

Global Events and Local Narratives: 9/11 and the Picture Storytellers of Bengal

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Abstract: This paper will examine the relativity of contexts produced through diverse mechanisms for interaction by using the example of the picture storytellers of Bengal (Chitrakaras) and their narrative scroll paintings depicting the 9/11 strikes at the World Trade Centre in New York. The Chitrakaras display the scroll along with a narrative constructed from newspaper and television reports and from other popular art forms such as the *jatra*. The narrative reveals a structure resembling the mythical narrative form *mangala kavya* that anchors the 9/11 event in a context that is locally intelligible and acceptable. Unlike other forms of mass media this traditional method of storytelling has the receptors actively participating in re-interpreting the event by re-locating it in mythical time. But myths cannot be self-consciously produced, they can only be re-produced or re-enacted. When retold as a myth, the 9/11 story does lose some of the unique features that make it a historic event. What it does acquire is a more universalistic dimension by focusing on human dilemmas and emotions. Thus the universal appeal of the *Laden pata*, even to those who are not familiar with the narrative tradition within which it is located, can be said to emanate from its ability to re-locate the global event in a local moral context.

Locality is a value 'variably realized' Arjun Appadurai (1997) tells us, in his essay on the same theme. Rather than referring to the embeddedness of cultural forms within communities and in the day-to-day lives of people, it foregrounds the relativity of contexts produced through

diverse mechanisms for interaction. In relation to globalization, to which Appadurai has given sustained attention, it is the local within which global events are contextualized.

In this essay I will describe one such event – a narrative scroll painting depicting the 9/11 strike on the World Trade Centre in New York – produced by the Chitrakaras (picture story tellers) of Naya village in the Medinipur district of West Bengal.¹ The scroll painting (*pata*) is displayed by the Chitrakaras to the accompaniment of a song that serves as a commentary on the images painted on the scroll. The narrative is constructed from fragments of ‘information’ that circulate in the village, culled from newspaper and television reports but also from other popular media like *jatra* (a form of folk theatre that is popular in Bengal).² It reveals a structure that resembles in part a mythic narrative form called the *mangala kavya*³ that embeds the event in a context that is locally intelligible.

The Chitrakaras and the Medinipur Style

The Chitrakaras – a caste of itinerant picture storytellers scattered all over Bengal – occupy an interstitial position in the caste hierarchy, designating themselves as Muslim, following local ‘Hindu’ customs such as worshipping the snake goddess, Manasa and displaying *patas* that have largely Hindu themes. Also, like many Bengali Muslims, they commonly have two names – a Muslim name and a Bengali name that is more frequently used.⁴ The Chitrakaras are not the only caste of painters in Bengal. Other artisan castes such as the Kumhars (potters) or Shutradhars (carpenters) also paint similar pictures but it is only the Chitrakaras who display *patas* and sing the *pata* songs thus making them multi-media performers (Ray 1953). Chitrakara families used to be organized into marriage circles (*samaj bandhanis*), which led to the formation of sub-regional schools of *pata* painting each with its distinctive style. The two surviving schools are the Tamluk – Kalighat – Tribeni Samajik school, and the Birbhum – Kandi – Katwa Samajik school. A third school at Berhampur – Murshidabad died out at the turn of the last century but some of its stylistic features have been absorbed by the Birbhum – Kandi – Katwa school (*ibid.*, 309).⁵ The Medinipur scroll painters belong to the first school though there has been some assimilation of other styles in recent years.⁶ For example the Medinipur scroll painters have taken to ‘copying’ the style of the *jadu patuas*, a sub-caste of Chitrakaras who live among the tribal populations of the border regions of Bengal and Bihar, for a particular type of painting called the ‘Origin of the Adivasi’ (Chatterji 2007).

The Chitrakaras first enter academic discourse through the writings of Gurusaday Dutt (1882-1941) who described them as *shilpi* (craftsmen) and traced their origin to an ancient tradition of picture storytelling mentioned in sacred texts such as the *Brahmavaivarta Purana*. Popular representations tend to characterize them as alms seekers soliciting *dana* (gifts) by displaying *patas* and singing *pata* songs (Hauser 2002). (In fact, based on the reports of the 1891 census in Bengal both Risley and Hunter classified the *Patuas*⁷ and the Chitrakaras as separate castes.) In the 1930s when Dutt was researching the art and craft traditions of Bengal many Chitrakaras had given up their traditional occupation in an attempt to achieve a higher status. In the early part of the twentieth century some Hindu nationalist organizations tried to bring low caste groups into the Hindu mainstream. 'The Society for the Advancement of the Chitrakaras of Bengal' (*Bangiya Chitrakar Unnayan Samiti*) was established in this context. But 're-conversion' did not have much of an impact on their social status and many *patuas* returned to their former religion (Bhattacharjee 1980). (However, the adoption of the title 'Chitrakar' by many members of this caste group is probably a result of this earlier mobilization.) In Bengal today, apart from the inhabitants of Naya village, one finds very few active scroll painters and performers. Many Chitrakaras have given up this occupation altogether while others treat painting as a subsidiary occupation being primarily icon makers.⁸ Naya is an exception in that it has a vibrant Chitrakara community with approximately 40 households actively producing *patas*. However, very few households actually earn their livelihood by displaying *patas* in the traditional way.⁹ Instead, their 'craft' has been 'discovered' through both state patronage and new market opportunities so that *patas* are now sold in wider urban markets in India and abroad.

