THE MEDINIPUR FLOOD OF 1978 IN PATUA ART: AN EMIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: The Patuas of West Bengal are a semi-itinerant caste of narrative scroll painters that have plied their trade for centuries. Over time, their repertoire has expanded to encompass a variety of new phenomena, including performances concerning natural disasters. This paper focuses specifically on one song about an infamous flood in Medinipur district that devastated the area in the 1970s, with the purpose of revealing how the Patuas themselves understand this tragic event as well as others like it. The conclusion suggests that they believe divine retribution is behind natural calamity.

Keywords: Patua, Narrative Scroll, Performance, Disaster, Divine Retribution.

INTRODUCTION

The community with whom I am concerned in this paper is known collectively by the vernacular designation Patua (*paṭuẏā*). More recently, many of them have taken the Sanskritized surname of Chitrakar, which means "picture-maker" (Hauser 2002). However, what makes this group somewhat unique and different from the average artist is that they also compose songs that thematically correspond to the scrolls they paint. In other words, they are performers who use the painted narrative scrolls to illustrate the songs they sing. The performative act thus requires the simultaneous engagement of both the oral/aural and the visual senses. Integrating the two in a competent and aesthetic fashion is what defines a good Patua (Hauser 1994).

In recent centuries, the art of the Patua declined, due to lack of patronage that resulted from the introduction of other visual media, such as wood block prints (Paul 1983), chromolithographs (Pinney 2004), radio, cinema (Korom 2006), DVD, and now, finally, even mobile phones with the capacity to screen films and other sorts of visual media, such as You Tube (Doron and Jeffrey 2013). The decline in patronage has therefore resulted in a shift in emphasis from performance to painting in recent decades. Patuas nowadays are more inclined to mass-produce scrolls for sale, without caring much for the composition of new songs (Korom 2017a, 2017b). This fact led one romantic nationalist to opine that the tradition would not survive much longer. Gurusaday Dutt (1882-1941) made this pronouncement first in 1903, but more than a century later Patuas continue to paint and sing, sometimes working other day jobs to supplement their income earned from artistic endeavors.

Referring specifically to the *paṭ* (scroll) tradition of narrative paintings under study here, Dutt wrote that it has a "sweetness and homeliness which is peculiar to the character of rural Bengal and is Bengal's very own" (Dutt 1932a: 528). Echoing

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E. B. Havell (1861-1934), who had earlier urged Bengali artists to develop their own style without mimicking the West in his 1912 book, Dutt continued by writing that the Patuas represent Bengal's ethnolinguistic character first and foremost. Those artisans who paint the scrolls, he wrote, were "pure and pristine," "unaffected by foreign influence," which makes them the "truest national art tradition not only of Bengal but of India" (Dutt 1932a: 526). His romanticized fascination with the rural bards discussed here compelled him to mount the first exhibition of Bengali scroll paintings ever, along with which he published a book in Bengali titled *Paṭuẏā Saṅgīt* (1932b), translated as Patua Song. It was a collection of songs that corresponded to the scrolls on display in the exhibition that he mounted.

In the introduction to the book, he opined that, due to modernization, the caste of bards he highlighted would not survive another decade. Fortunately for us, they did, and they continue to paint and sing down to the present day. Some have even garnered international fame as a result of the globalization of Indian arts and crafts after the Festival of India took place in Washington D.C. during the summer of 1985 (Brown 2017). Among the artists invited to the Smithsonian Institution's Festival of Folklife were several Patuas, who all now take the surname Chitrakar, except for those who remained Hindu after the others converted *en masse* to Islam during the medieval period, when greater Bengal was becoming Islamicized after the decline of the Sena Dynasty. Hindu Chitrakars, such as those who currently reside in the scroll painter neighborhood (*paṭuẏāpāṛā*) of Kali Ghat, Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) and build ephemeral images of deities for religious festivals, refer to themselves by the surname Pal (Jain 1999).

