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## From Oral Tradition to “Folk Art” Reevaluating Bengali Scroll Paintings

### Abstract

This article contributes to the scholarship on the politics of production and consumption of the arts in modern India as well as to relating issues of aesthetics and development. It describes the tradition of scroll painters—Patuas (*paṭuṃyā*)—and the practice of storytelling in contemporary West Bengal, where a small number of picture showmen who follow this caste-based occupation can still be found. In this article the process by which this tradition was recognized as “folk art” is analyzed and a shift of genre from a primarily oral tradition to a primarily visual tradition (i.e., from the performance of scrolls to their selling as art products) is demonstrated. It is argued that “Patua art,” as it is perceived today, is a quite recent phenomenon, generated to a great extent by the urban intellectual elite of Calcutta.

**Keywords:** Storytelling—scroll painting—folk art—politics of authenticity—Bengal

SHOULD YOU COME to Calcutta one day, you might be invited to the house of a Bengali family. And while you are in their house, a Patua might happen to call in. Your host will introduce him as a “traditional scroll painter,” who comes by from time to time to sell his scrolls. He will ask you whether you are interested in seeing his paintings. Okay, why not? Both of you go out on the veranda, where the old man is already waiting for you. He squats on the floor, opens his bundle, and starts to unwind a scroll. Divided into a series of framed pictures, the scroll narrates the story of *Behulā*. The old man starts singing the corresponding rhymes in a rather monotonous melody. Keeping pace with the story, he unfolds the pictures one by one. The recitation lasts for about ten minutes. Then the Patua presents all the other scrolls in his bundle. The paintings are in bright, intense colors; figures are outlined dramatically in black; trees, buildings, elementary details are depicted in a schematic fashion. By this time you will have already chosen your favorite scroll. You ask your host to inquire about the price. The bargaining begins. Soon both men are arguing quite loudly. Your host explains that the Patua is demanding an “enormous” amount of money, taking into account the presence of a foreigner. Finally, the painter goes down with his demands, and you purchase the scroll for a ridiculously low price. The Patua leaves grumbling. You and your host go back into the house and have tea. Then he shows you around and points out all the different kinds of Bengali folk art he has collected and displayed in his living room: Kalighat paintings, *kānthā*-quilts, *dhokra*-bronzes, handmade playing cards, and also a scroll painting. You become aware of his educated upper-middle class status. Your host speaks proudly of all the different arts and crafts of Bengal, the “inherent artists,” the spontaneity of the “naive village craftsmen,” the beautiful “folklore.” He explains that Bengal is exceptionally rich in such “old traditions.”

The Patuas, however, did not always sell scrolls. Basically, they were a community of wandering bards, whose hereditary occupation was less to paint scrolls than to display them in villages as illustrations to accompany

their storytelling. In fact, only a few of them knew how to paint. It is only during the last twenty-five years that the Patuas' tradition has no longer been identified with an oral and visual performance but with a particular kind of painting. The scrolls have become rather famous art products.

In this article I analyze the process by which this tradition came to be recognized as "folk art."<sup>1</sup> First, I will describe what I consider to be the Patuas' oral tradition (i.e., the practice of storytelling as it is occasionally found even in contemporary West Bengal). As will become clear, a crucial aspect of this tradition is its classification as a form of "begging." Then I will examine the discourse on scroll paintings, which has developed in two socio-historical settings: first, in connection with the emergence of folklore studies in early twentieth century Bengal, resulting in the Patuas' identification with the Chitrakars; second, in the light of the commercialization of scrolls that began in the 1970s. My aim is to demonstrate a shift of genre from a primarily oral to a primarily visual tradition (i.e., from the performance of scrolls to their selling as art products). I argue that "Patua art" as it exists today is a quite recent phenomenon, generated to a great extent by the urban intellectual elite of Calcutta. Thus, this essay contributes to the discussion on the politics of production and consumption of the arts in modern India as well as to relating issues of aesthetics and authenticity.<sup>2</sup>