Pata Performance and the Narrative Tradition

The scrolls (*patas*) that one sees in Medinipur today are usually between six to twelve feet wide and two and a half to three feet wide. Most storytellers tend to carry five or six scrolls to give their audience a choice of stories. They usually begin with auspicious themes based on the *mangala kavyas* or stories of *pirs* and then go on to display *patas* about local, often sensational events (Singh 1995). Even though a *pata* performance today is not considered to be a sacred event this may not always have been the case. Archival survey reveals that the display of *patas* may have had a sacred character in the past. Many old scrolls on sacred themes had inscriptions written at the back with names of donors who had given *dana* (offerings) to have the *pata* displayed again and again. Such performances were often considered to be rites of atonement for transgression and the repeated display of the sacred story to the accompaniment of the *pata* song acted

as a blessing spread to all the members of the audience (ibid.). Unlike the ritual narrations performed by bards elsewhere in India, Chitrakaras do not have an established network of patrons, nor are their performances commissioned. They see themselves as entertainers, experimenting with new themes and transforming old ones (Singh 1995b).

The Pata Painting



(Fig.1, Probir Chitrakar with his grandfather Baneshwar's scroll in Naya village, Medinipur in October 2006. This is the only *Laden pata* that I have seen which does not depict the 'killer' planes with an Osama face.)

Scroll painters follow a synoptic mode of representation – using figural types and standard motifs – which ask viewers to use their imagination to fill in the story in their own way. Images are shorn of detail but are pregnant with possibility. The technique of picture storytelling itself assumes a dissonance between verbal images depicted in the *pata* songs and pictorial images on the scroll. The displayer of the *pata* – the singer of the story that accompanies the scroll – may not be the same as its painter so the images must allow for variation in interpretation. The scroll is unrolled one frame at a time so that the pictorial space is revealed slowly - over time. As the story progresses previous frames are rolled up. The viewer sees only one frame at a time. Connections with previous images are made only through the song and through memory. The images in each frame especially the human figures are shown making hand gestures that connect them with images in adjacent frames that are no longer visible. Such hand gestures function as relays as does the finger of the performer,

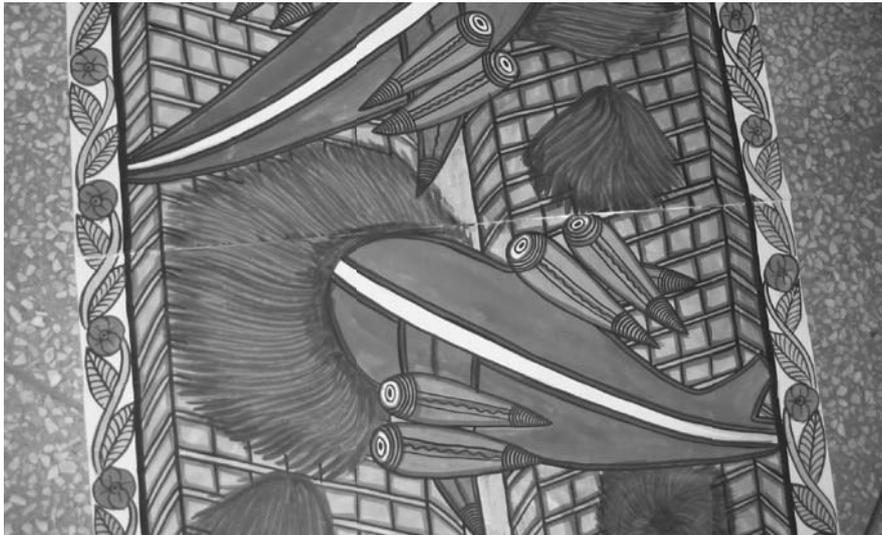
which moves over the images connecting the different segments of the story. The modern comic book comes closest to this mode of pictorial organization in the sense that the pictures are organized as a series in which the text has the function of relay (Carrier 2000).¹⁰

I now turn to the *Laden pata*, as the scroll painting on the theme of the 9/11 strike is known in Medinipur. It does not belong to the category of sacred *patas* even though it shares some features of the *mangala* (auspicious) stories that are sung by the Chitrakaras. Its popularity owes more to the new clientèle for *pata* painting in cities like Delhi and Philadelphia, where such themes have a certain exotic appeal, rather than to the rural audiences of Bengal. However as Korom (2006) and Mukhopadhyay (n.d.) have shown, the immediate inspiration for the *Laden pata* was a *jatra* performance in Naya village by a troupe from Kolkata titled *Amrika Jolchhe* (America is Burning). The play dealt with the events leading up to the Gulf War and the crash and collapse of the Twin Towers formed the climax of the performance, coming at the end of the play. It was depicted as a cyclorama on a separate stage (Mukhopadhyay n.d.). The leader of *Digbijoy Opera*, the troupe that performed this *jatra* in Naya, said in an interview to Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay, that the play wove in several themes including a sub-plot about a middle-class Bengali boy who goes to the US to study, succumbs to the corrupting influence of a decadent Western life style and dies in the 9/11 crash. The 19th century themes of modern decadence and the corrupting influence of westernization are still popular in Bengali films and television serials and were probably added for audience appeal. However, the *pata* renderings of the event are radically different. I have examined six versions of the *Laden pata*, and apart from variation in detail such as the manner in which the Twin Towers and the crash are depicted, they reveal a common episodic structure. The pictorial narrative begins with the crash, it then depicts scenes of long distance communication between Bush and Osama and meetings that lead up to the war in Afghanistan, the war and finally Osama's escape to the caves in the Tora Bora mountains. I have heard three versions of the song that accompanies the *pata*. The songs do not replicate all the activities portrayed in the *pata*. Instead they serve as a general commentary and it is the storyteller's finger that connects successive images with the song as he slowly unrolls the scroll, frame by frame.