What is interesting about Dutt's exhibition and book, however, is that he only includes examples of what members of the tradition call *purāṇo* (old) *paṭ*, despite the fact that they also produce *natun* (new) ones (Korom 2017a, 2017b). In other words, he presented them as he wished to see them, which is as being pure and pristine. He therefore intentionally left out any scrolls and songs that implied "pollution" or "degradation" based on coming into contact with the "urban" and the "modern," which he blamed on colonialism. The dilemma that these contemporary artists thus face even now is being stereotyped as rustic country bumpkins who paint rather crude but "homely" versions of mythological themes drawn from pan-Hindu narratives based on the lore of the Sanskrit Puranas, a classical genre of texts extolling the virtues of specific Hindu gods and goddesses.

The Patuas are, in fact, much more creative than that, for they constantly transgress their image managers by adding new materials into their collective repertoire concerning everything from social issues (e.g., hygiene, dowry deaths, alcoholism, and even HIV/AIDS) to environmental ones (e.g., floods, river pollution, deforestation, earthquakes, tsunamis, etc.). They call these *sāmājik* (social) *paṭ*. There are also historical scrolls about figures such as Rabindranath Tagore, Mother Theresa, Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, as well as local freedom fighters, such as

Kshudiram. Nowadays even Louis XVI and foreign researchers (such as myself) also appear in their scrolls as a result of globalization. Many are tragic, such as the nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki or the 9/11 (Mukhopadhyay 2008) scroll they began performing in December of 2001, during my first fieldwork trip to Naya, a village in Medinipur District, where a significant cluster of these talented people have settled (Korom 2006).

Contrary to Dutt's somewhat apocalyptic prediction, several scholars who have written full-scale studies on the Patuas noted their resiliency (Bhattacharjee 1980, Chatterji 2012, Hauser 1998), including myself. I have written extensively about the Patuas elsewhere; namely, in my 2006 book titled *Village of Painters*. In that book, I did not dwell very much on what happened to the Patuas as a result of governmental interventions, but I took it up in a subsequent publication (Korom 2011). Since the Patuas historically originated as a low-caste Hindu group that converted to Islam *en masse* in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, they have been doubly marginalized in Hindu society, being neither fully accepted by Hindus nor Muslims (Bhattacharjee 1973; Siddiqui 1972, 1982). Their ongoing marginality resulted in extreme poverty that has compelled contemporary governmental agencies to target them for developmental schemes, not only to benefit themselves as a low-caste Muslim community, but also to bring the ideology of development to the hinterlands of West Bengal. Such schemes to indoctrinate the Patuas into the ideologies of the state began in the 1970s, when non-governmental organizations started to utilize their communicative skills to disseminate messages concerning hygiene, disease, deforestation, and other such matters central to the dialogues of the development industry (Parmar 1975).

When local politicians began noticing their potential as ideological tools that could be manipulated to gain votes at crucial times, such as when natural disasters hit, they immediately started to entice Patuas to work for them by offering the participants benefits, such as cash salaries, health care, and material goods to improve their families' daily lives. This resulted in a number of new themes being incorporated into the repertoires of the Patuas, who earlier sang mostly about the exploits of mythological figures, which are abundant in the Bengali vernacular tradition (Smith 1982). And so it came to be that whenever a sensationalistic tragedy occurred locally (and sometimes even nationally; lately, even internationally, as suggested above), the Patuas would be called upon to go around to the villages of their home districts to sing songs that conveyed the messages politicians and social workers wished their constituents to hear. It was thus the carefully managed dissemination of a particular point of view, not necessarily that of the singer himself (Korom 2011, 2014, 2015). Sometimes, however, since the wanderings of the Patuas were not closely monitored, they added their own opinions, which were not always in line with the viewpoints of their urban patrons. Patuas therefore periodically challenged the hegemonic perspectives of the dominant powers that employed them

periodically. To illustrate, let me provide a case study from the corpus of what I term "disaster" songs that includes events such as the Medinipur flood of 1978, the Gujarat earthquake of 2001, and the tsunami of 2004.