#### THE STORYTELLING TRADITION

In contemporary West Bengal the term "Patua" (*paṭuā*) has three different meanings. It refers to a community (caste) whose hereditary and name-giving occupation is handling a *paṭ*, which is literally a scroll, canvas or painting; i.e., a Patua refers to somebody who paints scrolls and/or to their display. Furthermore, it functions as a surname for the members of this caste. Finally, it indicates a practicing picture showman.<sup>3</sup> These three meanings may overlap, but this is not necessarily the case. In historical perspective, there is no uniform usage of this term either. Even though colonial reports usually differentiated between caste/class on the one hand and occupation on the other, their classification of the Patuas is not clear. On the basis of the 1872 census report, HUNTER (1876, 77) mentioned more than a thousand "Potidars" living in Medinipur district and only twenty professional "Chitrakars" (painters). In 1891 RISLEY described the "Patuá" as "...an endogamous class of low Mahomedans, who paint pictures illustrating Hindu mythology and hawk them from door to door with songs" (1981, vol. II, 169–70). This "class" overlaps with a professional group of painters called "Pátua" (also known as Patu, Potá, Putuá, Patudar). RISLEY (1981, vol. I, 206) distinguished them from the Chitrakars, "a profession followed by Acharji, Ganak, Sutradhar, and other low castes." In other words, Patuas and

Chitrakars were considered as two different categories. I will come back to this point later. For the time being I want to show that scroll paintings were not made only by this particular community. In the first half of the twentieth century, *Ācārya* (astrologers), *Sutradhār* (carpenters), and *Kumbhakār* (potters) were also involved in this activity (GHOSE 1926, 98–99; RAY 1953, 307). On the other hand, the painting and showing of scrolls was never the Patuas' only mode of income. They earned their livelihood by taking on a variety of jobs (mostly as agricultural day laborers and peddlers), which they could combine with their peripatetic lifestyle. Besides, the Patuas were and are particularly known for several trades associated with low caste status, including those for making and selling clay idols and a variety of wickerwork articles, for catching birds, for snake charming, and for being magicians, jugglers, pyrotechnicians, etc. (BHATTACHARJEE 1980, 16–17; RAY 1953, 307).<sup>5</sup> However, while the community of Patuas is spread over many districts of pre-partition Bengal (including present-day Bangladesh), there are only a few practicing picture showmen today, who are active almost exclusively in the Indian districts of Medinipur and Birbhum (West Bengal).

When a Patua travels around the countryside to display his scrolls, he has to leave his village for a couple of days or even for some weeks. He visits an area where he has not been for a long time and which he considers profitable for his work. As soon as he enters a village, the children announce his arrival. Usually all the people from one compound gather for a performance: children, women, and others who have been busy around the house. The Patua shows about three to four scrolls at each presentation. The narratives tell the well-known myths and legends of the Bengali Hindus: Behulā and Lakhindar, the renunciation of Caitanya, stories on Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, episodes from the Ramayana (see Figure 1) etc. Apart from these, political and social events have also become topics for narratives. A performance takes about half an hour altogether. Then the Patua asks for gifts (*dān*) and alms (*bhikṣā*). Usually he is paid in rice, sometimes he also receives a meal, some rupees or old clothes. The Patuas mostly visit lower and middle class households, preferably Hindu farmers. Rural upper- and upper-middle class people, who often own TV sets, are not interested in their performances. For many Patuas, picture showing is a seasonal occupation: while it seems fruitful to move around with scrolls after harvest, during monsoon they rely on other work.<sup>6</sup>

The social status of the Patuas is very low. Wandering from village to village in order to narrate stories illustrated on scrolls provides only a meagre income. Moreover, it is considered by the Patuas as well as the audience to be a form of begging (*bhikṣā karā*). The Patuas' attitude toward this status is an ambivalent one. On the one hand, in Hindu society asking for gifts is



FIGURE 1. Two pictures from the scroll “The Abduction of Sītā” (*Sītāharaṇ*), painted by Niranjan Chitrakar in 1990. The upper scene shows Śūrpaṅakhā complaining to the ten-headed demon king Rābaṅ about the brothers Rām and Lakṣmaṅ who had cut her nose. In the lower scene, the exiled prince Rām is sitting with his wife Sītā in front of their forest hut. Sītā points at a golden deer and Lakṣmaṅ tries to get it for her. The size of the picture is 35 cm in width and 351 cm in length. (Author’s collection)

a legitimate way of making a living, and the storytelling tradition follows this pattern. A patron has the moral obligation to give alms and gains religious merit by doing so (this is best exemplified by mendicants). On the other hand, begging is seen in opposition to work and means degradation. The latter viewpoint is predominant today.<sup>7</sup>

In some districts the Patuas are recognized as “Scheduled Castes.”<sup>8</sup> But this classification seems more a strategy for obtaining certain government benefits than a reflection of how they see themselves. In general, Patuas believe in Islam. The common strategy for improving their social standing follows this pattern: giving up storytelling and becoming a “real” Muslim. Apart from that, practicing Patuas are considered to be somewhere in between the religions. They depict Hindu gods on their scrolls, sing about Hindu myths, and their patrons are exclusively Hindus. On the other hand, they practice their rites of passage according to the Islamic rules, albeit in an unorthodox manner.

