



# THE CHANGING WORLDS OF THE PATUAS OF WEST BENGAL

The Patuas, also known by their caste title Chitrakar (“picture-maker”), are an itinerant community of painters and singers who reside primarily in Medinipur District, which is located south of Kolkata (formerly Calcutta). Traditionally, they wandered from village to village with a sack of painted narrative scrolls (pats) on their back. Upon arrival in a village, they sought out patrons who paid them in kind to listen to sung performances that accompanied the unraveling of scrolls. The songs were by and large about Hindu gods and goddesses as well as Muslim saints. But they also sang about themes that pertained to the social circumstances of the times. During the British colonial period, for example, Patuas would sing what was known as the sahib pat (“foreigner scroll”), which emphasized the cruel oppression of the colonialists. Such scrolls often ended with an Indian freedom fighter being hanged for alleged crimes against the Raj. The Patuas thus disseminated both religious lore and their own form of journalism to rural Bengali audiences. In modern times, a gradual decline in patronage has forced the Patuas to seek out new venues to market their caste occupation.

The thematic content of the Patuas’ repertoire has always been moralistic, covering sacred and secular themes as well as current affairs. The cult of Gazi Pir in south Bengal reflects not only the dual Hindu/Muslim background of the Patuas, but also the interaction between the sacred and the secular in their songs. Gazi Pir’s complex narrative addresses the socio-religious issue of Hindu-Muslim interaction and contains a secular aside about a mischievous and suggestively promiscuous woman, which voices final concerns about the moral repercussions that a “fallen one” of her sort might face in the underworld after death. The woman’s brash behavior is implied to be indicative of the “modern” (i.e., colonial) influences on Indian women.

From the colonial period onward, the singers’ repertoires have tended away from medieval religious motifs, and toward contemporary secular themes. By becoming “modern” in the twentieth century, the Patuas were able to provide local and national news in addition to religious instruction and entertainment. In the 1930s, for example, Patuas picked up on a sensationalistic tragedy that occurred in Cooch Behar. The story came to be known as pitakartrik putravaddha (“Father Induced Sibling Murder”), in which a father caused one of his sons to kill a second son when the plot was actually intended to kill the son-in-law. Such historical accounts were embellished in typically journalistic fashion to keep people interested and listening. Another common theme that hinted at modernity’s impact on the trade was

that of the spoiled wife, seeking divorce while wishing for British products such as shoes, soap, and spectacles.

As chromolithographs flooded the market following their introduction in the 1870s, the visual dimension of the Patuas’ art soon began losing its appeal. People still enjoyed hearing the songs, but the Patuas’ painting style looked dull in comparison to the brightly colored prints. Later, the cinema accelerated the erosion of the patronage base that had always been the economic backbone and justification for this performance genre. Nowadays, rectangular, single-framed pats are painted primarily for sale. Patuas did not originally sell scroll paintings, but used the pats as props for their singing performances. As the demand for sung performances has decreased in modern times, however, the Patuas have taken to selling the scrolls instead of the songs.

What is most striking about the Patuas is their resilient ability to adapt by addressing issues of current interest. It is no wonder, then, that they continue to practice their craft in innovative and creative ways, even though many Patuas have been forced into other occupations. Those who continue to perform the hereditary occupation now find themselves sitting on the concrete sidewalks of Kolkata, in the atriums of five-star hotels, or at festivals (melas) selling scrolls rather than singing about them. They also continue to compose new songs on themes such as famine and flood relief, elections, birth control, communalism, and even HIV prevention. Passion for their craft, as well as the need to survive, have motivated the Patuas to remain current in their thinking.

Frank J. Korom has been working with the Patuas of Naya Village, Pingla Block, Medinipur District, West Bengal, India since 2001. This illustrated lecture draws on his ethnographic fieldwork and provides an overview of his book *Village of Painters* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2006), which accompanies an exhibition of the same title that will open at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe on October 29, 2006.

*The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to “preserve and present American Folklife” through programs of research, documentation, archival preservation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Center includes the American Folklife Center Archive, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Please visit our web site at <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/>.*

