CHAPTER - VII

Socio-cultural Movement - A Study on Inter cultural Oscillation.
It has already been mentioned in the chapter on the Origin and History of the Patuas that according to Rakhu Patua they were a wandering group. This statement was further corroborated by Naren Patua (67) of village Bonta, Banku Patua (66) of village Sardha, Sudarshan Chitrakar alias Sukuruddin Patua (79) of village Itaguria and Panchanan Chitrakar (57) of village Madian. They also reported that the Patuas and the Bazikars, the road-side entertainers, were related. The latter also practised abracadabra in various forms and were expert in rope tricks. Later on some of them learnt making fire works from Muslim experts and came to be known as Bazikars, the term being applicable to both magicians and manufacturers of fire works. Hemchandra Chitrakar was a famous Bazikar in Calcutta. He entertained the public with his magnificent fire works. He won the first prize in a competition with Messrs Jane's Pain and Sons Ltd. of London and Bonbonnier Ltd. of Calcutta, organised by the Earl of Ronaldshay, the then Governor of Bengal, on the occasion of the visit of the Prince of Wales at Calcutta Maidan in 1921. His son Gurudas Chitrakar, a resident of Manicktala, Calcutta, is also a famous Bazikar who has many patrons among Maharajas, Nawabs and Zamindars for his fireworks, testifying to Patua efficiency in pyrotechnics.

That the Bediyas and Pakhmaras are two other sub-sections of the Patua community has already been noted in the chapter on intra-caste
divisions among the Patuas. The Pakhmaras and the Bediyas are wandering communities to this day. While describing the population of Birbhum W.W. Hunter classified the Bediyas, Mals and Pakhmaras under the heading "Semi-Hinduised Aborignals". He writes, "Bediyas, a wandering gipsy-like tribe who live by selling trinkets at fairs, bird catching, juggling, fortune telling and when these things fail by petty thefts; 583 in number. Pakhmaras, bird catchers, perhaps they may be identified with the Bediyas". Hunter did not mention anything about the Chitrakars or Patuas in his exhaustive "Statistical Account of Bengal". Herbert Hope Risley described the Bediyas as vagrants in Bengal, low status. He also did not mention the Chitrakars or Patuas in his monumental work, "The People of India". There is a mention by Buchanon of the Chitrakars among the artisan castes of Bihar and L.S.S. O'Malley mentioned the Jadu Patuas in the District Gazeteer of Birbhum 1901. The absence of any mention of the Patuas or the Chitrakars in "The Statistical Account" of Bengal by W.W. Hunter and in "The People of India" by Herbert Hope Risley probably was not due to oversight but due to the fact that the Chitrakars of Patuas of Birbhum were known as Bede or Bediya or Paharia Mal or Nyasara or Nasya (low caste Muslim converts are known as "Nasya in North Bengal" to the old Hindus and Muslims. Naluas, a similar

detribalised low-caste Hindus, later on converted to Islam was traced by Dr. M.N. Basu in the eastern part of Bengal.  

The total population of Bediyas (593) and Mals (9346) in the district of Birbhum was 9939 according to the Census of 1872. The total number of Patuas or Chitrakars, including all the sub-sections such as Bede, Mal, Maskata, Bazikar, etc. was 1168 according to the census of the Patua population of the district Birbhum made during my field work in 1970-72. Part of the decline in the population is perhaps attributable to some physiological reasons reflected for example, in the size of the Patua family which is such smaller than the size of the average rural family. But this is a problem for the physical Anthropologists and does not come within the purview of the present study which is primarily concerned with the sociological problems of the community. The sociological factors relating to the decline in the number of population are migration and clandestine penetration in the Hindu and Muslim communities through concealment of Patua identity. Many abandoned and dilapidated houses, once inhabited by Patuas, were noticed during the field work. Many Patuas have changed their surname and have migrated to the industrial areas of Burdwan and Calcutta where they are no longer known as Patuas. For example, an educated Patua is now working at Mankar as a school teacher and his brothers are working at Raniganj and Barakar. All of them have adopted "Pal"- a Hindu surname. Six families migrated to Calcutta as Muslim. They are now living in Dilkhusa Street and in Bhowanipur, Calcutta.

Of their bread earners, one is working as a peon in Writers' Buildings, one in a Medical College and four others in a private firm. These examples throw some light on the migratory tendency of the Patuas and other sociological reasons for the erosion of the Patua population.

From the somatoscopic point of view the physical features of the Patuas are:

- Hair: slightly wavy (low waves)
- Head form: medium to long
- Nose: broad and flat
- Eye: Sclera-reddish, Iris-dark-brown, opening-shallow
- Cheek-bones: prominent
- Skin colour: dark to dark-brown
- Stature: medium

These physical traits are more or less akin to those of the tribal people who belong to the Proto-Astraloid groups of Guha or the Pre-Dravidians of Haddon. From close observations it seems that the Patuas are somewhat akin to the low-caste people in (West) Bengal such as Hari, Dom, Bauri, Bagdi, etc. who have many cultural traits similar to those of the Patuas.