It is very difficult to trace the history and origin of the Patuas and their performance tradition due to the lack of written documents. However, there are basically two theories about their origin. One links the Patuas to a tribal background and is based either on physiognomy or on their customs, occupational pattern, and social organization (SARKAR 1988/89, 128–29 with reference to Risley; BHATTACHARYA 1973, 97; GHOSE 1981, 85). The other views them as descendants of the ancient tradition of storytelling as it is mentioned in the canonical writings of the Jains, Buddhists, and Hindus, dating back as far as the third century.<sup>9</sup> However, all over India there is a great variety of visually aided storytelling traditions and many of them could claim this heritage, like, for example, the Bhopā in Rajasthan, the Garoḍā in Gujarat, or the Citrakathī in Maharashtra (see JAIN 1998). Who authorizes the Bengali Patuas as legitimate heirs? It is not possible to trace any of these contemporary traditions to the one(s) mentioned in the canonical literature. Both theories rather reflect the scholarly attempt to classify Bengali scroll paintings as either a “tribal” or “classical” tradition. Nevertheless, if we presume a Bengali tradition of scroll performances to be constituted by particular actors (a specific caste), a body of stories narrated in a specific style and language (close to the fifteen and sixteenth centuries’ *maṅgal* literature) and its confinement to a certain region (Bengal), we might assume that this tradition was popular already in the sixteenth century, if not even a bit earlier (see also SEN GUPTA 1973, 70).

#### THE EMERGENCE OF BENGALI FOLKLORE

When in the 1970s the Patuas started to sell scroll paintings in Calcutta, their new urban clients already knew how to perceive and value Bengali

folklore. Their ideas of authentic Bengali "folk art," "folk music," or "folk literature" had then been nourished for a long time already and developed over almost a hundred years.

The concept of folklore and folklore studies emerged in the colonial context of British India.<sup>10</sup> As KOROM (1989, 68–70) has demonstrated, it was initiated by the British educated elite as a response to European orientalist's visions of India and supported strongly by the rising nationalist movement. Employing Eric Hobsbawm's concept of the "invention of tradition," he analyzed the conditions that made the elite search for the "folk." Prior to 1860 most of the urban intellectual elite in Bengal were Anglophiles, attempting to imitate British fashion and lifestyle and using English as their major mode of communication. After all, the rapid growth of Calcutta offered them sufficient opportunities to develop a new hybrid culture. Finally, the urban elite forgot about their cultural roots. However, after the Sepoy rebellion nationalism grew and an identity crisis set in among the Bengali elite. "They started to search for new meaning in old symbols and old meaning in new symbols" (KOROM 1989, 70). Redefinitions of religion, culture, educational, and economic reform reached their climax in the so-called Bengali Renaissance. Nonetheless, the link to the rural population was broken. Inspired by British scholars who had published their first studies on Indian folk culture, the educated Bengalis visualized "an unknown but hauntingly familiar 'other,' the Bengali peasant" (KOROM 1989, 76). Many scholars felt the need to "save traditional folklore," be it oral literature, songs, dance, or paintings, and to transmit it in a "sophisticated" manner.<sup>11</sup> Ironically, the whole revival of folk and rural culture occurred in the shadow of British ethnology. Significantly, there was no appropriate indigenous term for the English word "folklore." Expressions like "*loḳ saṃskṛti*" (folk culture), "*loḳ yānā*" (folk vehicle), "*loḳ śruti*" (that which is heard by the folk") etc. were introduced only later as synonyms for the English term, but were never fully accepted (KOROM 1989, 78). However, the propagation of folk culture emerged as an attempt to unite the Bengalis and to raise a nationalist consciousness.