The *patas* are divided into six frames or more, each frame depicting a different scene in the story.¹¹ As I have said all the *Laden patas* begin with the scene of the crash. It is the airplane that is foregrounded in the first register – a swollen fish-shaped form with a bearded face that represents Osama bin Laden, and in some *patas*, the explosion – with tongues of flame opening out like the petals of a flower in bloom.



(Fig.2, Probir's *Laden pata*, frame 1)



(Fig.3, frame 2 of Probir's *Laden pata*)

Unlike the exploding airplane, the Twin Towers are rendered differently in each of the *patas*. Probir Chitrakar has modeled the Twin Towers on some of the modern high-rise buildings he has seen in Delhi.¹² Even though he follows convention in depicting Osama's face on the 'killer plane', the focus is on the crash rather than on the airplane. Dark red

aureoles highlight the points of impact. Paired missiles that accompany the airplanes could either refer to past scenes of bombing from the first 'Gulf War' that was televised in India or foreshadow the war that is yet to come. Other *patas* such as that by Yakub Chitrakar do not depict images of the tower at all. Instead, we see a wall with row upon row of windows with the killer plane suspended above. It is as if two viewing positions co-exist in the single picture frame – the perspective available to the people inside the ill-fated plane that crashed into the tower as well as the perspective of the camera-person that filmed the scene of the crash.



(Fig.4, Yakub Chitrakar of Naya village. Reproduced with the permission of Veena Naregal.)

In *patas* with sacred themes such as the *Satya Pir patas*¹³ or those on the snake goddess Manasa the first scene is usually disjunct from the story. It depicts the god or the main protagonist enthroned with a retinue of worshippers and is accompanied by the invocation sung before the actual story is musically rendered. Since the *Laden pata* deals with a historical theme and that too with human tragedy, it cannot begin with an invocation. However images of the airplane with Osama's face and the crash tell us about the subject of the *pata*, as do the invocatory stanzas and the enthroned gods in the traditional *pata* performances. Unlike many of the traditional *patas* some of the *Laden patas* also encapsulate different phases of an action sequence. This is particularly evident in Probir's painting where the first two frames depict the moment before the crash, the crash and the devastation within the buildings.

(Fig.5, frame 3 of Probir's *pata*). See also figs. 1 and 2)



All the different moments of the crash are depicted on the same plane and are not separated by boundary markers as is often done in traditional narrative art such as mural painting and so on (Sheik 1983). This gives the scene a somewhat surreal effect such as in Fig.5 where decapitated heads with serene expressions are suspended upside down above the line of the Twin Towers – the dark red border being the only mark indicating the separation of the interior from the surface of the building. It is as if the building is unfolding to display its interior in front of our eyes.

Khandu Chitrakar's *pata* also works with multiple time perspectives but the emphasis here is on the Bush-Osama relationship. Only one of the towers is depicted on the right hand side of the frame. Flames erupt from the top of the tower and at the bottom of the register in line with the frame, dead bodies lie horizontally with eyes closed.

(Fig.6, Khandu Chitrakar's *Laden pata*, frame 1)

It is important to note at this juncture that all the faces are beardless and therefore in marked contrast with the bearded face on the airplane. (Perhaps viewers who are unfamiliar with the codes of pictorial representation in this genre are likely to see these dead figures as women. Markers of gender are not always highlighted in this tradition. Viewers are expected to fill such details on their own, when relevant. However, with respect to this particular frame it is worth noting that these images could represent young men modelled on the image of the god Kartikeya who is represented as a dandy in popular Bengali culture.) Another point worth noting is the position of the plane vis-à-vis the tower. The plane seems to be flying away from the tower coming towards the left of the frame with the face pointing towards the viewer and seems undamaged, unlike the tower. However the tower form is repeated in several other registers as we shall see and serves as a motif symbolizing the Bush-Osama relationship in the narrative.



(Fig.7, frame 2 of Khandu)

In the second frame of Khandu's *pata* the tower form becomes a column separating the figures of Bush and Osama, seen here talking to each other by telephone. The figures are symmetrically positioned, each one flanked by guards carrying guns. The point of distinction is the presence or absence of the beard, for Bush and his men look young and beardless and Osama and his men look old with full beards.¹⁴ Osama, a replication of the face on the airplane, is now shown near the right hand side of the frame. (The position of the bearded figure keeps alternating from left to right and again to left in the successive frames. It is only in the last frame that it occupies a position at the center of the frame. Perhaps these alternating positions of the bearded and beardless faces tell us something about the way the Osama-Bush relationship has been conceptualized in this pictorial imagination). A small *pata* on the 9/11 theme, reduced to three registers, drawn by Malek Chitrakar makes the connection between the tower motif and the Bush-Osama relationship even more explicit (see series C, frame 1). The first two scenes depicted separately in Khandu's *pata* are collapsed in one register. Two Osama faced airplanes collide with the tower from opposite directions. They form a canopy, supported by the burning tower, over the heads of Bush and Osama who are shown standing talking long-distance via telephone. The instruments attached to the wall are very much like the telephones one finds in public call booths.

The song emphasizes the relationship between the two leaders. Bush phones Osama to ask him what happened to spoil their relationship. "What led to this terrible catastrophe?" the storyteller sings in Bush's voice. Osama replies fatalistically, "What had to happen has come to pass." (Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay gives a different version. Madhusudan

Chitrakar, Mukhopadhyay's main respondent told him that Bush had once made a derogatory remark about Osama that might have sparked the enmity between the two. In Afghanistan, Osama makes clandestine preparations for the 9/11 strike. He makes his followers drink the blood of a dog so that they will be forced to redeem themselves through self-sacrifice and swear to avenge Osama's honour. However, neither the song nor the painting that Mukhopadhyay reproduces in his essay actually depict this scene. I have never heard this version of the story in Naya.) Other versions of the *Laden pata* depict scenes of round table meetings of the two leaders separately with their followers, apart from the presence or absence of bearded figures that help us to distinguish between the two scenes (see series B, frames 4 and 6; *pata* painted by Probir Chitrakar, Khandu's son). Even when Bush and Osama are not depicted side-by-side in the same register, there is a remarkable symmetry in the way that they are positioned vis-à-vis their followers. Bush and Osama are portrayed as the archetypal rivals – their followers, depicted as replicas of either leader. In fact in the scene where the US soldiers are chasing Osama his followers are only shown in outline behind his full figure (see series A, frame 6).

