

## 研究ノート

### Singing about Disaster

—How Oral Tradition Serves or Does Not Serve Governmentalities—

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#### Keywords

Governmentality, natural disasters, oral tradition, Patuas, West Bengal

#### 1. Introduction

Building on Michel Foucault's notion of *gouvernementalité*, which he developed during the later years of his life, from approximately 1977 until his death in 1984, I wish to explore some strategies that a certain group of people in India use to cope with being governed as well as those used to subvert the mentality of governance.<sup>1</sup> Governmentality, the English equivalent of Foucault's French term, is here defined as the strategies utilized to render a given society governable.<sup>2</sup> This essay will explore how the vernacular bardic tradition of narrative picture painting has been co-opted and used by the state to convey ideological positions when local disasters occurred in the state of West Bengal, India. The theme of counter-hegemonic discourse will also be addressed by demonstrating how the bards in question provide their own running commentaries on tragic events that quite often go against the officially sanctioned positions of local governmental agencies. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are also often complicit in this process, but their involvement is not always constructive, a subject that I have addressed elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Examples will be drawn from flood and earthquake relief as well as from communal disharmony and political assassinations.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Foucault (1991)

<sup>2</sup> Foucault (1991) also refers to it as the "art of government" or what Gordon (1991) terms "governmental rationality."

<sup>3</sup> For some preliminary musings on this subject, see Korom (2011).

Based on ongoing ethnographic fieldwork that began in 2001, the conclusion will question transparent notions of “truth,” when it comes to interpreting and/or explaining contentious events in the life-worlds of rural Bengali peasants.

The community with whom I am concerned in this paper is known collectively as Patua (*paṭuyā*), and they all take the surname of Chitrakar, which means picture-maker. The term *citrakār* is somewhat ambiguous, since it can refer to a variety of artisan groups inhabiting the Indian subcontinent. The word literally means “picture-maker”, derived, as it is, from *citra* (picture) and *kār* (doer). However, what makes the Bengali Patuas different from others who bear the title is that they combine visual art with verbal art in a synergistic fashion to produce a performance tradition quite distinct from other genres of oral performance in South Asia. It is their combination of words and images that makes them somewhat unique and different from the average artist. Traditionally, Patuas composed songs that thematically corresponded to the scrolls they painted. In other words, they are performers who use the painted narrative scrolls to illustrate the songs they sing. The performative act thus requires the simultaneous engagement of both the aural and the visual senses. Integrating the two in a competent and aesthetic fashion is what defines a good Patua. However, in recent centuries, the art of the Patua declined due to lack of patronage that resulted from the introduction of other visual media beginning wood block prints, then chromolithographs, radio, and cinema. In recent years videos and DVDs have also challenged their craft.

The decline in patronage has therefore resulted in a shift in emphasis from performance to painting in recent decades for the purposes of sale primarily to tourists who frequent urban *melās* (fairs) in search of exotic souvenirs to take home with them. Patuas nowadays are more inclined to mass-produce scrolls for sale, without caring much for the composition of new songs.<sup>4</sup> This led one romantic nationalist to opine that the tradition would not survive another decade or two. Gurusaday Datta made this pronouncement in 1903, but more than a century later Patuas continue to paint and sing, sometimes working other day jobs to supplement their income earned from painting and singing.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Korom (2006) for a more detailed historical and contextual analysis of this talented group of artisans.

<sup>5</sup> For the complicated relationship between Dutt and the Patuas, see Korom (2010).

I have written extensively about the Patuas elsewhere; namely, in my 2006 book titled *Village of Painters*.<sup>6</sup> In that book, I did not dwell very extensively on what happened to the Patuas as a result of governmental interventions, which is what I wish to focus upon in this essay and in future works. The Patuas historically originated as a low-caste Hindu group that converted to Islam *en masse* in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. They have thus been doubly marginalized in Indian society, being neither accepted fully by Hindus nor Muslims. Their ongoing marginality has resulted in extreme poverty that has compelled contemporary governmental agencies to target them for developmental schemes, not only to benefit themselves as a low-caste Muslim community, but also to bring the ideology of development to the hinterlands of West Bengal.