CLIMACTIC STORIES

As science warns us more and more about the devastating toll that climate change will bring upon the Anthropocene, historians such as Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009), archaeologists such as Ian Hodder (2012), anthropologists such as Philippe Descola (2013), and other post-humanists have all urged us to question, interrogate, and redefine the human/non-human divide, since human culture is not separable from the material world in which we live. Popular culture has always attested to the fact that human and natural ontologies collapse in the face of disaster in the past (Gugg et al. 2019) and folklore continues to provide witness to an animistic worldview in the present (Srivastava 2019), such as the Andaman proverb that states, "When the waters go out, head for higher ground," which was quoted widely in the media after the devastating tsunami of 2004 to explain why not a single person suffered death in the islands after the event that sent boats crashing into houses in Sri Lanka and carved deep cliffs of sand along Kerala's coastline. Indeed, even as far north as West Bengal, ripples could be seen and felt on the surface of ponds in Naya, where I was conducting ethnographic fieldwork at the time among my Patua associates.

Shortly after the tsunami that caused such massive devastation from Aceh to Sri Lanka and coastal southern India to which everyone around the world woke on 24 December 2004, a well-known art entrepreneur in New Delhi quickly organized a painting competition to raise money for the victims of the dreaded event. Some of the first to step up and volunteer to paint tsunami scenes were the Patuas of West Bengal. Given the short notice, many of them painted tsunami scrolls without first composing songs. As already noted above, Patua performances require the simultaneous engagement of the aural and the visual senses to connect the ear and the eye. Integrating the two in a competent and aesthetic fashion is what makes a Patua distinct, according to Dukhushyam Chitrakar, a senior Patua scroll painter and singer in Naya, who many younger artists call their *guru* or teacher. Yet, the timeframe for completion of the paintings was so short that very few were able to compose any verses to accompany their paintings. Patuas, however, thrive on patronage, be it from local patrons or tourists. It is not surprising, then, that when the art entrepreneur from New Delhi sent out his call to announce a national tsunami painting contest, many Patuas were ready and even eager to engage with the topic to produce images such as the following one by Gurupada Chitrakar of Naya village. Like all of the paintings produced by others in the village, Gurupada's creation began with an opening frame depicting a monster or demon clutching individuals in the inundation, making it difficult to discern human from fish in the deluge that engulfed all creatures (see Figure 1). His opening frame represents a "collapsed ontology" in post-humanist terms, one that merges species within the same frame of existential reference, as part of a shared biome.