The tower form becomes a canon spouting flames in the third register of Khandu's *pata*, depicting the battle scene – but it acts as a barrier separating the two armies, its mouth points upwards rather than facing the soldiers (see series A, frame 3). In only one of the six *Laden patas* that I have examined do the guns and canons of the two armies face each other (see series B, frame 5). In one of the *patas* only one of the armies is shown in the battle scene and it is unclear which side they represent.



(Battle scene from Baneshwar Chitrakar's *Laden pata*.
Note that the two sides are not distinguished.)

In another, a diagonal line stretching across the rectangular space separates the two armies and the soldiers are seen pointing their guns to a point outside the pictorial frame.



(Yakub Chitrakar. Battle scene. Reproduced with permission from Veena Naregal.)

The battle scene in Malek Chitrakar's *pata* depicts *dhoti*-clad soldiers who wield cutlasses in addition to guns, juxtaposing figures from the battle scenes in the Ramayana *patas* with scenes of 'modern' warfare. American soldiers are depicted in the same way as young 'dandies' in popular theatrical representations and Kalighat prints¹⁵, sometimes with earrings, moustache and well groomed hair parted in the middle.

The next frame of Khandu's *pata* shows only corpses, some of which are bearded (series A, frame 4). There are no barriers that separate the soldiers of the two armies, though the bearded figures tend to be concentrated in the upper half of the frame. A bearded Christ like figure, lying horizontally across the upper half of the frame with his arms outstretched is reminiscent of the crucifixion scene from the Jishu (Jesus) *mangala pata* (series A, frame 4). The last two frames of the *Laden pata* show Osama and his followers on horseback, being chased by Bush's men, finally disappearing into the caves in the Tora Bora mountains. The last frame of Probir's *pata* is especially interesting. It shows Osama on his white horse as an inset set distinctly apart from the mountains in the background. The mouth of the cave is reduced to a border that frames the Osama figure and separates it from the action scenes above (series

B, frames 7 and 8). The first and sometimes the last frames of traditional *patas* are disjunct from the other frames that depict the episodes in the story in that they serve to place the story in the mythic universe so that it resonates with other stories about gods and goddesses. Typically these stories begin with an invocation to the god who is the subject of the *pata* – describing their attributes and then go on to express the god's desire to receive worship. One person is usually targeted as a potential devotee who will help to spread the god's worship on earth. The *patas* first depict the god/dess as an iconic image and then go on to show us the adventures undertaken by the potential devotees. Some traditional *patas* end with another iconic image of the god/goddess, others do not. Compare the last frame of Probir's *pata* that depicts Osama, triumphant, on a white horse with the first frame of the *Satya Pir pata* painted by Jomuna Chitrakar, which shows the *pir* sitting on his lion. It is their positioning, the first at the end of the narrative, and the second at the beginning that makes for a significant difference. The Laden story moves between history and myth. In another time and place it may well have become a story about a *pir*, but the global impact of the 9/11 crash will not allow this to happen.

The Bengali landscape is dotted with the graves of *pirs* that have become shrines and pilgrimage centers. Many of these *pirs* were local rulers, and one sees the ruins of their palaces and other monuments spread around the sites of pilgrimage. Some of the legends associated with these *pirs* have assimilated themes from stories about local tiger gods such as Dakshin Rai (McCutchion and Bhowmik 1999). Others like Satya Pir also have a more global dimension. On the one hand as his *pata* song tells us he is lord of the tigers and often sends his tiger horde to punish recalcitrant devotees, but as his alter ego Satya Narayan, he is also an incarnation of the great god Vishnu of the Hindu pantheon. Pir worship in Bengal, as in other parts of India, enables folk Hinduism in India to co-exist with folk Islam especially through the theory of *avatarhood* (incarnation) (Stewart 2002). Therefore, the difference between the Osama legend and the legends associated with these *pirs* lies not so much in the fact that the former has a global dimension, but rather in the fact that apart from the fact that Osama may still be alive the event is too recent to have been euhemized. The Laden story has no resolution. Instead, the pictorial narrative, by showing Osama in an inset, points us to another story and to an alternative trajectory that this story might have followed. In a similar vein the collapse of the Twin Towers that occurs at the end of the *Amerika Jolche jatra* serves as the beginning of the Laden story.

Drawing attention to the meta-textual relationship between the Laden story and the myths about *pirs* I want to emphasize that myths are related synchronically within a given narrative universe as Levi-

Strauss (1975) has stated. In the context of a living storytelling tradition we can see how contemporary events are narrativized following older structural patterns. These patterns are not copied blindly so that even if there are several stories with the same theme they never sound exactly the same. The audience, familiar with the narrative universe, is able to make connections between different stories by concentrating on the details – motifs that carry meaning and reveal the underlying pattern of the story.

In the *pata* tradition it is the continuous method of painting that is favoured. The thematic material is revealed by the adding on of motifs one after the other and by repeating a limited number of forms that can take on different meanings as the story unfolds (Hauser 1952). Thus, as I have shown, in Khandu's *pata* the tower motif is repeated in several successive frames – anticipating the violence that is to come. The tower acts as a barrier separating Bush and Osama in the second frame, but even then they are depicted with their faces towards each other while they speak to each other on the phone (series A, frames 1 and 2). The tower becomes a canon in the third frame but its mouth faces upward and not at the enemy, as if pointing to the Osama-Bush relationship that is depicted in the second frame (series A, frame 3).