Schemes to indoctrinate the Patuas into the ideologies of the state began in the 1970s, when NGOs started to utilize their communicative skills to disseminate messages concerning hygiene, disease, deforestation, female infanticide, the evils of dowry, and other such matters central to the dialogues of the development industry. When local politicians began noticing their potential as ideological tools that could be manipulated to gain votes at crucial times, such as when natural disasters hit, they immediately started to entice Patuas to work for them by offering the artists benefits, such as cash salaries, health care, and material goods to improve their families' daily lives. The Patuas, however, did not always spread the word to rural villages by behavioral examples, as I will suggest below. Instead, they mostly reiterated what they were paid to say. This resulted in a number of new themes being incorporated into the collective repertoire of the Patuas, who earlier sang virtually exclusively about the exploits of mythological figures, who are abundant in the Bengali vernacular tradition.

Gods and goddesses thus slowly had to move aside and accommodate secular themes such as HIV prevention, the evils of drug addiction, and other such social phenomena. And so it came to pass that whenever a sensationalistic tragedy occurred locally (and sometimes even nationally; lately, even internationally<sup>7</sup>), the Patuas would be called upon to go around to the villages of their home districts to sing songs that

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<sup>6</sup> Prior to my own studies, the most extensive study of the Patuas of West Bengal was Hauser (1998). Unfortunately, because it is written in German, it did not receive the attention it should have gotten in the Anglophonic world. Nonetheless, I owe her a debt of gratitude for raising a variety of questions with which I am still grappling myself.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Mukhopadhyay (2008) and Chatterji (2012: 62-106), who both write about the role that the 9/11 tragedy of 2001 played in the repertoires of the Patua community.

conveyed the messages politicians wished their constituents to hear. It was thus the carefully managed dissemination of a particular point of view, not necessarily that of the singer himself or herself. Sometimes, however, since the wanderings of the Patuas were not closely monitored, the Patuas added their own opinions, which were not always in line with the viewpoints of their political patrons. Patuas therefore periodically challenged the hegemonic perspectives of their employers. To illustrate, let me provide the reader with the lyrics of some disaster songs, followed by exegesis about the contents.

## **2. Singing Disaster**

The first song, called *banyā* (Flood), is sung by Gurupada Chitrakar, an up and coming singer who has won national awards for his talent, about a terrible flood that occurred in Medinipur District, where he lives. The floods of 1978 were the worst in recorded history. The *BBC*, for example, reported on September 4, 1978 that at least two million people were left homeless in northern India, and that some of the areas of West Bengal were under eighteen feet of water, due to incessant monsoon rains. West Bengal was hit the worst, with an estimated fifteen million people affected by the storm. Despite the fact that the Indian Air Force was deployed to ensure that aid workers would be able to get into the worst affected areas as soon as the waters receded, the fear was that typhoid and cholera would follow swiftly on the waves of the monsoon floods.<sup>8</sup> After the waters receded, the State Inter Agency Group of West Bengal reported that the flood affected 235 “blocks” (administrative units), with 1,370 people perishing, 1,361,338 houses being damaged or totally demolished.<sup>9</sup> So terrible was the devastation that Gurupada, who was only a young boy at the time, still recalls the event. Now he sings about it, as he did for me in December of 2001, when I first recorded him singing the following song on the veranda of his home in the village of Naya, which I have dubbed the “village of painters.”

Before he begins singing, he speaks the following: “The *pat* (scroll) I am going to sing now is of 1385BS (1978CE). A devastating flood inundated West Bengal.<sup>10</sup> This *pat*

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<sup>8</sup> See

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/september/4/newsid\\_2496000/2496097.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/september/4/newsid_2496000/2496097.stm) (accessed on September 28, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.lagwestbengal.org.in/disaster-flood.html> (accessed on September 28, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> All songs reproduced here were recorded in Bengali by me during two field trips to Naya in December 2001-January 2002 and May-July 2002. The translations are my

deals with the theme of that flood. I am now singing that *paṭ*.” He then reached for the appropriate scroll and yanked it out of a pile lying on the floor. After unraveling it enough so that only the first frame, which was an image of the goddess Ganga (Ganges River personified), could be seen, he sang the following to bring forth an audience, a common practice to signal what folklorists term a breakthrough into performance:<sup>11</sup>

Listen, listen everyone, listen attentively.

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

On Bhadra 14, 1385BS,

An accident took place in the district of Medinipur.

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

Goats, lambs, cows, and calves came floating.

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

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

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

Early in the morning I heard people crying.

In the morning I found water all over.

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

Say, in our lives, gentlemen, we have never seen a flood.

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

We had to float on banana trunks to see relief.

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

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

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

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own, with grateful assistance from two researchers listed in the acknowledgements at the end of this essay.

<sup>11</sup> See Hymes (1981: 79-262).