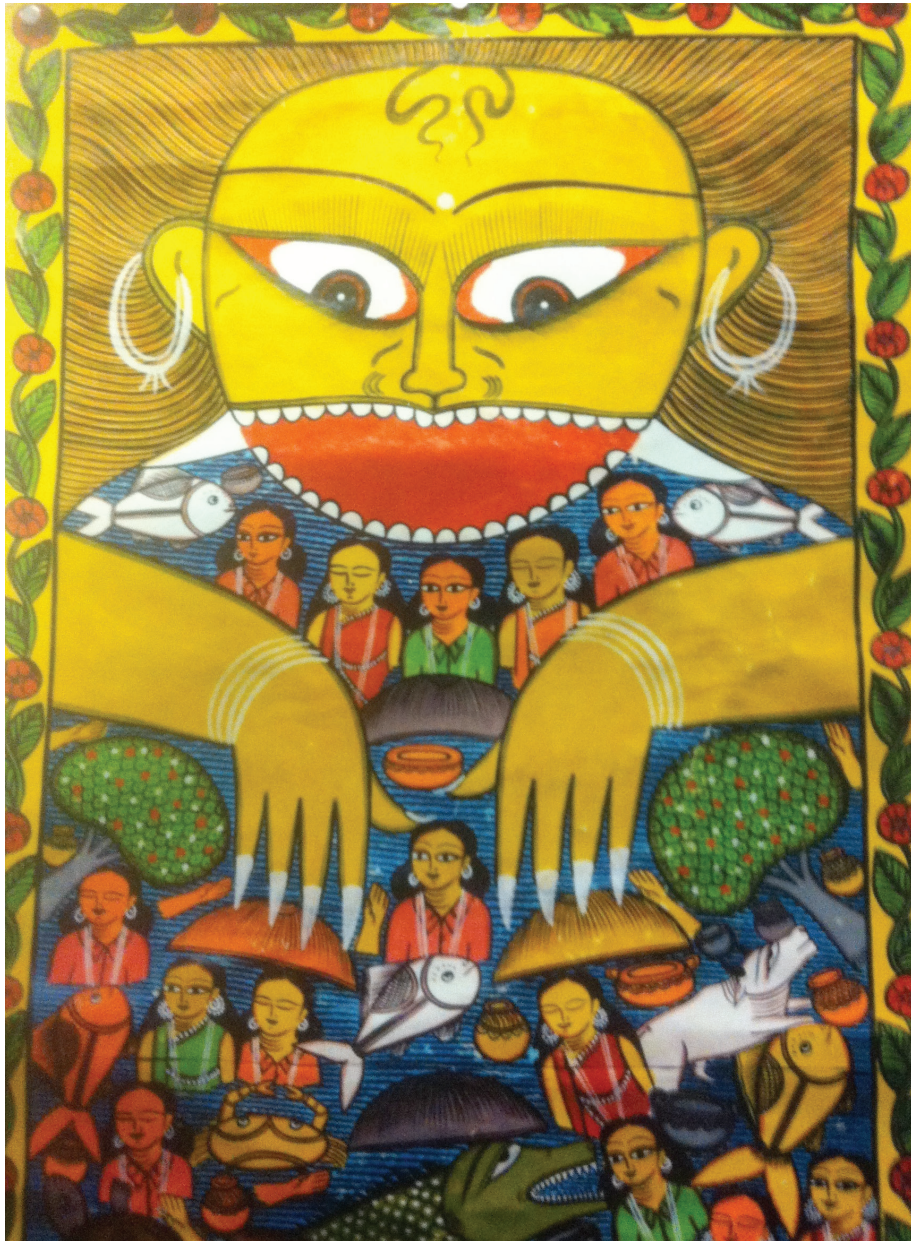**Figure 1. The opening frame of GurupadaChitrakar's tsunami scroll depicting a fearful demon,who produces the great wave that wreaks havoc throughout Southeast and South Asia. Photo by and courtesy of the author.**

The opening frame of Gurupada's scroll depicts the main character, the specific weather demon responsible for blowing out a great breath that caused the mighty wave to travel from Indonesia to India, devastating everything in its path along the way. In the clutches of the great demon, we see people, fish, and animals, such as cows, none of which were spared by the wrath of the monster storm. Blaming natural phenomena on some supernatural force is quite common in the Patua storytelling tradition, since they tend to explain events with reference to a mythological world inhabited by them and the other creatures that inhabit the agricultural landscape around them. The first frame thus sets up the rest of the narrative that is then theoretically sung as the raconteur slowly unfurls one frame at a time to hold the audience members captivated for the duration of the performance. The scrolls, however, originally lacked a narrative, as already suggested above, but as time went by, several Patuas composed verses after the fact to accompany the production of more and more tsunami scrolls that were produced to meet the increasing demand of buyers, most of whom were from India's cities or tourists visiting from abroad. Joydeb and Moyna Chitrakar, also residents of Naya, were then later commissioned to produce illustrations for a children's book about the tsunami that was published by Tara Books in 2009, which has even been translated into Spanish (see Figure 2)!
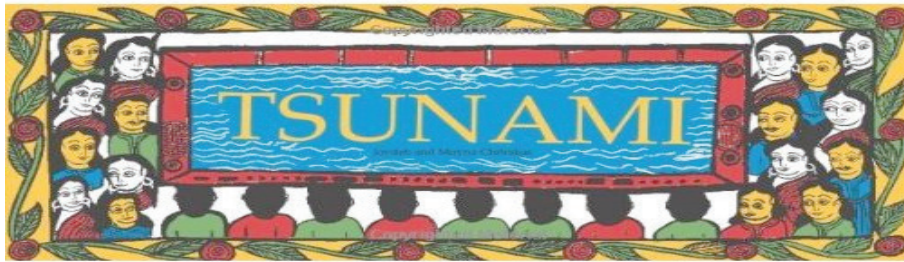

Figure 2. The cover of the tsunami book created by Joydeb and Moyna Chitrakar in 2009 for Tara Books, done in the style of a traditional Bengali *paṭ* scroll painting. Photo by and courtesy of the author.