The eye travels downwards from one frame to the next as the scroll is unfolded, guided by the pointing finger of the *patua*¹⁶ (storyteller) and his song. Within the *pata* itself, the characters gesture to each other as if in conversation and point to episodes depicted in other registers. Thus in the last frame of Khandu's *pata* (see series A, frame 5), Osama and his men are seen pointing upwards as if to draw our attention to the events depicted above.

The last frame of Malek's *pata* depicts Bush and Osama together in the inset against a backdrop of palm trees and hillocks – a scene set in a desert oasis perhaps (series C, frames 2 and 3). The depiction of Bush and Osama together is important and requires some discussion. In this pictorial tradition there are iconic models for the depiction of contrary principles within the same image. For instance in the icon of Mahishasura Mardini that depicts the great goddess Durga slaying the demon king Mahisha, the emphasis for the worshippers is not so much on the act of killing but in the fact that the demon and the goddess receive worship together.¹⁷ Bush and Osama are depicted as types, archetypal figures, replicated in each scene. The symmetry between them is reflected in Khandu's *pata* through the way the two sides keep alternating between right and left sides of the frame in each successive register as I have said (see series A) and in Probir's *pata* through the identical way in which the figures of the two leaders are positioned vis-à-vis their followers (see series B).

Doubling is a technique that is used in the *pata* tradition to express intimacy and antagonism not only within certain kinds of stories but also as a meta-textual device to express a particular stance towards society. The relationship between Hindus and Muslims is also depicted in this way. For instance, the *pata* song about Satya Pir ends with the following couplet,

*Hindus call him Satya Narayan, Muslims call him Pir
Let us both join hands in worship¹⁸*

As storytellers, Chitrakaras use their interstitial position within the local social hierarchy to comment on issues of existential importance. Religious conflicts, contradictions between the ideologies of the two great religions, Islam and Hinduism are one of the important subjects that come up repeatedly in their stories – not merely at the level of theme and plot but also as rhetorical devices that express relationships of kinship between members of the two religious groups. Paired names such as Habil-Kabil and the symmetry between their practices expressed in utterances such as, *Habil reads Shastras* (i.e. sacred Hindu texts) and *Kabil the Koran*, are used to describe the tension between Hindus and Muslims, that arises from their similarity or as the *patua* song puts it as ‘two sons of the same mother’. However, as Stewart (2002) says they could also be ways of expressing equivalence between religious categories without reducing their contradictions and searching for a mode of address that is tolerant of the other. It is this spirit of tolerance that motivated Malek to include Bush with Osama in the inset in the final register of his *pata* (see series C). In fact some Laden songs end with a call to both the leaders to come together to establish world peace (Mukhopadhyay n.d.).

The *Patua* Song

Chitrakaras always say that the composition of the song always precedes the *pata* painting. This may not apply to established themes that are well known but is essential for new compositions such as the *Laden pata*. However, the event as told and as it is picturized is not simply a replica of each other. This was brought home to me when I heard four different performances of the Laden story. All four *patuas* had similar *patas* but the songs were different.

Unlike an illustrated story-book where the picture illustrates an idea presented in the text or an advertisement where the text anchors the image, in the case of the *pata* there is a dissonance between the lyrics of the songs and the pictures painted on the scroll as the texts of the songs will show.

Khandu Chitrakar's song:

O the event in Amerika
Tis a wonderous event
The plane crash in Amerika
What a wonderous event
That hundred storied house broke
O what a wonderous event
Bush says Laden
Was this your real intention
O what a wonderous event
Bush says O Laden
Was it your intention to deceive
O what a wonderous event
Teams [of soldiers] went to war
And look Bush's people died
And look at Laden laugh
O the plane crash in Amerika
What a wonderous event
They went to war
In teams they went [from Laden's side]
But they could not fight against Bush
Bush's soldiers went after Laden
But look Laden hid in a cave
Look they could not catch him
O the plane crash in Amerika
O what a wonderous event

The song functions as a commentary, telling the audience what to look at as the scroll unfolds. (Note the repeated use of 'look', *dekho* in Bangla – directing the audience's attention to particular figures in each register; the use of the third person mode of address and reported speech.) It is event-centric – the refrain emphasizes its magnitude and hyper-real quality of the plane crash. (The Bangla word used to describe the event is *ajob* derived from the Arabic *ajai'b* and means marvellous or wonderous. [see Mukhopadhyay n.d]).

Rani Chitrakar's song:

In Amerika, in Washington
There was destruction
Because of the plane crash there was decimation
O God, O Merciful One
What kind of recompense is this
In 2001, 11 September

In New York in Washington
The house broke into four pieces
In New York in Washington
There was destruction
Laden and George Bush were friends
When did this enmity happen
Why hundreds and hundreds of people had to loose their lives
I do not know
In Amerika, in Washington
There was decimation

The song goes on to detail the sophisticated surveillance cameras in the building that failed to detect the oncoming airplanes, the plight of parents, waiting anxiously for news about their children in New York and George Bush's attempts to console his people while making a pledge of retribution against America's enemies. Rani was singing to Probir's *Laden pata* (series II) and she pointed to frame 6 that depicts a group of bearded men around a table as if in conference, when she sang about the plight of parents in far away lands. Beards that usually signify Osama and his followers in the *Laden patas* are taken to be a sign of alterity by Rani telling us about the presence of a large immigrant population in New York. The song ended with a lament and a plea for peace but made no reference to the war or Osama's escape that are so prominently displayed in Probir's *pata*.