The price of *rahu* fish became as low as two or three rupees.

So many people died of eating those fish.

The government sent doctors for that.

Doctors went from door to door to administer vaccine injections.

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

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

Say, the government gave *hoglās* (leaf lean-tos), tarpaulins, and clothes.

Babus (intellectuals) came to inspect and said it was a devastation.

Aid was dropped from helicopters.

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

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

Be kind enough to save the lives of children.

Where are you, our prime minister, Morarji Desai?

All of us convey our appeal to you.

Give loans, give fertilizer, give seed grains.

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

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

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

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

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

One ferryman sailed in a boat to catch fish.

He spotted a young woman in the river.

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

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

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

“Don’t touch me, *bābā* (sir), [or] my child, I beg.”

Saying this, the young woman disappeared.

The ferryman went and disclosed that.

Oh, here I have ended my invocation in verse.

My name is Gurupada Chitrakar, my address is Naya.

My district is Medinipur, Pingla *thānā*, my home.

I, Gurupada Chitrakar, sing this song.

This song was originally sponsored by a politician who was a member of the Congress Party that stood against both the Marxist regime of the Bengali governor Jyoti Basu, as well as against the central government’s prime minister Morarji Desai, who was a member of the Janata Party and the first prime minister who was not affiliated with the Congress Party that has dominated India’s central government since Independence in 1947. According to a number of eye witnesses with whom I spoke, the Congress Party was the first to take action to provide relief for those affected by the flood, which seriously threatened Basu’s CPI (M) ruling party, and also drew attention to the ineffectiveness of Desai’s central government in New Delhi, with the Congress Party ultimately regaining central power some years later.

The 1978 flood of Medinipur received much more widespread attention in West Bengal than it did nationally because of the vast amount of destruction that occurred there, but the fact that Desai is also criticized by the singer suggests that the citizens of Medinipur were dissatisfied with both their state’s reigning politicians as well as the national ones. One frame of the scroll even depicts the chief minister Basu flying over the flooded areas in a helicopter to survey the damage, but doing nothing to assist the stranded masses. Ironically, the flood of 1978, among a variety of other sociopolitical factors, led to the Congress’ reestablishment of power at the center but did not provide its politicians with opportunities to overthrow the CPI (M) in Calcutta. The song ultimately opines at the inefficiency of the West Bengal government to work with the center for the benefit of its citizens.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> For an earlier, but yet to be published, paper on the flood scroll, see Sarkar (No Date), who explores another version of the song that I have included above. His conclusions more or less parallel and confirm my own.

The second song comes from Dukhushyam Chitrakar, an aged man who is the so-called *gurū* (teacher) of the Patuas. He has been responsible for training virtually every younger Patua in the village of Naya, where he resides, including Gurupada, whose flood song was just discussed. The song is called *bhūmikampa* (Earthquake), which occurred at 8:46AM on January 26, 2001, India's 52<sup>nd</sup> Republic Day. The magnitude of the quake was 7.7, the epicenter of which was nine kilometers south-southwest of the village of Chobari, located in the Kutch District of the western Indian state of Gujarat, killing almost 20,000 people and injuring more than 166,000 more. More than 400,000 homes were destroyed, and the quake could be felt throughout northern India and the neighboring nations of Pakistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh. Even in Ahmadabad, the financial capital of Gujarat, fifty multi-storied buildings collapsed like houses of cards, killing several hundreds of people. In Kutch, where the devastation was the worst, the quake destroyed approximately sixty percent of the local food and water supplies, and more than ninety percent of the houses were destroyed. In addition, the destruction of hospitals, schools, and roads leading toward the epicenter made relief difficult.<sup>13</sup>

Dukhushyam, a thoughtful man with a strong spiritual disposition, but who chain smokes, began by quashing his cigarette, clearing his throat, then, like Gurupada before him, picked up his earthquake scroll and unraveled it to the first frame, which showed bodies and buildings turned upside down, suggesting disorientation. Singing privately for me, he did not bother with the usual verbal framing to draw in an audience, but went directly into the haunting melody characterizing the disaster songs he sings.<sup>14</sup>

That Gujarat's earthquake, what a strange affair.

That Gujarat's earthquake, what a strange affair.

One hundred year old people say,

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<sup>13</sup> Culled from various sources listed on the Wiki page for the quake. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2001\\_Gujarat\\_earthquake](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2001_Gujarat_earthquake) (accessed on September 28, 2014).