The tsunami scroll example is not the first time that the Patuas have painted floods and damage caused by storm and water, since it belongs to the sub-genre that I have titled disaster songs, which are sung in a melancholic tone, what the singers refer to as the *ājab* (enchanting) mode. Another of their paintings and songs recalls the devastating flood that hit one of their own villages in 1978. I refer to the great flood of 1978, which impacted much of West Bengal, but was felt especially hard in Medinipur, in which Naya is located.

The floods of 1978 were the worst in recorded history. The *BBC*, for example, reported on 4 September 1978 that at least two million people were left homeless in northern India, and that some of the areas of West Bengal were under eighteen feet of water, due to incessant monsoon rains. West Bengal was hit hardest, with

an estimated fifteen million people affected by the storm. Despite the fact that the Indian Air Force was deployed to ensure that aid workers would be able to get into the worst affected areas as soon as the waters receded, the fear was that typhoid and cholera would follow swiftly on the waves of the monsoon floods. After the waters receded, the State Inter Agency Group of West Bengal reported that the flood affected 235 "blocks" (administrative units), with 1,370 people perishing, 1,361,338 houses being damaged or totally demolished (Korom 2015: 4).

The song that Gurupada composed about that earlier event is simply called *banyā* (flood). He sang it for me in 2002, as we sat together in the cool shade of his veranda while waiting for the monsoon to begin on a hot, dry afternoon. The scroll he used to sing the song was painted by Rani Chitrakar, one of his sisters, who lives adjacent to him. It is her scroll that illustrates the verses I recorded. I have translated the song below, interspersed with frames of Rani's painting to give the reader a sense of how a Patua performance unfolds.

Before beginning to sing about the terrible flood that occurred in Medinipur District, where he lives, Gurupada, then a young, pudgy man with a powerful singing voice, spoke the following: "The *paṭ* I am going to sing now is of 1385BS (1978CE). A terribly ferocious flood inundated West Bengal. This *paṭ* deals with the theme of that flood. I am now singing that *paṭ*." Such spoken exegesis is an integral part of the sung tradition, since it allows the bard to elaborate and explain to the audience what it is he (or she) is singing about. In this case, it was a cue to indicate that he was about to "break through" into performance (Hymes 1981: 78-262), a familiar framing mechanism (Goffman 1986) to alert the audience that the performance was now about to begin. Such frames are essential to performance, not only to announce that a transition is occurring from everyday discourse to the realm of performed narrative, but also to help guide the audience through the aesthetic event being experienced. Once calling his audience to order, he sang the following without further ado, while periodically pointing at various characters in the vertically arranged frames that he rolled out one by one to correspond roughly with the verse being sung. The very first frame shows the Ganges River in her anthropomorphic form as a weather goddess who controls the waters that would inundate the village in which the Patuas reside. She is shown sitting on her vehicle, the *makara* (crocodile), with bloated bodies of humans, cows, and fish floating around her, demonstrating that not only people suffered, but all species. Gurupada begins as follows:

Listen, listen everyone, listen attentively.

I have brought out a new *paṭ* (scroll) giving an account of the flood.

Figure 3. A smiling goddess Ganga sitting on her crocodile mount with bloated bodies of humans, cows, and fish in the foreground. FA.2002.34.20.2. By permission of the Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe, New Mexico. Department of Cultural Affairs. Photo by Polina Smutko.

On 14 Bhadra 1385BS,

An accident took place in the district of Medinipur.

Water released from the DVC [Damodar Valley Corporation] rushed in at gushing speed.

Goats, lambs, cows, and calves came floating.

The *rahu*, the *kātlā*, and so many domesticated fish came floating.

I cannot write it down, [for] I have no rice in my belly.

Everyone said there would be a flood and raised an uproar.

Figure 4. The second frame of Rani Chitrakar's flood scroll, depicting unearthed trees, animals, and human beings floating in the water, along with some couples on banana trunks attempting to save themselves from the raging water's wrath. FA.2002.34.20.3. By permission of the Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe, New Mexico. Department of Cultural Affairs. Photo by Polina Smutko.