With regard to the development of "Patua art" one of the most prominent figures in the beginning of the twentieth century was Gurusaday Dutt (1882–1941).<sup>12</sup> Coming from an open-minded rural zamindar family, Dutt was the first villager to pass a university entrance examination. Financed by a local stipend, he was sent to England for higher education. He studied law in Cambridge, was admitted to the Indian Civil Service, and returned to Bengal in 1905. His career as a civil servant required him to travel extensively, even to the remotest pockets of the countryside. Dutt took advantage of these travels and developed a keen interest in studying and collecting

objects of folk art and craft from different areas. In 1930 he became the District Magistrate of Birbhum. By that time he had already devoted himself to Bengali folklore and its “extraordinary genius for ‘color music’ and rhythmic expression which marks our Bengali race and which is still preserved intact by the unlettered men and women in our villages who have yet remained unaffected by the modern education in our towns and cities...” (DUTT 1932, 523). One can hardly escape his romantic overtones and his idealization of (supposedly) rural simplicity. Dutt was a man with a mission. He wanted to promote “folk art and culture” not only to preserve his country’s heritage but to convince educated Bengalis to come down from their academic pedestal, to turn against the “pseudo-culture of our cities brought about by modern conditions” to “embrace the unlettered man” (DUTT 1932, 523).<sup>13</sup> In line with the revival of Bengaliness, he understood such a turn to the “freshness, simplicity and robustness” as a means to free the Bengali self from colonialism and decadency. In opposition to the ideology of the dominant contemporary art schools, which systematically taught Western painting techniques, Dutt carried his nationalistic ideas to extremes and criticized art education per se. He blamed the urban artists’ “inadequate knowledge” of the Patuas’ tradition,<sup>14</sup> which in DUTT’s view represented the “oldest school of national art in India” (1932, 524–26). He wanted to prove the significance of scroll paintings for art history, their relation to other Indian art traditions, and their importance for “the history and development of art in general throughout the world” (1932, 524). He started to collect scroll paintings and scroll songs in a systematic fashion. In 1932 he organized the first public exhibition of scrolls at the Indian Society of Oriental Art in Calcutta, followed by a second one in Shantiniketan in 1934. Dutt also published several articles and a book on the Patuas, which included many song transcripts from picture showmen in Birbhum (DATTA 1939). Moreover, he believed that the tradition of scroll performances was “undoubtedly in a state of decline” (DUTT 1932, 524) and tried to revive it by motivating Patuas to copy scenes from scroll paintings into single square pictures.<sup>15</sup> To promote the Patuas’ work, he classified the scroll painters as successors of the ancient Chitrakars, a rather well-known pan-Indian painter caste. He stated, “...Patuas, as they are now contemptuously termed..., still adhere to their classical Sanskrit appellation of Chitrakar...” (1932, 526). In comparison with earlier colonial reports, this identification of the Patuas with the Chitrakars was a rather new development. However, Dutt was certainly right to view the naming as “Patua” or “Chitrakar” in a socio-economic context. While Dutt’s usage of the term “Chitrakar” was significant as it provided the picture showmen with a “classical” past, the Patuas contributed to this view to serve their own purpose. As will be shown later, they were not

uninterested in this identity.

Dutt was not only an administrator and art lover, he was also a passionate nationalist. His enthusiasm led him to declare Bengali folklore to be the "national culture of India," and one may obviously raise doubts as to how far his view was shared or contested in other parts of the country. However, with regard to the organized, institutionalized attempt to invent a synthetic "Indian" tradition on the rich diversity of the regional idioms in post-independence India, one cannot underestimate Dutt's contribution to emphasize the regional element in a nationalist discourse (Bandyopadhyay in his introduction to DUTT 1990, xvii):

But whatever position this old national tradition of Bengal art may ultimately hold in the hierarchy of art either of India or of the world generally, it has a significance and a value for Bengalis which is entirely independent.... [T]o us in Bengal the art tradition of the rural Patuas of our province, be it ever so humble, represents nothing less than our mother language in art.... (DUTT 1932, 528–29)