<sup>14</sup> Dukhushyam did not witness the earthquake himself, but based his song on what he called *kānākānī* (hearsay), which is often how Patuas first receive information about sensational events that they later memorialize in song, as they did with the 9/11 incident. There, however, they received some concrete inspiration from a traveling theater troop that performed a play (*jātrā*) titled *āmerikā jvalcche* (America is Burning) in December of 2001 about the event, which I was fortunate enough to attend at the very outset of my research in Naya. See Korom (2006).



One hundred year old people say,

We didn't see, we didn't hear.

A strange affair.

That Gujarat's earthquake, what a strange affair.

In the morning at exactly nine.

All of Gujarat's people who were sleeping,

They were sleepy.

This time Basumata (wealth) got down.

Basumata (wealth) got down.

He knows, though, that no one can [escape].

A strange affair.

That Gujarat's earthquake, what a strange affair.

Some children were saved, mothers died.

But fathers got buried alive underground.

Oh my oh, they go underground!

Oh my oh, they go underground!

The journalists wandered around and looked.

The journalists wandered around and looked.

Some were wearing district identity badges.

A strange affair.

That Gujarat's earthquake, what a strange affair.

The wise ones say, it is in the hands of God.

All of these words of solace gave the wise ones.

Oh brother, words of solace gave the wise ones.

Oh brother, words of solace gave the wise ones.

Why weren't they provided with safety?

So then there wasn't any wisdom?

A strange affair.

That Gujarat's earthquake, what a strange affair.

Children were left motherless, mothers without sons.

Women became widows, what agony.

Oh, their agony!

Oh, their agony!

Gujarat's accident.

Gujarat's accident.

Say brother, aren't you going?

A strange affair.

That Gujarat's earthquake, what a strange affair.

Relief came from the government.

In the earthquake people were taken far away.

Took them far away.

Took them far away.

India joined together to feed them.

To feed India joined together.

Only one introduction took place.

A strange affair.

That Gujarat's earthquake, what a strange affair.

The sky cries, the wind cries, trees and creepers cry.

All the children crying say, "Where are our moms and dads?"

Where are our moms and dads?"

The sky cries, the wind cries, trees and creepers cry.

All the children crying say, "Where are our moms and dads?"

Where are our moms and dads?"

What else shall I write about this sad story?

What else shall I write about this sad story?

I'm not receiving food for my stomach.

A strange affair.

That Gujarat's earthquake, what a strange affair.

Oh, I have seen women with dead faces.

They went through life bearing burdens on their breasts.

They, bearing burdens on their breasts.

They, bearing burdens on their breasts.

In their lives they'll never be happy again.

In their lives they'll never be happy again.

They'll only remain worried and concerned.

A strange affair.

That Gujarat's earthquake, what a strange affair.

Sita entered into the underworld.

Entire districts went underground, all were finished.

They were all finished.

Today they don't believe in the word of God (*isvar*).

All their deceptions.

A strange affair.

That Gujarat's earthquake, what a strange affair.

Muslims praise Allah, Hindus Bhagvan.

Santals praise Marang Burung, God praise the Christians.

Brother, God praise the Christians.

Brother, God praise the Christians.

The wise ones praise matter.

The wise ones praise matter.

But atheists, though, don't believe.

A strange affair.

That Gujarat's earthquake, what a strange affair.

Everyone getting together, beg forgiveness.

But my name is Dukhushyam Chitrakar.

Pingla Block, house in Naya.

Medinipur is my address

A strange affair.

That Gujarat's earthquake, what a strange affair.

Dukhushyam was asked by some local politicians of the CPI (M) to compose a song about the Gujarat earthquake to generate revenue to contribute to the national relief effort. His political message is therefore less subdued than in Gurupada's flood song, yet he nevertheless sides with the CPI (M) against the central ruling party when, in verse four, he accuses the central government of negligence, asking, "Why weren't they provided with safety?" He also invites his listeners to join him in the relief efforts in an attempt to unite all Indians. This last idea of patriotically uniting all Indians is a common theme among the Patuas' songs of tragedy, as a way of counterbalancing the divisive posture politicians often take when such catastrophes occur to exploit the tragic events as political opportunities for personal gain and perpetuating the agendas of specific political parties. This is quite evident, for example, in the song composed to memorialize the incidents surrounding the destruction of the Babri Masjid by Hindu extremists in December of 1992, which left many dead, both Hindu and Muslim. It is to this tragic event that I now turn for my third and final example.