The occupational pattern for three generations of Patuas described in an earlier chapter shows their peripatetic tendency. The lack of attraction for land and agriculture is probably due to an ingrained nomadic habit. Many Patua young men told me that they liked to move

33. Risley, H.H., Discussed in different chapters of this dissertation vide also appendix Plate XXXV of "The People of India".
from place to place rather than stay at one place.

The data collected during the present study which is, so far as the history of the Fatuas is concerned, is a maiden one support the conjecture that the Fatuas were a nomadic tribe with their original habitation somewhere in Central India. They spread out in different directions from their original habits and one of the branches entered Bengal either through Orissa or through Bihar. They came with their original occupations such as snake charming, bird catching, abortioning, juggling, training animal for tricks and giving road side shows for entertainment, abrachdarba, etc., and also with their tribal way of life which includes drinking liquor on all ceremonial and festive occasions, sacrificing chickens to benign as well as evil spirits, characteristic form of tribal government, election of leader, oath taking and truth finding through ordeal. Close contact with the vast and powerful Hindu community gradually weakened their tribal entity and loosened their tribal moorings. They gradually added huckstering, scroll painting and later idol making to their original occupations. There are many castes among the Hindus in various parts of India who traditionally practice scroll painting and idol making. In Birbhum itself scroll painting was done by the Acharyas.

The Sutradhars (Architects and architectural wood carvers and Kumbhakars (clay modellers) were also famous for image making and scroll painting. There are a few well-known Sutradhar families in the village Hatserandi or Birbhum who still practise scroll painting.

34. Detailed reference is available in the Chapter I of this dissertation.
It has been noted earlier that the Patuas do not know the dhyanmantra, the scriptural description of a particular god or goddess to be found in the Hindu religious books, but they can very well emulate the traditional Hindu image makers like the Acharyas who know the dhyanmantra. The Patuas with their natural skill in handicraft adopted the art of image making from the Hindus. The break-up of the occupations table reveals that the Patuas were never dependent only on scroll painting or image making.

The itinerant nature of the Patua’s occupations made them move from place to place and from house to house and the Patua huckstress could go into the inner courtyard of a Hindu house to sell to the ladies trinkets and alta - a lac-dye, specially used by Hindu women to paint the borders of their feet (now-a-days the Muslim women also use alta in Bengal). With the passage of time the Patuas lost more and more of their tribal culture till only some vestiges of it were left. They settled generally on the fringes of Hindu villages. The study of Patua habitations shows that in five out of the 38 villages having Patua habitations, these are situated on the outer fringes of Muslim villages or Muslim paras in three cases in between Hindu and Muslim villages and in the rest of the villages the Patua habitations are on the outskirts of Hindu villages and near to the low-caste Hindu settlements. The settlement pattern clearly indicates the low status of the Patua community in the eyes of both Hindus and Muslims. As the Patuas expanded their market among their Hindu clientele with scrolls depicting Hindu mythological stories and moral tales, with songs sung in accompaniment with Khanjani
(small cymbals) glorifying the god Mahadev and his consort Durga and with selling images of Hindu gods and goddesses they adopted many Hindu traits of culture and inclined towards Hinduism. Like other Hindu artisan castes, they adopted the worshipping of Visvakarma and other Hindu gods and goddesses such as Durga, Kali, Manasa. They also developed a myth about their origin and the cause of their present degraded social position. Every Hindu low caste has a myth attributing the caste's origin to some god or a great Brahmin or some mythological sage and the cause of the fall to the present low status of the caste in the Hindu social order to some crime or misdeed or breach of taboo by one of the forefathers in the remote past. The mythology of the Patuas' origin and degraded social position has already been described. The myths and the reference to the Chitrakars in the Brahma-Vaibarta Purana indicate that at the time when this Purana was written—13th century A.D.—the Patuas or Chitrakars were incorporated in the Hindu social system, however lowly their status in it. There is no mention of Chitrakars or Patuas in any earlier Purana or list of castes.

Islamic rule played a very important role in the changing political, social and cultural life in India. Though since the beginning of the 8th century when the Muslims from West Asian countries first invaded India more and more of the country had been coming under Muslim rule advancing from the north west, the Muslims could establish their rule in Bengal only in the 12th century. There was no unity among the Hindu kings of the time. Bengal was ruled by Vallal Sen who was enthroned in Circa 1158 A.D. He introduced "Kulinism" in the Hindu society in Bengal during his 11-year reign. Not only some castes were upgraded and others downgraded, hierarchy was introduced even within a caste. Many Patuas