A tradition is hardly invented by a single person or group, rather it is a dialectical process. No matter how peculiar the visions of Bengali "folklore" were, in some way or other they were answered by the "folk" themselves. In the case of the Patuas, the idea of the educated Bengali elite—as expressed by Gurusaday Dutt—met their own need to associate with the Chitrakars.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, several Hindu social reform organizations—like the Ārya Samāj, the Hindu Mahāsabhā or the Bhārat Sevāśram Saṅgh—initiated so-called purification rites (*śuddhi*, *yajña*, *dharma sabhā*) in order to "re-convert" apostates and strengthen the Hindu majority. The aim of these ceremonies was not only to persuade low-status and Muslim communities to observe Hindu manners but also to identify with the Hindus in the nationalist movement. These conversions were also directed towards the Patuas and resulted in the foundation of the "Society of the Advancement of the Chitrakars of Bengal" (Bāṅgiya Citrakar Unnayan Samiti). In order to raise their status in the caste society, a community has to refer to or develop a myth about their origin and to rationalize the cause of their present degraded social position. The Patuas did so by identifying themselves with the Chitrakar painter caste. The Chitrakars were explicitly mentioned in the thirteenth-century text *Brahmavaivartapurāṇa* (Skt.) as one of the nine sons of the celestial architect Viśvakarman. These nine sons became the "Nine craftsmen-guilds" (*navasāka*) of Bengal. The text describes how the Chitrakars were degraded by angry Brahmins for drawing "untraditionally" (DATTA 1939, ix; RAY 1953, 308).

Why did the Patuas become Hindus and call themselves “Chitrakar”? It was mostly for pragmatic reasons. First of all, fierce riots between Hindus and Muslims had broken out in Bengal during the first half of the twentieth century, and the identification with one of the religious communities became crucial. The Patuas’ former position between two groups—as Muslims earning their income at Hindu houses—was most dangerous. It was much safer to join the majority. Second, the conversion to Hinduism offered social improvement in a way which M. N. Srinivas would have termed “Sanskritization.” Since the peripatetic Patuas were associated with several low caste activities, the Chitrakars—as rather respected artisans—offered an appropriate role model. So the picture showmen hoped for an integration in the Hindu social order with an honorable status. Accordingly, several purification rites were conducted (BHATTACHARJEE 1980, 112, 132–34). In the census report of 1951 the Patuas were finally recognized as Chitrakars. Both names were used as synonyms and the registered caste occupations were mostly arts and crafts. Exhibiting scrolls was given in the fourth place only, yet it was termed the “main profession.” According to this report, it had been the temporary “adoption” of some “unclean” occupations that had led to the former loss of their status (RAY 1953, 308). However, since the prejudices of the high caste Hindus and their social behavior towards the purified Chitrakars did not change significantly, the integration into Hindu society remained purely on a formal level. In the following years most storytellers returned to their previous Muslim habits. But they now claimed to be (Muslim) Chitrakars.<sup>16</sup> Since the Chitrakars were known as craftsmen (*śilpī*), their status was still higher than that of wandering beggars (*bhikṣhāri*). Moreover, in the following years this identity helped the Patuas to improve their reputation as painters among their new urban patrons.

#### THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF SCROLLS

In the 1970s, several social organizations began to pay all kinds of “folk artists” to convey their messages through traditional media. The topics ranged from family planning, the literacy campaign, and the dowry problem to environmental issues such as the planting of trees. Even though the success with regard to the aims and objectives of these organizations can be seriously questioned, such engagements offered regular jobs to a number of Patuas. And since most picture showmen were in dire straits, they welcomed this opportunity. Their rural patrons had almost lost their interest in watching scroll performances. The men were more attracted by cinema halls or travelling video parlors, and the women’s small payment in kind was not enough to make ends meet. In any case, since the social institutions demanded the composition of new songs, more and more Patuas learned

how to rhyme and paint about all kinds of new topics. In other words, they obtained skills that prepared them for the slowly rising market for scroll paintings.

By the beginning of the 1980s, the demand to buy scrolls had increased substantially.<sup>17</sup> The customers were no longer only limited to inspired art collectors as in the 1930s, when Gurusaday Dutt had organized the first exhibition of scroll paintings. The fascination with the Patuas' vivid and affordable art spread among members of the educated upper-middle class, namely teachers and professors, media people, civil servants, business men, as well as a growing number of foreigners and non-resident Indians. Scrolls had become a commodity.<sup>18</sup> With these new patrons the context of showing scrolls also changed. The picture showmen's emphasis was less on the actual process of narrating and illustrating a story (i.e., then entertainment) than on the display of his scrolls as a means to attract his customers. His performance became part of selling his art, hence the customer/patron was given the right to hear the song to match "his" scroll. The song or performance itself was not paid for. Instead one bargained about the price of the painting. Naturally the Patuas gave less and less time to the singing and skipped many rhymes. Apart from that, those narratives that required an extensive story were neglected so that over time some of them disappeared.<sup>19</sup>