The Babri Masjid was built in 1528 by the first Mughal emperor named Babar. Fifty years later a Hindu poet named Tulsidas began composing a Hindi devotional text called the *Ramcharitmanas*, resulting in the growth of the Ram cult throughout the region, including the construction of many Ram temples in Ayodhya, with many claiming the town to be the birthplace of the hero-god. According to some analysts, the nineteenth century saw growing Hindu/Muslim unity that posed a threat to the ruling British Empire. The British Raj thus gave sanction to a rumor about Babar destroying a Hindu temple to build his mosque. Then, in 1949, militant Hindus broke into the mosque and installed a *rām mūrti* (Ram statue) in the mosque. The District Magistrate K.K. Nayar refused to remove the image, claiming communal discord, and the mosque was subsequently sealed off until the matter could be adjudicated in the court system, which has still not happened to this very day. On December 23, 1949 a personal account disseminated of someone's vision of a boy Ram (4-5 years old) who appeared in the mosque in a great flash of light, at which time the lock on the precinct's gate miraculously broke off. In more recent times, a concerted video campaign telling of the miraculous appearance of the boy Ram is being propagated to bolster support for the VHP (World Hindu Society) and the Ram Janambhoomi (Ram Birth Ground) cause.

Muslims have not been able to pray at the site since then, although Hindus continued to worship outside of the Babri gate with the help of a local *pūjārī* (ritual specialist). It was with this contentious history in mind that L. K. Advani, head of the BJP (Indian People's Party), vowed to undertake a *rathyātrā* (chariot pilgrimage) throughout India to rally Hindu *kar sevaks* (volunteers) to proceed to Ayodhya for the purpose of tearing down the mosque to build a temple to Ram on that very spot, where

many devout Hindus now felt was his exact birth spot. October 30, 1990 was the predetermined date set for Advani's arrival in Ayodhya after the *rathiyātrā*.

The VHP, the international cultural arm of the political party known as the Bharatiya Janata party (BJP), to which Advani belonged, was called upon to rally the faithful throughout the world to send money and bricks to support the building of the temple. Once the so-called pilgrimage began, violence and death occurred at virtually every stop along the way, and despite the fact that Advani was arrested at one point but then released, they managed to stay on schedule to reach Ayodhya in conjunction with a real Hindu pilgrimage called the *pañcakrośī yātrā*, the circumambulation of the holy precincts. This "coincidence" was, in fact, planned, so that the police would not be able to distinguish between pilgrim (*yātri*) and *kar sevak*. Thus, the volunteers were able to enter the sealed off area around the mosque. They were, however, unsuccessful in destroying it on that occasion. The mosque was, however, finally brought down brick by brick by Hindu mobs led by radical *sādhus* (Hindu mendicants) a few years later on December 6, 1992. Advani went on to become the successful home minister of India during the first BJP period of rule, and was much later exonerated of all charges concerning incitement of religious intolerance and communal violence.<sup>15</sup>

It was against this contentious historical background that the Patuas began composing songs about the mosque incident. The version included here is by a senior female singer named Rani Chitrakar, who has also been involved in singing songs about other social issues, such as dowry deaths, abuse of children, and the spread of HIV/Aids. Rani's song *sampradāyer samṛti* (Communal Harmony) was written in response to the senseless violence resulting from religious differences.

We are the human race, one mother's offspring.

We are the human race, one mother's offspring.

Oh, some of us are Hindus.

Oh, some of us are Hindus.

And some of us became Muslims.

One mother's children.

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<sup>15</sup> My summary draws from Anand Patwardhan's account documented in his award-winning 1991 film titled *rām ke nām* (In the Name of Ram), in which he follows the events leading up to the destruction of the Babri Masjid. For a cogent academic analysis of the event, see van der Veer (1994).

We are the human race, one mother's offspring.

The Santals say Marang Burung.

Again, the Christians say God.

The Santals say Marang Burung.

Again, the Christians say God.

Those Muslims say Allah.

Hindus say Bhagvan.

One mother's offspring.

We are the human race, one mother's offspring.

Adam's wife conceived,

[and] Habil and Kabil were born.

Adam's wife conceived,

[and] Habil and Kabil were born.

Oh, those two brothers embraced two different religions.

Oh, those two brothers embraced two different religions.

There is proof in the scriptures.

One mother's offspring.

We are the human race, one mother's offspring.

Hence I say that whatever *dharma* one embraces is his.

The real *dharma* of human beings is that all are brothers.

Hence I say that whatever *dharma* one embraces is his.

The real *dharma* of human beings is that all are brothers.