Rani composed this song especially for her trip to the US.¹⁹ The dominant mood of the song is pathos. There is no mention of war. The tunes to which these lyrics are sung are also different from each other. Both songs are set to old film tunes, but whereas Khandu's song was a filmic adaptation of a very old folk tune, Rani's was a sentimental tune with great emotional appeal. I have noticed that the newer *pata* themes are set to filmic adaptations of popular Bengali folk tunes such as Baul and Bhatiali, both genres that have become popular by being adapted to *jatra* and film music. Their popularity probably lies in their emotional appeal. Songs on the *mangala kavyas* are usually folk tunes that are very old but stress rhythm and scale rather than emotion.²⁰ Both song compositions, however, conform to an older type with a repeatable refrain made up of a sequence of rhyming couplets. Rani's song also has a *bhonita* or colophon, an innovation, which is becoming increasingly popular among the *Naya patuas*.

Thus:

I am Rani Chitrakar
From Naya village

In Pingla thana, Medinipur, West Bengal
Let such an event no one else enact

Probir, Khandu's son and Rani's nephew gave me his version of the Laden song – a mixed composition of fragments taken from both set to a tune very similar to the tune of Rani's song. His song begins in the same way as Rani's, with the same refrain but ends with a stanza on the war and Osama's disappearance. The refrain acts as a paratactic device, which allows for the juxtaposition of distinct elements without an overarching structural frame, which imposes a single viewpoint on the composition.²¹ Parataxis is an important device in narrative compositions, especially oral compositions where there is a degree of spontaneity in performance (Lord 1976). Performers stitch together stanzas that carry motifs and other poetic devices. These devices become meaningful within the song performance because they are associated with particular kinds of thematic subjects and therefore point to the larger narrative universe. Thus even though there is no mention of war in Rani's *pata* the audience is familiar with the narrative subject from other performances and the battle scenes in the *pata* that she displays do not need to be explained. The audience assumes that she has chosen to focus on a different aspect of the story. It is the same technique of parataxis that allows Probir to graft some new stanzas on to Rani's song. The *pata* painting is also organized according to the rule of parataxis. Repeat motifs such as the tower form, the bearded faces and gestures of pointing are 'phased repetitions' that allow the spectators to recall the overall theme of the story and to return to points of reference that may be forgotten as the painting is visible only one register at a time during a performance.

The dissonance between the *pata* picture and the *patua* song serves as a reminder of the extraordinary quality of the event. The performance uses such techniques to distance the audience from the everyday world, from the historical aspects of the event and to transform it into an aesthetic experience. The fact that the Laden story is sung rather than just narrated sets it apart from ordinary speech and enhances the aesthetic aspect of the story and turns it into a performance that has to be savoured. According to the *Natyashastra*, an ancient Indian treatise on the dramatic arts, music brings out the resonance (*dhwani*) and that is an essential quality of sound and of aurality. In this case, it emphasizes the fact that the *pata* performance is not just a *re-counting* of events that have already occurred, as one would expect in a news bulletin on television but rather a *presentation of a way of living in the world* - the 'world' as it is posed by the narrative universe presupposed by the *pata* performance. The presentation thus transcends the ordinary spatio-temporal world and foregrounds the generalized aspect of the event. In the *patua* tradition this usually involves framing historical narratives with mythological stories

so that situations and characters appear as exemplary types. However it is not as if the mundane world is not acknowledged by this form of storytelling. Depictions of T.V. screens showing pictures of current events in some of the *patas* on new themes such as the tsunami reveal awareness of parallel but distinct ways in which an event may be rendered.²²

Indian performative traditions rarely view theatre in terms of the representation of 'real' events or as an imitation of something in the 'real' world (Heckel 1989). Theatre is not seen as a medium for representing something that is absent. In fact the *Natyashastra* opens with a description of the first dramatic performance in which the victory of the gods over the demons is enacted. The demons, who are among the spectators of the performance, are greatly agitated by what they assume to be a deliberate attempt to slight their community. Brahma, the divine creator, then steps in to expound on the nature of theatrical reality and its precise relationship to the world that we live in. It is to do with the presentation of different situations and characters with their varied dispositions (*bhava*) using *abhinaya* or modes of conveyance by which these dispositions are communicated to the audience (Ghosh 2002). Through *abhinaya* a relationship is established between the performance as event and the audience in a way that implies the cessation of the historical world with its mundane concerns and its replacement by a new dimension of reality (Gnoli 1985: xlvi).

However, if the majority of clients of the *Laden pata* are strangers with no knowledge of the narrative universe of the Chitrakaras, and therefore incapable of understanding its aesthetic context, is it still possible to read the *patua* performance against a classical text like the *Natyashastra*? Can a *local* performative tradition be interpreted in terms of a classical, pan-Indian theory? Scholars like Coomaraswamy (1990) remind us that it is impossible to separate the local from the classical in the Indian aesthetic tradition. In India most classical forms of music and dance have their roots in local performative traditions. Even the *Natyashastra*, a pan-Indian treatise on the dramatic arts, is a re-constructed text, primarily available through living local traditions and through commentaries such as the *Abhinavabharati* by the famous Kashmiri philosopher, Abhinavagupta who lived in the 10th century (Gnoli 1985). The references to wonder (*ajob*) and pathos in the *Laden* songs acquire new depth when interpreted in the light of the *Abhinavabharati* in which the term *chamatkara* (wonderment) is used to characterize the sudden shift from the mundane to the theatrical register in which a new dimension of reality is revealed (*ibid.*).