For the few Patuas who managed to gain a number of regular customers for their scrolls, living conditions improved. Their status rose also in the estimation of their village neighbors. Nevertheless, in Calcutta they were more or less treated like unwanted hawkers. As the introductory example shows, even though educated people praised the artistic expression of Bengali "folklore," they mostly did not value a scroll in financial terms. Only rarely is a Patua asked into a home or even been offered tea. However, by the 1990s almost every Patua tried to make a living solely on painting scrolls and selling them. Picture showing and storytelling had become a kind of last resort for earning one's living. Even though nowadays some Patuas sell quite successfully they realize that the demand for scrolls might be short-lived and worry about their future. Having to return to the display of scrolls in the villages would mean failure in trying to gain a higher social status.

One might certainly assess these shifting priorities in the Patuas' tradition to be a result of the economic needs and commercialization of scroll paintings. My argument, however, takes a slightly different line: I consider "Patua art" to be a quite recent phenomenon, generated and perceived as such to a great extent by the urban intellectual elite of Bengal. Calcutta is known as a cultural metropolis and famous for its poets, painters, musicians, film-makers, dancers, etc. These intellectual elites took up the heritage of the earlier British educated class and developed a strong interest in their distinct

Bengaliness objectified in their “folklore.” When they speak about their patronage of “genuine folk artists,” their rhetoric is similar to the writings of Gurusaday Dutt. The (private) Crafts Council of Bengal, for instance, states that “We feel we should make a concerted effort to bring Patua art back to its past glory and position as an important media for mass communication” (PALCHOWDHURY 1989, 43). However, the new urban patrons finally completed the change of the Patuas’ occupation from a verbal and performing art to an almost purely visual tradition. To support this argument, I should like to highlight a few aspects of this development: the urban patrons’ quest for authenticity, its reception by the Patuas, and the Patuas’ identification with the new role expectations.

Not surprisingly, the mere selling of scrolls brought about stylistic changes in the paintings (see BLURTON 1989). Some Patuas began to paint hurriedly with a reduced number of pictures and without details. The new scrolls were generally slimmer (ca. 35 cm width) and shorter (less than 3 meters) than the previous ones, without special varnish and winders at both ends. But not all stylistic changes were due to the fast and cheap production. Some painters realized that their new customers were looking for a particular style of “folk art,” so they adapted their paintings according to what they thought this style to be (see Figure 2). Some Patuas from Medinipur district, for instance, specialized in a “tribal style” and imitated scrolls from the related Jadupatuas at the border of Bihar. The Jadupatuas’ scrolls are much smaller in size (ca. 15 cm width) and drawn only in shades of brown. Other Patuas began to paint—equally “authentic” works—on cloth or started to design scrolls horizontally instead of vertically,<sup>20</sup> since this shape was in demand for being more suitable as a wall decoration. Part of this adaptation to their patrons’ preferences was supposed to include the use of “natural color pigments,” but this was a modern myth promoted by the Patuas and which came to be mentioned in nearly every recent publication on scroll painting. However, none of the living scroll painters was ever engaged in making the paints himself (with the exception of lamp black). Synthetic yellow, red, and blue color pigments were purchased on the market and prepared with homemade gum (*bel*, i.e., woodapple). Already in 1953, RAY had realized that “the present Chitrakaras cannot tell us what ingredients their forefathers used to collect for making paints” (1953, 314).<sup>21</sup> But since the present buyers of scrolls were looking for natural colors, the picture showmen started to explain to them in great detail how they collect, grind, and prepare the different shades. The Patuas were quite aware of their swindle and of the changes they introduced. As they themselves put it precisely, Patuas were “making culture” (*kālcā karā*, i.e., the English term “culture” in combination with the Bengali verb “to do/make/perform”). However, these inventions



FIGURE 2. We find several pictures illustrating the tortures of hell, particularly at the end of scroll paintings from Birbhum. This picture shows, among other things, how a liar's tongue is pulled out with hot tongs and how a miser's head is smashed with a husking pedal. Usually it is King Yam's male servants who punish naked females. The scenes depicted here belong to a scroll on Caitanya's renunciation (*Nimāsan-nyās*), painted in 1991 by Kalam Patua who successfully revived this style. The picture is 56 cm in width and 471 cm in length. (Author's collection)

were and are subject to power and various interests.