Early in the morning I heard people crying.

In the morning I found water all over.

We, the children, the aged, how are we going to find our food?

Say, in our lives, gentlemen, we have never seen [such] a flood!

For that very reason, we don't have even a raft or dinghy.

We had to float on banana trunks to see relief.

In the midst of all that, a young woman delivered a baby.

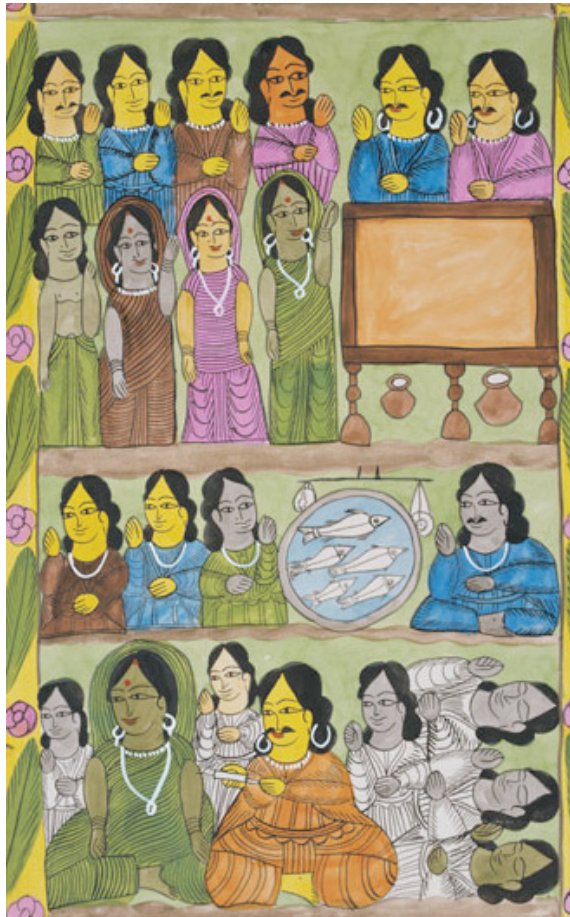Say, seeing all of these scenes, gentlemen, we couldn't help shedding tears!

Figure 5. Frames three and four showing the arrival of the doctors and the sale of rotten, poisoned fish that died in the flood. Lastly, people gather to mourn the dead who drowned. FA.2002.34.20.4. By permission of the Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe, New Mexico. Department of Cultural Affairs. Photo by Polina Smutko.

Homes, buildings, human beings came floating in large numbers.

The price of fish dropped as low as two or three rupees.

So many people died of eating those [rotten] fish.

The government sent doctors for that.

Doctors went from door to door to administer vaccine injections.

The government gave flattened rice, jaggery, rice, wheat.

We would have died if we hadn't gotten those.

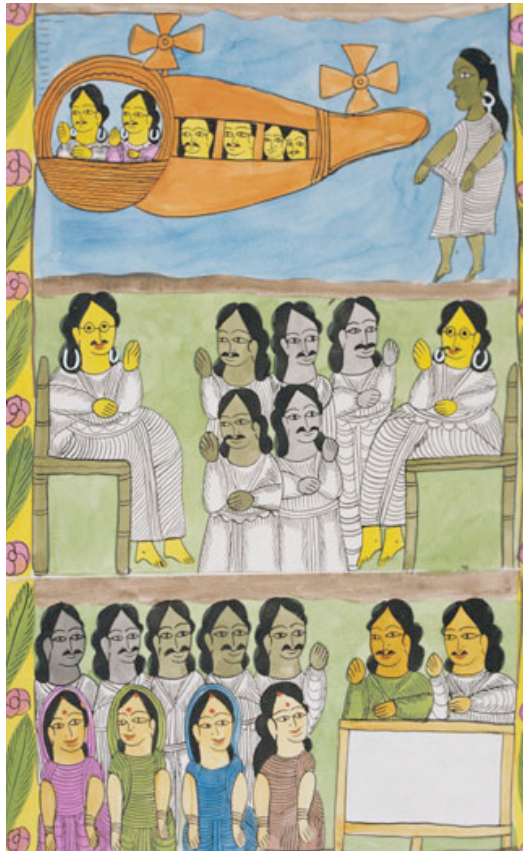Say, the government gave leaf lean-tos, tarpaulins, and clothes!