Why does the *Laden pata* appeal to non-local audiences? The estrangement of the event – the aesthetic distance that is established by locating the event in an unfamiliar and 'exotic' context could be

one reason for its popularity. A postmodern sensibility taught to value alternative aesthetic traditions would surely appreciate the bold lines and broad patches of vibrant colour that make up the pictorial field of the *pata*. But even if the *pata* has the potential to circulate, to appeal to tastes unfamiliar with the local aesthetic tradition it is not as if the *patua* tradition as a whole has this potential. It is the *patua* song that accompanies the display of the *pata* that anchors the performance in a particular narrative tradition. It is precisely this aspect of the performance that tends to be left out or reduced when performers travel to places outside Bengal. But even if the music and the lyrics of the songs are not understood, traces of their influence can be seen in the pictorial narrative itself. Take for instance the symmetrical placing of the figures of Bush and Osama. The form of continuous narration, the linear ordering of the pictorial space so that the episodic structure of the story is clearly understood, are painterly conventions that make for intelligibility. As does the stylistic prominence of the initial frame that dictates the interpretation of the story, and guides it to a level of generality. The open-ended *patua* narratives lend themselves to multiple interpretations. Stories can change course and adapt themselves to new situations. Thus, in keeping with the context of performance, Khandu's song emphasizes the emotion of wonder (*chamatkar*), and Rani's, pathos. Rani composed a special song for her visit to the US, which emphasizes empathy with the victims of the 9/11 crash. But both performers try to universalize the event so that it can appeal to spectators in different historical situations. In the *Laden pata*, as we have seen, the juxtaposition of the mythic with the human dimension is an attempt to achieve universal appeal. The plane with Osama's face on the first register of the painting and the Osama inset on the last register contrast with the human dynamics of those in the middle registers.

Interpreters of Tradition

How are the Chitrakaras, an interstitial group claiming Muslim identity while they earn their livelihoods by making and displaying images of Hindu deities, authorized to re-present mythic narratives? Even canonical themes from sacred texts are re-contextualized in *patua* depictions so that great gods like Siva and Durga appear in local settings.²³ These are self-conscious attempts at localizing grand narratives that have a pan-Indian sweep. In this sense, such attempts at interpreting tradition assume a different orientation to culture than that assumed by Coomaraswamy. For Coomaraswamy folk cultural forms carry mythic and metaphysical meanings that are only intelligible to the scholar learned in India's textual tradition. The custodians of folk culture do not seek to make sense of these practices but are satisfied in following tradition rather than attempting to interpret it.

This is not the case with the Chitrakaras. Their origin myths reveal a certain pride in their caste occupation, which also gives them the confidence to transgress rules even if the consequences of such acts result in loss of status. They trace their descent to Vishvakarma, the celestial architect from whom they have inherited the gift of craftsmanship. He came down to the mortal world as a Brahmin, married Ghritachi, a celestial nymph, who was also re-born in human form, and the ancestor of the Chitrakara was born of their union. But arrogance led to a fall in caste status when the great god Siva cursed their ancestor for transgressing the taboo against pollution. (The Chitrakara ancestor was painting Siva's image when he put the paintbrush in his mouth. According to some stories Siva cursed them so that they fell from being a high caste to a very low one while in other stories Siva's curse gives them an ambivalent identity, as Muslims who are condemned to make pictures of Hindu deities so that they will be denigrated by Hindus and Muslims alike.)

These stories place the Chitrakaras *outside* the social system as is recognized by both Hindus as well as Muslims. Another story traced to the *Brahmavaivarta Purana*, a 13th century sacred text, mentions the Chitrakaras as a community whose members have been demoted to low-caste status because they violated the traditional rules associated with their caste occupation and did not paint sacred images in the conventional manner (Bhattacharjee 1980). Original high caste status with a descent to low status because of some violation of caste tradition, a position of being outsiders to the social system as well as the reputation of being innovators are the important aspects of Chitrakara identity that we glean from the origin myths. (At this juncture it is also worth noting that the pictures painted by the Chitrakaras are not sacred per se. There are no rituals associated with the act of painting and the Chitrakara display the same attitude towards secular or worldly events as painterly themes as they do towards religious stories.)

A more recent story collected from Dukhushyam Chitrakara of Naya village portrays the first *chitrakara* as a trickster figure who manages to save the lives of his fellow villagers from the depredations of a demon by holding a mirror in front of the demon. Unable to recognize his own image the demon dies while trying to grapple with his reflection (Korom 2006, Singh 1995). In the second part of the story we are told that the demon slayer could not convince the villagers that the demon was dead until he painted a picture of the event and used it to illustrate his story. The scroll painting that the *patuas* display is a mirror-substitute that enhances an aspect of the familiar world, re-presenting it so that it appears as new. The demon slayer is their ancestor and ever since then they have traveled from village to village, singing stories with pictures.

How do we think of the 'local' from the vantage point of the Chitrakaras whose status as outsiders and nomads is correlated with their capacity to play with tradition and to be commentators on social life? It is difficult to think of the *Laden pata* as the 'domestication in local practice' of a global event (Appadurai 1997, 17). Unlike forms of mass media where the primary orientation is consumption, in the *pata* tradition the receptors actively participate in re-interpreting the event by re-locating it in mythic time.²⁴ As Alexander Piatigorsky (1993) reminds us myths are objective phenomena that cannot be self-consciously produced. They can only be re-produced or re-enacted. When the 9/11 story is retold as myth it loses some of the particularistic features that identify it as a historical event. Instead it acquires a more universalistic dimension as it focuses on human dilemmas and emotions – of pathos, wonder and the awareness that relations of intimacy can also be dangerous. Friends can suddenly become enemies with frightening consequences for the world at large. The continuing appeal of the *Laden pata*, even among audiences who are unfamiliar with the narrative tradition within which it is located, might well lie in its ability to re-locate the global event in a local moral world.²⁵

Notes

¹ Chitrakaras are also known as *Patuas* – from *pata* the Sanskrit word for cloth. However Chitrakara is the preferred term for self-designation in Medinipur. 'Patua' is still used as a title by the members of the scroll painting caste in Birbhum. 'Patidar' is the preferred title in Purulia and Bankura. (Ghosh 2001)

² Frank Korom (2006) actually witnessed a *jatra* on this theme in Naya village. (For more details see Mukhopadhyay (n.d.).

