*), and sometimes conversions. Others sing of *prakāśa* of a kind that our own categories may more easily recognize as "historical." The *paṭa* contributed by Dukhushyam to the *Arts of Bengal* exhibition,⁷¹ (identified as a "Sahib pata," it has as subject matter the martyrdom of Tamruk's own young *śahīdas*, Khudiram Bose and Profulla Chaki, after an attempt on the life of an English magistrate in 1908), is representative of this group. The Scroll of the Flood of course is most intimately accommodated in this group with other titles like, "The Story of the Famine," "The Kakdvi Ferry Disaster," and "Independence (*svādhīnatā*) 1947." But what needs to be understood is that from the *Rāmāyaṇa* to the Flood of

⁷¹See no. 58, p. 43, Skelton and Francis (1979).

1978, all are connected, being what Dukhushyam "sings." There is one continuous discourse. Each serves to explain the others, and each derives support from the whole. Each may be described as a *pālā*, "Act" or "turn" in the theatrical sense, an action with meaning where something is revealed or where something is manifested (*prakāśa*).

What Dukhushyam is engaged in, is an act of collective historical integration of themes and responses that we can also find in other areas of "popular" Bengali culture. For example, in the Tamluk area, the most important cultural presentation in the Spring is the annual operatic presentation based on the *māṅgalakāvya* narratives of the Goddess Śītalā. As noted elsewhere, the growth of the cult of Śītalā in the southwest Bengal delta is mostly a phenomenon of the eighteenth century, when this area had reached the appropriate population level able to support the endemic-epidemic cycle typical of Smallpox. In most Tamluk villages today, Śītalā is the central village deity, the "Mother" of the village, around whose temple the religious life of the village may be said to be constituted. The efflorescence of the *māṅgalakāvya* narratives of Śītalā was a mid-eighteenth century literary event, when external invasions, internal disorder, and a series of natural disasters--drought, famine and finally epidemic disease, brought this area close to total chaos. Though the Goddess Śītalā was being already given a place in the Bengali Hindu religious year in the sixteenth century, it is only in 1690 that the first Bengali text elevating Śītalā to supremacy in the pantheon is written. Its poet, Kṛṣṇarāmadāsa, lived not far north of the village of Calcutta, where the English "Company" had settled that same year. The facts are not unrelated, for we may suppose that the area was developing a

population density able to support epidemic smallpox. The next such Bengali composition to Śītalā dates from 1745/50, and between that date and 1770, at least nine separate poets composed narratives to Śītalā, in a very limited area between Calcutta and Tamruk. Between 1742 and 1751, Maratha cavalry repeatedly looted and wasted this land. In 1757, after the fateful battle of Plassy, the English gained control of the area, and pressed for revenue payments. A severe drought in 1769 led to famine and epidemic smallpox in 1770, which together carried off ten million people in eastern India. While not suggesting a mechanical connection between event, text and history, it seems almost certain that the experience of the past two centuries is remembered in the preeminence of the Śītalā cult in the villages in this area.⁷²

From the mid-eighteenth century, the villagers of Tamruk accepted a cosmic order that elevated Śītalā to supremacy in the pantheon. The main story of the opera (*yātrā*) of Śītalā, based on the mid-eighteenth century narratives, is the conversion of Virāta, well known in the *Mahābhārata* as the King of Matsyadeśa (a region the local people identify with their own), to the worship of Śītalā. The King is a devotee of Śiva, and rebuffs Śītalā in no uncertain terms. The Goddess attacks the kingdom and the royal family with an army of poxes and reduces the whole kingdom to a cremation ground. The King finally submits, and institutes the worship of Śītalā. While King and Goddess remain onstage, the actors playing the Queen and the royal daughters-in-law step off-stage, go among the audience to beg the rice and money needed to initiate a Śītalā *pujā*. In this the Royal

⁷²For this history and narratives of the Goddess Śītalā in western Bengal see Nicholas and Sarkar (1976), and R. W. Nicholas, "The Goddess Śītalā and Epidemic Smallpox in Bengal," *Journal of Asian Studies* 41, 1 (November 1981).

ladies imitate any modern day *pujā* of Śītalā, which must always customarily begin with begging. King Virāta's action and that of modern villagers are integrated into one set of responses to the *prakāśa* of Śītalā. History is made by being enacted.