Figure 6. Frames five through seven showing the helicopters that flew in to drop aid to stranded villagers after the roads were washed out. The *bābu*s or "intellectuals," depicted wearing spectacles and sitting on chairs to suggest their outsider status, rest after assessing the situation and declaring it a disaster. Volunteers who handed out food and survival supplies are depicted in the bottom register talking to villagers. FA.2002.34.20.5. By permission of the Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe, New Mexico. Department of Cultural Affairs. Photo by Polina Smutko.

Bābu came to inspect and said it was a disaster.

Aid was dropped from helicopters.

Both the rich and the poor had to take that aid.

Where are you, our chief minister Jyoti Basu, the second god?

Be kind enough to save the lives of children.

Where are you, our prime minister, Morarji Desai?

All of us convey our appeal to you.

Give loans, give fertilizer, give seed grains!

We are going to farm and save the lives of our children.

Those volunteers gave *roṭī*, gave rice, gave wheat.

If we hadn't gotten them, we would have died.

Figure 7. The final frame once again showing the goddess Ganga and the ferryman fishing with a net, who has an encounter with a woman who has "suffered" (lit. eaten) three quarters of her belongings. FA.2002.34.20.6. By permission of the Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe, New Mexico. Department of Cultural Affairs. Photo by Polina Smutko.

"The Ganges is about to come," say the elders.

Mother Ganges' play (*khelā*) is like the killing of demons.

One ferryman sailed in a boat to catch fish.

He spotted a young woman in the river.

That young woman said, "I lost (lit. ate) three sides."

The ferryman said, "Alas, what devastation has taken place!"

"I lost three sides and live on one side."

"Don't touch me, *bābā*, [or] my child, I beg."

Saying this, the young woman disappeared.

The ferryman went and disclosed that.

Oh, here I have ended my invocation in verse!

My name is Gurupada Chitrakar, my address is Naya.

My district is Medinipur, Pingla *ṭhān*ā, my home.

I, Gurupada Chitrakar, sing this song.

Patuas almost always end by adding a signature verse (*bhaṇitā*) to their sung narratives to remind the audience of who they are and where they can be found, should another future opportunity to perform arise.

The song I have included above questions both the Marxist regime of the former Bengali Chief Minister Jyoti Basu, as well as the central government's Prime Minister Morarji Desai, who was a member of the Janata Party and the first prime minister who was not affiliated with the Congress Party that dominated India's central government since Independence in 1947 until recently, when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won the popular vote and rose to power. According to a number of eyewitnesses with whom I spoke, the Congress Party was the first to take action to provide relief for those affected by the flood, which seriously threatened the stability of Basu's CPI (M). The song also draws attention to the ineffectiveness of Desai's central government in New Delhi, which led to the Congress Party ultimately regaining central power some years later.

The 1978 flood of Medinipur received much more widespread attention in West Bengal than it did nationally, but the fact that Desai is also criticized by the singer suggests that the citizens of Medinpur were dissatisfied with both their state's reigning politicians as well as the national ones. Ironically, it led to the Congress' reestablishment of power at the center but did not provide its politicians with opportunities to overthrow the CPI (M) in Calcutta. The singer and his song ambiguously both praises and condemns relief efforts simultaneously, suggesting that it may not have been the politicians who came to their aid after all, but simply compassionate philanthropists belonging to the gentry class of urban Calcutta, the *bābu*s.