Well, are we going to fight brother against brother?

Well, are we going to fight brother against brother?

Or else, we are all just monkeys (*hanumān*).

One mother's offspring.

We are the human race, one mother's offspring.

None of us is going to remain on earth.

One has to depart whenever one's time is up.

Then what's the use of fighting among one another?

What's the use of provoking communal clashes?

Let all of you voice a slogan.

"One mother's offspring."

We are the human race, one mother's offspring.

Politics thrives on communalism.

Abandon those matters and promote harmony, brothers.

Abandon those matters and promote harmony, brothers.

He who is Ishvar is nature (*prakṛti*) itself.

Listen brothers, he who is Ishvar is nature itself.

The proof is provided by science.

One mother's offspring.

We are the human race, one mother's offspring.

Hence I tell you, come, let us take a vow together today.

Today, all of us together shall harmonize in one tune.

Hence I tell you, come, let us take a vow together today.

Today, all of us together shall harmonize in one tune.



We brothers shall maintain our harmony.

We won't feel hurt for any reason.

One mother's offspring.

We are the human race, one mother's offspring.

We are the human race, one mother's offspring.

Rani suggests that while politicians separate citizens with different views to exploit them for votes, there is no need to do so. To make her point, she draws on the Biblical Genesis story to explain that the two offspring of Adam and Eve became followers of two different religions, yet we are all children of one mother. This well-known Muslim account of the difference between Muslim and Christian is here aesthetically reinterpreted to replace Christians with Hindus. The refrain, "one mother's offspring" (*ek māyer santān*) was a rallying cry used by Patuas to try to convince angry mobs not to attack and destroy Muslim homes and businesses after the destruction of the mosque.

### 3. Conclusion

Examples, such as the three cited above could be multiplied with many other examples I have documented throughout the past thirteen years of fieldwork, such as the opinions expressed over the political assassinations of people like Indira Gandhi, the best known of India's prime ministers, but the three presented here should suffice for the time being to make the point I suggested at the outset, which is that the Patuas, being impoverished and undereducated, are susceptible to the exploitation of politicians who merely wish to use them as receptacles for the dissemination of various forms of propaganda and ideology. Yet, the Patuas, who are often presented as being *cālāk* (streetwise) by other castes, have honed their ability to subvert governmentalizing authority over the centuries to allow them the possibility to voice their own opinions, sometimes in a disguised way by using what James Scott calls "hidden transcripts," or by overtly resisting the attempts of officials utilizing governmentality to manipulate them.<sup>16</sup> This is what we notice, for example, in Rani Chitrakar's song about communal harmony.

In conclusion, let me relate my experiences with the Patuas after the tsunami of 2004, which was felt as far north as West Bengal (ripples could be seen on ponds), but

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<sup>16</sup> See Scott (1992).

had the greatest impact on coastal areas of southern India, such as in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. After the tragedy occurred and appeals for aid were going out, the Patuas were approached by an art entrepreneur in New Delhi who appealed to them to create tsunami scrolls to auction off for relief purposes. Many of the Patuas hesitated to write songs, since they were not quite sure what had happened in south India, yet virtually all were ready to create scrolls that showed a weather demon creating the storm, then showing the devastating aftermath frame by frame. The tsunami scroll later came to be a standard feature of the Patuas' repertoire, and eventually led to collaborations between an Indian book publisher specializing in graphic novels with specific Patuas.<sup>17</sup> The writers hired by the publisher furnished the text, while Patuas provided the illustrations. In this instance, Patuas expressed no opinion whatsoever.

My tentative conclusion would be that the interpretation and understanding of events among the Patuas is not transparent, for they alter and modify their opinions as need demands. Despite the fact that they claim to always speak the truth, their opinions in the songs they sing oscillate when the memory of events are contested after the fact. Patuas therefore manipulate the ideologies of those who govern, while at the same time being manipulated by those who rule. Truth, therefore, is not a fixed category, but a dialectical one that is constantly constructed as newer and newer opportunistic contexts present themselves. It is precisely by drawing on their ability to oscillate between opinions that the Patuas have crafted a means of survival that even allows for moments of empowerment by gaining voice in an ever-increasing situation of subordination to the eminently more powerful forces that govern them.

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<sup>17</sup> See Chatterji (2014) who also shows how the Patuas basically interpret meteorological events as cosmological and mythological ones by placing such ecological events within the context of Hindu mythology, as did Gurupada above by explaining the Medinipur flood in terms of the goddess Ganga's wrath.

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