



Amitabh SenGupta, *Scroll Paintings of Bengal: Art in the Village*

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BENGALI *paṭṣ* (painted handscrolls used as props for singing stories), particularly from the southwestern corner of West Bengal, have enjoyed a resurgence in recent decades. The reach of this performance has expanded, captivating local, national, and international audiences in a range of venues, engaging with issues of larger global and local concerns in their choice of subject matter, and through creative adaptation for publication and dissemination in various formats and materials. This phenomenon has accrued academic investment in the various aspects of these processes, particularly among anthropologists, folklorists, artists, and art historians. The *paṭṣ* created among the relatively more marginalized Santal communities of Bengal however, have not achieved similar prominence. If anything, they have been promoted by the Patuas (*paṭujā*), who sell these scrolls as middlemen, and less often, sing the accompanying songs. *Scroll Paintings of Bengal* attempts to draw attention to the latter through the juxtaposition of the two practices, even if this structure inevitably underscores how the endeavor remains weighted unevenly. This is understandable, as the latter hardly seems to be practiced anymore. The author, Amitabh SenGupta, recognizes the importance of documenting what still remains and is remembered about the practice, and the material cultural aspect that survives among rapidly changing Santal communities in the relatively remote western reaches of Bengal.

Not surprisingly, the book returns to the theme of the changes experienced in these practices and among the practitioners, one that much of the earlier scholarship grappled with. SenGupta claims explicitly to approach change as inevitable, without value judgment or nostalgia, following on from the folklorist Alan Dundes. He notes the improvisational quality of both songs and iconography, and flexibility and pragmatism among Patuas in promoting their work, and related adaptations in their lifestyle. The brief biographical sketches of Patuas, particularly from Naya, Medinipur District, the locus of much of the recent revitalization activities, to identify their

specific contributions, follow up on the recent work of scholars such as Frank J. KOROM (2006), Ákos ÖSTÖR (2006), and Aditi Nath SARKAR (2000), who remain unmentioned. Comparable attention to the living Santal communities, to provide a counterpart, would have been a major contribution, even if to illuminate the conditions and processes whereby the practices seem to have become less valued in the Santali communities.

Greater depth of field research would also elucidate how these artistic communities related to each other. SenGupta notes various strategies of using multiple scripts for Santali, but without analyzing the visual and oral performative implications for *paṭ* practice (60–61). The work of ethnographers such as Nishaant CHOKSI (2014), to better understand these communities, or that of unraveling the problems of terminology such as “tribal” and its implications for the range of users of terms, including Katherine HACKER’s work on Bastar (1999), would have bolstered this study. Likewise, SenGupta gives us a glimpse of the perspective of Shibram Hembrhm, a man of Santal origin, who moved to work and live in the industrial town of Asansol, and his skepticism about the Bengali Patua version of Santal origin narratives is intriguing (70–71), raising questions about the relationships between the two communities, and how they interacted in their *paṭ* practices. It would be useful to know Shibram Hembrhm better to contextualize his perception of regressive trends of ignorance and exploitation of ignorance and fear in the use of hell images and *caḥsudān paṭ* (eye-opening images for bequeathing sight to the dead to find their way). Contextualizing his relationship to his community of origin much more specifically would provide us necessary background information to evaluate his perceptions. A greater range of perspectives would also allow us to understand better how practitioners such as the *jādu paṭujās*, who are addressed generally as ritualists, were received among their clients/audiences.

Related to the issue of inequity of attention among the two painting practices is the absence of Santal women. SenGupta acknowledges the attention given to women Patuas, initiated by efforts such as by the Jadavpur University Women’s Studies Department (not noted by the author), but it does not prompt him to look for the presence of women among *jādu paṭujās*, or to investigate if deceased women’s eyes were painted alongside that for men, and if so how the rituals may have been similar or different.

Another area that deserves greater attention is the terminology employed for painting practices, as it gets in the way of establishing conceptual frameworks and articulating relationships. Defining and using terms such as classical, folk, vernacular, and regional more precisely, would go a long way toward clarifying the relationships among them, particularly in chapters 4 and 5.

SenGupta’s strength lies in his observations as a practicing artist. The juxtaposition of *paṭ* imagery is thoughtful and provocative. Although he does not analyze all the visual imagery with equal rigor, the illustrations encourage us to appreciate iconographic and compositional flexibility—for example, in the adaptation of the circular formation of figures, deployed previously for the *rāslilā*, to the international round table conference on disarmament (85), along the lines of earlier scholars such as David McCUTCHION (1989) and Richard BLURTON (1989), who also go unmentioned. He juxtaposes the styles of multiple artists addressing the same subject matter; the

work of the same artist on the same subject in multiple styles; stylistic similarities and variations among members of a family or village, for example, the work of Gurupada and his brother, Montu Chitrakar, with whom he shares a home, or Gurupada and his brother-in-law, Shyamsundar, who lives down the street; and how female artists approach the same topic as men (Gurupada and his older sister, Rani). He thereby visually demonstrates the complexities in the work and working relationships of a living community. He addresses the adaptation of themes across various formats (single scene, horizontal sequences, and vertical scrolls) with significant insight. SenGupta privileges this aspect of the practice over others such as lyrics, music, performance styles, but such attention to each of these aspects would expand our understanding of style, continuities and changes, in a complex and sophisticated local practice as it aspires to global recognition.

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