In addition to the implicit political commentary inherent in the song, what is also intriguing is the mythologization of history to create what I would call "mythistory," in which the natural causes of the floods that caused the destruction are replaced by divine intervention. In this particular version of the song, it is the wrath of the Ganges River, worshipped as a goddess (*devī*) by Hindus, that causes the mayhem. Her wrath is witnessed in the line stating, "Mother Ganges' play is like the killing of demons." The play of the Hindu gods is normally referred to by the Sanskritic term *līlā*, but it is significant that the term used here is the vernacular Bengali word *khelā*, which suggests a much more direct and visceral intervention into human affairs on the part of the goddess. It also captures the anger of the goddess, who can be as malevolent as she can be benevolent, depending on her mood and the amount of attention, or lack thereof, given to her by mortal devotees. Indeed, the deities of the Bengali vernacular pantheon are well known for rewarding pious devotees who worship them regularly, but also punish those who forget their devotional duties.

Mythologization, such as the example used above, is quite common throughout the Patua repertoire, especially when a tragic event occurs that is otherwise unexplainable. In the Titanic scroll, for example, that became a part of the Patua repertoire after the popular film was released, the sinking of the ship is explained by Swarna Chitrakar, a female singer considered one of the best in Naya, not as a result of crashing into an iceberg, but because of the illicit affair that the starring characters have on the ship. In the end, one singer decried in 2003, "the dark age (*kalijug*) makes humans more sinful. This is why the boat crashed and sank."

Many other examples could be cited, but the ones I have already presented should suffice to illustrate how the Patuas filter modern events through their traditional worldview to indigenize external influences, such as western environmental science, Hollywood films, and even the events of 9/11 in New York City, when the Twin Towers were brought down by suicide bombers using planes as weapons. Soon after the Patuas heard of this event back in December of 2001, they immediately began producing 9/11 scrolls about the event, as I have recounted elsewhere (Korom 2006), but rather than following the news as it unfolded on the radio and in newspapers, they remarkably chose to add a Bengali character into the action, who goes to New York for higher studies and ends up landing a job in the Twin Towers just days before the tragedy. As it happens, his first day of work is on the fatal day of the attack, so he also dies in the conflagration that led to the crumbling of the towers, along with the almost 3,000 other helpless victims.

Elaborating on the historical events surrounding 9/11, while not mythological in nature, does lead to indigenizing the event by making it ring true to local audiences in rural West Bengal, thereby making a local incident global in nature. Indeed, I witnessed people weep in Medinipur, when the song was initially being sung to local audiences during the early months of 2002, when I first saw what is now a standard part of the Patua repertoire performed to a somber audience in a nearby

market town only kilometers away from the village of Naya where more than thirty scroll painting families reside, making it the largest community of Patuas in the state. The transformation of an American tragedy into a Bengali one demonstrates the hallmark of creativity that has allowed the Patuas to survive and even thrive, as their traditional work adapts to the ever-changing circumstances around them. The Patuas, it can be said, are alternatively modern in the sense that they pick and choose those aspects of modernity that suit their tastes and dispositions. But they do so only to the extent that they can reshape the modern event into a traditional incident. Thus, while characters may change, the structures remain fixed, as do the technologies that render the modern into traditional idioms.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, let me end this short essay by suggesting that the Patuas collectively show a sort of brilliant resistance to the influences around them. In some cases, they accommodate foreignness, but only on their own unique terms, as I have suggested above with the Titanic and 9/11 examples. However, when disastrous events hit closer to home, such as the tsunami mentioned above or the more extended main example of the Medinipur flood, the tendency is to explain violent natural events according to a shared mythological worldview that helps locals to make sense of a world that seems uncertain, unstable, and often unfair. It is an animated world in which all sorts of non-human agents share the biome with humans. It is the kind of world that modernists and humanists rejected for too long, as a result of scientific rationality. Yet as the globe becomes more and more intertwined between all sorts of agents, the master narrative of rationality breaks down to allow for a much more fluid dialogue between tradition and modernity, one in which the two categories are not seen as binaries in conflict but rather categories in dialogue, albeit often in a contested fashion. The job of the Patua performer, in the end, is to mediate between modernity and tradition, the natural and the supernatural, and finally, the mortal and the divine. By collapsing our assumed modern ontologies, the Patuas return us to a world that demands respect for nature, not exploitation of it. In short, they bridge the chasm between myth and history for their audiences. By doing so, they have remained relevant to the present and the future, despite the many hurdles they have faced to bridge the past to the present.

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