What are the uses of enacting history? What expectations of new Knowledge or Beauty might make people treat of History thus? Dukhushyam's painting and recitation, vivid and reasoned as they are, form only part of the cultural activity that centers immediately around him. They derive their validity from participation in a discourse that exists largely independent of the concerns that have pre-occupied cultural historians of India. When we see Dukhushyam perform with a *paṭa* before an audience we are witnessing the collective creation and propagation of knowledge. There is, it should by now be clear, a great variety to Dukhushyam's repertoire, and this is partly what gives it its validity. There are many culturally ordered associations with each narrative, and the *paṭuā* is not by any means, the exclusive possessor of such information. There is much expertise and some variety of opinion at different levels of his audience. All of this is known and remembered and the activity of listening to a *paṭuā* is not passive, but under the best circumstances, two uses are made of it. First, it is, as for example with the Scroll of the Flood, used to explain "the way things are." Secondly, it is an occasion for self-conscious and collective creation of new knowledge, of History. What is being recorded here, in the case of the Scroll of the Flood, is a very real set of events marking the knowledge of change. Two of our usual methods of analysis are simply not adequate to the situation. It would be quite inappropriate to talk of this creativity in terms of Great/Little

Traditions and *purāṇic* detritus. Equally, to seek to analyze it through "Tale Types" and "Folklore" entirely misses all that is new, the very real sense of "event" recorded in such a cultural presentation. The utility of this type of discourse in the culture lies partly in the fact that conventionally, everything of significance may be represented within it. Furthermore, the discourse is collective, and the knowledge generated and propagated, is not easily appropriated by any one individual or group. We may of course, as has been done by dominant classes before, express our domination by delegitimizing Dukhushyam's discourse and his epistemology, with a variety of accusations of false consciousness and mystification. But then the questions remain, what is History for and for whom? Let us at the end, turn to the text with which we began, Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*,⁷³ a play moreover whose central quarrel turns over "A lovely boy, stol'n from an Indian king" (II.1.22). The discussion of representation and collectively created knowledge may be more sympathetically presented through a Shakespearean dream than a Bengali flood.

The play was most probably composed in the Winter of 1595-96 to be first performed at the wedding of Elizabeth, daughter of Sir George Carey, Lord Hunsdon (the future Lord Chamberlain), and Thomas, the son of Henry, Lord Berkeley, in February 1596. Elizabeth, Queen of England, was quite probably in the audience, for the bride was her god-daughter, and the bride's grandfather her Lord Chamberlain.⁷⁴ Clearly the compliments paid to the "fair vestal, throned by the west," "the

⁷³ *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, edited by Harold F. Brooks, the Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare (London: Methuen and Company, 1979). All references are to this edition.

⁷⁴ See the "Introduction" to Brooks (1979) edition.

imperial votress" who lives on, "In maiden meditation, fancy free" (II:1:164), would be gratefully received by England's Virgin Queen. Moreover, it is this "vestal"'s unchanging chasteness that gives rise in the play to the flower with the magical juice that causes the "madness" of love in the several parts of the plot, and also finally leads to the happy nuptials of the paired lovers at Duke Theseus' court, reflecting the nuptials then taking place in the Queen's court, and in her presence. Through the figure of Theseus of Athens, Shakespeare not only makes complimentary references to his Sovereign, but the Sovereign is dramatized on stage and the Prince's qualities depicted. This is a constitutional ruler like the Tudors, a wise-hearted statesman who values the subjects' feelings for their Prince, and after all the unsuccessful rulers of the Chronicle plays--for the first time Shakespeare presents a perfectly able monarch. This royalty is wholly perfect yet wholly down to earth in comparison to the other royalty in the play--the King and Queen of the Fairies. Theseus is the ideal chivalrous ruler from Chaucer's times (see *The Knight's Tale*), as well as according to the Renaissance model. He is a humanist, skilled in learning and the hunt. As his critique of poetic inspiration indicates, he stands for rational order. He is a younger cousin and comrade to the greatest Hero of all times, Hercules; and the only infant in the Palace not daunted by the latter's lion-skin mantle. It was he who gave Athens its constitution, united all Attica, conquered the Amazons whose Queen he is to wed in the play, and slew the Cretan Minotaur. All this Shakespeare and his audience would know from North's translation of Plutarch.

The child of the Olympian god Poseidon, Theseus has yet, like Elizabeth on her royal Progresses, come to see the humble artisans' play put up by Messrs. Bottom, and Snout and Snug, and that too against the advice of the court sophisticates:

For never anything can be amiss
When simpleness and duty tender it (V:1:82-83).