³ *Mangala Kavyas*, long narrative poems about specific gods and goddesses, written from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century in Bangla, circulated in oral form long before they were written down. According to Clark (1955) these poems have two distinct levels – the popular and the learned – and he believes that there is a chronological relationship between the two levels. The oral lore was re-inscribed in an orthodox Brahminic literary canon but the fact that the medium was Bangla rather than Sanskrit allowed for its mass circulation. *Patua* songs are often based on popular *mangala kavyas*.

⁴ Some of these names are Hindu such as Radha or Gouranga but others like Khandu or Roopshona do not signify membership in a religious community.

⁵ Kavita Singh (1995) has discussed the differences between the three styles in great detail.

⁶ Benoy Bhattacharjee (1980) who has studied the Chitrakara community of Birbhum, dismisses Ray's discussion on the patua samajik schools and says that his respondents had never heard of such institutions. However, as Kavita Singh's

(1995b) analysis of museum collections shows, it is possible to distinguish three broad styles in Chitrakara art which conform to the regional divisions that are delineated by Ray (1953).

⁷ See note one.

⁸ See note ten.

⁹ The display of *patas* has always been a seasonal occupation. Some of the other occupations followed by the Chitrakaras were icon (*murti*) making in clay, snake charming. Some sub-castes of the Chitrakaras also performed magic tricks, were garland makers, makers of clay dolls especially the women, and women often acted as mid-wives. Some Chitrakaras have also taken to occupations such as tailoring, bus driving and so on (see Singh 1995, Ray 1953).

¹⁰ Comic books of course allow the viewer to move back and forth between the different frames, which the *patua* performance does not allow.

¹¹ One *pata* only has three registers and is interesting as it describes the essential structure of the story.

¹² Private conversation in October 2006 in Delhi.

¹³ Muslim warrior saints (*gazis*) and holy men (*pirs*), deified over the centuries are important mediators between the divine and the earthly realms (Amin 2002). Even though most *pir* legends have roots in historical events and biographies, the stories themselves follow the structure of the *mangala kavyas*. *Pirs* are worshipped by both Hindus and Muslims alike. Satya Pir is also worshipped as Satya Narayan by Hindus (Stewart 2002).

¹⁴ This was pointed out to me by Khandu Chitrakar, the artist.

¹⁵ Kalighat paintings were a form of bazaar painting that became popular in the 18th and 19th centuries. Named after a famous pilgrimage site, the painters at Kalighat migrated from villages in Bengal at a time when Calcutta was developing into an important metropolis. They developed their own folk-urban style of painting, derived from traditional Chitrakara styles and popularized the depiction of secular themes. The last Kalighat *patua* died in the 1930s though there has been an attempt to revive this style by Kalam Patua of Birbhum, West Bengal.

¹⁶ I use the term *patua* rather than Chitrakara here to highlight their role as storytellers.

¹⁷ In the Bangla version of the story, Mahisha asks Durga for a boon while he is on the point of her trident waiting for death to release him from his demon birth. He asks that he may receive worship with the goddess so that they will be joined for all time to come.

¹⁸ According to Tony Stewart (2002) Satya Narayan emerged somewhat earlier than Satya Pir. The latter is incorporated into Vaishnavism through the doctrine of *avatarhood* (incarnation). Vishnu, the preserver, one of the three great gods in Hindu cosmology, appears on earth as an *avatar* whenever the earth is mired in turmoil and is in need of a saviour.

¹⁹ Soumitra Das, "Midnapur *patuas* still sing for their supper – The 'phoren' experience." The Telegraph, Calcutta. Downloaded on 2/8/2007 from <http://www.telegraphindia.com/others/print.html> See also "9/11 part of *Patua* scrolls show." Delhi Newslines. cities. Expressindia.com. Downloaded on 6/20/2007 from <http://www.cities.expressindia.com/fullstory.php?newsid=70258>

²⁰ I am grateful to Urmila Bhidrekar for listening to recordings of the *patua* songs with me and giving me her interpretation of the tunes. Unfortunately my rudimentary knowledge of music does not allow me to interpret the music further.

²¹ The grammatical term parataxis refers to an arrangement of clauses or propositions without connectives. The reader is expected to form the logical connections between the grammatical elements (Zupnic).

²² A new version of the Laden song has the following refrain
What terrible news.
Did I get from the radio station

²³ Jyotindra Jain (1999) describes a Kalighat *pata* in which a harassed Siva clasps his baby son, Ganesa, the elephant headed god of auspicious beginnings, to his chest with one hand while he beats his drum (dumru) in a desperate attempt to distract him. An anxious Durga follows behind clapping her hands in a similar attempt to get the baby's attention and stop him from crying. Siva is the god of destruction whose drum is heard only when the world and life as we know it, is about to end. Durga, for many Bengali Hindus, is primarily worshipped as the protector of the universe and the slayer of demons who threaten the world.

²⁴ As Appadurai (1996) reminds us mass media consumption does not have to be passive. It involves 'selectivity, resistance, irony' and reveals signs of agency (ibid.7).

²⁵ I use Arthur Kleinman (1988) conception of the 'local moral world' to talk about the stake that the Chitrakaras might have in giving the 9/11 story this particular form.

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