“It is the professors, journalists, and the artists who decide what Patua art is!” explained one of the experienced picture showmen. Many patrons in Calcutta were convinced that the Patuas had lost their ancient knowledge and saw themselves in a position to improve their painting. For example, the famous sculptor Meera Mukherjee took a Patua under her wing and brought him several times to a museum to give him the opportunity to learn his ancestors’ art. She supported his painting and his personal artistic development over many years (CHATTERJEE 1991, 2). But the Patuas were not only supported by idealistic individuals. In 1986 and 1991, for example, the Handicrafts Board of West Bengal organized and financed a training course for Patuas in the village of Naya, Medinipur district. These courses were intended to improve the techniques of painting and to revive the “ancient art.” The program was several months in length and was guided by an experienced scroll painter. The government paid him a salary and the students were offered stipends. As it turned out, however, none of the picture showmen attended. The stipends were too meagre for them to miss a day’s work, and one may only guess whether the painters shared the government’s views about improving their style of painting. Instead, the Patuas sent their wives to join the program. The women happily received the money and took the chance to learn painting.<sup>22</sup> In 1992 the private Crafts Council of Bengal organized a one-month workshop at the Asutosh Museum of Calcutta University. Five scroll painters were invited and taught how to copy scrolls from the nineteenth century. Remarkable in this case was the fact that the Patuas had to do it in a precise way that was completely new to them. As with oral narratives that change slightly from performance to performance, the drawings tended to differ every time an old scroll had to be replaced. Originally, the guidelines for a painting were given by the accompanying song. Conventions for the design of a single picture existed only for a few prominent scenes. Meanwhile, several other workshops, exhibitions, prizes, and competitions for scroll paintings have been organized. Patuas have not only changed their style of painting but have also increased the variety of their subject matters as they produce more and more order-made scrolls. Today we find narratives commissioned by all kinds of customers with such diverse topics as poems by Rabindranath Tagore and the French Revolution (See ALLIANCE FRANÇAISE OF CALCUTTA & CRAFTS COUNCIL OF BENGAL 1989). A Patua who knows how to transmit such topics on a scroll painting is considered to be a good Patua.

By organizing exhibitions, workshops or competitions, public and private institutions have the power to assess what art, especially “folk art,” should be. They judge who is considered a *śilpī* (i.e., an artisan), a term that

also came to indicate an artist in the modern sense, sometimes with surprising results.<sup>23</sup> For example, in 1984 the Indian government decided to honor one of the Patuas with the Presidency Award, an award regularly given to exceptionally good artisans. Significantly, this prize honored one of the very rare women Patuas, who had never practiced storytelling in the villages. She had learned how to paint after her husband's death and then started performing in exhibitions only! Obviously, the other picture showmen were upset about this governmental choice. In other cases too the selection of award winners was seemingly dubious. Once I met a fifty-year-old Patua teaching in a village school. In his spare time he painted scrolls and took part in various locally organized competitions. He held a certificate that stated that he was an "ancient *paṭ śilpī*." "Ancient" must have been used more in the sense of "honorable" than of "knowledgeable" since he was not able to remember a single line when I asked him to sing a song for me. He excused himself: "I'm not used to singing. I'm not a *bhikḥāri* [beggar] like them... and I have aged." More important than his age was the fact that he had never moved around with his scrolls. Like him, many Patuas nowadays sell scrolls but are not able to remember the old scroll songs. Yet these Patuas are honored by governmental certificates as "ancient *paṭ śilpī*." Another Patua, who had been to London and the USA for the India Festival, had visiting cards that stated he was a "renowned [sic] *paṭ śilpī*." The term *paṭ śilpī* is a recent creation that has now become quite fashionable. With respect to the invention of "Patua art" this title is revealing. On the one hand, it reflects an appellation given from the patrons and serves as an equivalent to the English title "artist" in the contemporary marketing of scrolls. On the other hand, it corresponds with the identification of the Patuas with the Chitrakars, i.e., artisans (*śilpī*) in the first half of the twentieth century. Thus it is in contrast to the stigma as a *bhikḥāri*. In other words, if a Patua nowadays identifies himself as a *śilpī*, he might consider himself as an artisan but is still recognized as an artist by his urban patrons.