The Prince recognizes the imperfectly expressed love and duty in his subjects' hearts and responds magnanimously to it, for its ". . . tongue-tied simplicity / In least speak most . . ." (V:1:104-5). For this alliance between subject and Prince is the political counterpart to the wedlock which is the ostensible occasion for the play.

As Bottom and the company of artisans stand to Theseus so, Shakespeare would like to pretend, he and the company of players (then Lord Hunsdon's Men) stand to Queen Elizabeth. When the artisans rehearse their play, about the tragic love of Pyramus and Thisbe, they soon reach an impasse with the role of the Lion. The play calls for a Lion, but is it to respond to the call of "objective realism," and roar so that it "will do any man's heart good to hear?" Or will it, as social hierarchy requires it to, "roar as gently as any sucking dove" so as not to fright the ladies of Theseus's court, a social blunder "that would hang us, every mother's son" (I:2:73). The playwright is alluding here also to a recent comic event in the Scottish court. It seems that for the pageants held there to mark the baptism of Prince Henry in August 1594, the original plans had included a chariot drawn in

by a lyon, but because his presence might have brought some feare to the nearest, or that the sights of the lights and the torches might have commoved his tameness,⁷⁵

⁷⁵See Brooks (1979), p. xxxiv.

the chariot was drawn in by a "blackamoor" instead! We recognize in the situation here complex interlarding of imagination and social realities in Shakespeare's act of creation. The victorious Virgin Queen of England is witnessing at the wedding feast of her godchild whose grandfather is the Royal Chamberlain, a courtly comedy presented by the players of the bride's noble father's household, a play which turns on the theme of a quarrel between the King and Queen of fairyland over a page at Court. The fairy realm intersects with the ideal polity of Athens when the Queen of the Faeries falls in love with Nick Bottom the Athenian weaver, while he is rehearsing in a play supposedly based on the tragic story of a pair of lovers from ancient Babylon. We know, moreover, that the romantic adventures of Duke Theseus and his bride-to-be Hippolyta, have included the fairy principals Titania and Oberon respectively, on earlier occasions. The Lord Chamberlain's urbane players play at being rude amateurs. The play being rehearsed is to be presented before Duke Theseus and his court on the occasion of his marriage to the Queen of Amazons. At this juncture "*Enter Lion.*" "Real" life and "acting" have a great deal of freedom to enter and leave the scene of representation here. As Puck, the jester and lieutenant to the King of Fairies exclaims when he comes upon the Athenian artisans rehearsing in the woods:

What, a play toward? I'll be an auditor,
An actor too perhaps, if I see cause.⁷⁶

And "representation" is not a tortured preoccupation, but, granted convention, a free act in which actors and auditors all cheerfully participate in their desire to create meaning. Thus, when it is discovered that the artisans' play requires that the hero and heroine

⁷⁶ III.1.75-76.

meet by moonlight, Quince, their director, has a quick solution:

. . . one must come in with a bush of thorns and a lantern,
and say he comes to disfigure or to present the person of
Moonshine.⁷⁷

In this type of cultural discourse, no act of representation need be prohibited if its role in the narrative is understood; and so, as the "Prologue" says:

Let Lion, Moonshine, Wall, and lovers twain
At large discourse.⁷⁸

The meaning created here is a meaning of great complexity in which a certain discourse, a vast array of people and a great deal of circumstantiality have parts, though the main motivator of it is Shakespeare. Without the presence of the Queen and the nuptials for example, the play would have a lesser meaning. Without the Lord Chamberlain's players pretending to be amateurs there is no "Pyramus and Thisbe" within the play. Without the memory of the War of Roses still raw in the viewers' minds, and the present fact of the Tudor peace to replace it, there is no meaning in the Court of Duke Theseus. The cultural fact that is accomplished is accomplished through concerted action, and through each person knowing his part and being aware of everyone else's. Perfect knowledge on the part of everyone is not implied, nor would it appear to be necessary for participation. The comic mispronunciation by the artisan actors of the names of the characters they are playing, (the oft repeated "Ninny's tomb" for the tomb of Ninus) is sufficient indication of this. But all must and do take part. And so, the play and the play within the play, and the greater "play" of real living, all draw towards a close with

⁷⁷III.1-55-56.

⁷⁸V.1.149-150.

Well roared, Lion!
Well run, Thisbe!
Well shone, Moon!⁷⁹

One problem always remains: I have difficulty placing Dukhushyam in my scheme of things. He has no difficulty fitting me into his.

⁷⁹V:1:254-56.