#### CONCLUSION

In this paper I described the community of the Patuas, their central occupation, and its shift from an oral tradition to "folk art." I focused on the aspects of commercialization, the politics of production, consumption, and the development of scroll painting. Special emphasis was laid on the influence of the old and new urban patrons, on the emergence of "Patua art," and on the impact of their ideas on the scroll paintings. I presented examples of how the urban patrons suggested to "improve" scroll painting and the effects of their classification and values on the handicraft business. I argued that "Patua art" as a visual tradition is not an "ancient art form" but a recent out-

come of the commercialization of scroll paintings. Still, the desire to “preserve” this tradition is real. It is linked to regional identity, to ideas of Bengali-ness. The discourse surrounding so-called traditional art forms is a highly marketable one. However, most people involved do actually believe in it. So do Patuas and their patrons.

This article is not to deny the Patuas the respect of a painter. I am sure that there have always been great artists among the Patuas. However, in earlier times there was no need to renew the scrolls so often.

#### NOTES

1. The data for this article were collected from 1990 to 1992 during fourteen months of fieldwork on the Patuas’ storytelling tradition and their present occupational identity. This research resulted in a PhD thesis at the University of Hamburg (HAUSER 1998).

2. This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the fourteenth European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies, Copenhagen, 1996. I would like to thank Emma Tarlo for her comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

3. Also written as *paṭidār*.

4. Equated with “Pātikar” and “Sākubi.”

5. The frequency of those modes of income varies according to the region.

6. See HAUSER 1998 for more on the everyday life of the Patuas, their performances, narratives, and lyrics.

7. On the cultural implications of “begging,” see HAUSER 1994 and HAUSER 1998, chapter 6.

8. In the Republic of India formerly “untouchable” castes are classified as “Scheduled Castes” and as such receive positive discrimination (e.g., they may apply for reserved seats in education and governmental institutions).

9. In other words, the *Bhagavatisutra*. Some scholars also mention earlier references. However, there has been a controversy over whether these texts refer to picture showmen or to shadow or puppet players (JAIN 1986, 173–75; JAIN 1998, 8–21; MAIR 1988, 17–37).

10. There was no indigenous discipline of folklore prior to the encounter with the British in the eighteenth century (KOROM 1989, 57).

11. One of the key figures was nobel prize winner Rabindranath Tagore.

12. For his biography, see Samik Bandyopadhyay in DUTT 1990, xi–xix; SEN GUPTA 1965, 127–50. Pioneering work on the study of scroll paintings was also undertaken by COOMARASWAMY (1929) and GHOSE (1926).

13. See also SEN GUPTA 1965, 141. However, even Dutt sent his son for higher education to England, “the most wide-awake and progressive country of Europe” (DUTT 1990, xix).

14. For a comment from Nandalal Bose, a representative of the Neo-Bengal School of Art, see DUTT 1990, xvii–xviii.

15. A photograph in DUTT 1990 shows him supervising a Patua who sits on a stool and paints on a canvas attached to the wall (for the original scroll motive, see DUTT 1932, 524). Usually Patuas paint in a squatting position while the paper is fixed to the floor.

16. Even today most picture showmen are known by two names, one Muslim and the other Hindu. Besides there seem to be regional variations in the appellation as Patua or Chitrakar (GHOSE 1926, 98–99; GHOSE 1981, 75).

17. The increase in the demand for scrolls was at least in part due to a symposium organ-

ized by the Indian Folklore Society, which resulted in a rather popular book on the Patuas' tradition (SEN GUPTA ed. 1973).

18. As late as 1956 BANDOPADHYAYA had explicitly stated that scrolls were never made for sale since they constituted the material basis for the picture showmen and their performances (1957, 15).

19. For instance, the scroll songs "King Hariścandra" and "Narnamedh yajña."

20. Before there were two specific scroll stories that were painted horizontally: the *Sahab paṭ* on the colonial cruelties and the story on Vaishnava preachers. All other scrolls illustrated their plots vertically, which is more suitable for a single picture showman.

21. BANDOPADHYAYA (1957, 15) mentions even the use of "foreign paints."

22. Subsequently more and more scroll paintings by women emerged on the market.

23. The term *śilpi* signifies somebody who produces something regardless of whether it is an art or craft (e.g., earthen pot, modern art). Further, it refers to the *śilpaśāstra*, a body of ritual knowledge that describes how and why things are done in a certain way, but which is not available to any of the scroll painters.

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