told me of their belief that they were degraded along with Subarna Baniks and other artisan castes and ostracised during the reign of Vallal Sen. The social history of that period reveals that it was an especially harsh time for the low-caste Hindus as casteism and caste hierarchy got especial support and encouragement from the royal court. There are many records pointing to Vallal Sen's pre-occupation with casteism and his unpopularity among the low castes. In 1510 A.D. Anandabhatta composed a book on the life and character of Vallal Sen—'Vallala-Charita'. It was edited and translated by Mahamohapadhyaya Haraprasad Sastri and published by the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1904. The book depicts Vallal Sen as capricious and tyrannical especially in his treatment of some castes. There is a story in that book that once Vallal Sen borrowed a crore of rupees (nishka) from Vallabhananda, the richest merchant in his time for financing an expedition against the king of Undantipura. After repeated reverses in that expedition Vallal asked for a fresh loan of a crore and a half of "suvarnas". Vallabha was ready to give the money but wanted that the revenue of Harakali should be mortgaged against the loan. This enraged Vallal Sen and he forcibly took possession of all the wealth of Vallava, who was the leader of the Baniks (merchant community) along with the wealth of many other merchants and inflicted other hardships on them. There was a series of changes in the caste order. The caste to which Vallava belonged was of course downgraded. So it is not improbable that a number of castes including the Patuas were so treated at this time. Their resentment was a contributing factor in the Muslim conquest of Bengal.
Lakshman Sen succeeded Vallal Sen in the year circa 1170 and reigned up to circa 1207. Towards the end of his reign Muhammad Bakhtyar Khilji invaded Bengal (1202 A.D.) Maulana Minhaj-ud-din Abu-Umar-I-Usman gives a detailed account of this invasion in his famous book Tabakat-I-Nasiri in which he describes the unopposed progress of Bakhtyar "until he reached the entrance to the palace of Rae Lakhmanah, when he drew his sword and commenced an onslaught on the un-believers". History records no mass or popular resistance to the successive Muslim invasions in Bengal. No student of sociology or social anthropology can help thinking that the common people must have been alienated from the ruling class; otherwise, it would not have been so easy for the foreigners to conquer the country. The social history of that period unveils the fact that the domination by the three upper castes backed by royal patronage over the rest of the society was so harsh that the common people, particularly the low castes, welcomed the Muslims in expectation of some relief from this oppression. The Patuas, who undoubtedly were in one of the lowest strata of the Hindu caste hierarchy and who were possibly not fully assimilated to the Hindu social order may have been drawn towards Islam sometime in this period. The new Muslim rulers also wanted to propagate Islam through proselytization to fulfill the Islamic injunction to convert unbelievers as well as to strengthen the base of their rule in this country. The scrolls were being used not only for entertainment but also as a medium of mass education. The Muslim rulers soon saw how

38. Sen, Dinesh Ch.: Brihat Banga; Pub. Calcutta University, 1934, pp. 532-533.
this medium of mass education could be utilized the propagation of Islam. This inference is substantiated by the evidence of the large number of scrolls, known as 'Gazir Pat' dealing with the lives and miracles of Muslim pirs (religious preceptors) and other Islamic legends. This royal patronage and the Islamic saying that "all believers are brothers" (Koran 49:10) must have attracted this poor community at the lowest rung of an oppressive caste system towards Islam.

The Patuas gave me two other views regarding their swings, in later periods, towards Islam. When the Maratha plunderers (Bargis) 39 ravaged rural Bengal (1741-1751) again and again, the Muslim rulers took more interest in protecting Muslims than in protecting Hindus. There was no unity in the Hindu community divided as it was into rigid compartments by caste. And the Patuas, a small poor and weak community, in search of security, naturally swung towards Islam.

The other reason ascribed for the Patuas' Islamisation related to the imposition of the zizya tax on the Hindus. To get rid from this oppressive tax, the Patuas like many other low-caste Hindus took shelter in Islam. Anyway, there are good grounds to believe that the Patuas embraced Islam during Muslim rule in India. But it seems the conversion was never complete because the Patuas could not give up overnight the Hindu traits which they had acquired through a long process of acculturation. And secondly, for economic reasons, it was not possible for them to give up image making, scroll painting and scroll shows for which the Hindus provided their main market. So the Patuas' position was an

ambiguous one forcing them to conceal their acquired Islamised ways from the Hindus.

With the decline of Muslim rule and the rise of British power in India, the Patuas swung back towards Hinduism. Muslim patronage was now worth little. In spite of the adoption of Islamic themes the popularity of scrolls was never wide even among the common Muslims because of the general Islamic objection to any picture. Socially, the Patuas were relegated to a very low position among the Muslims. Risely writes on the converted Muslims in Bengal: "In some places a third class called Arzal or 'lowest of all' is added. It consists of the very lowest castes, such as the Halalkhor, Lalbegi, Abdal and Bediya, with whom no other Muhammadan would associate, and who are forbidden to enter the mosque or to use the public burial ground". This description applied to the social position of the Patuas among the Muslims.

Moreover, in the changed situation of the early period of British rule in India, the Patuas felt that the Muslims were not very much liked by the new rulers whereas the Hindus, favoured by the British, were gaining in power, politically and economically. So the Patuas haunted by a feeling of insecurity turned towards the Hindus. But they could not give up the Islamic traits of culture they had acquired in their everyday life, such as circumcision, performance of namaj, observance of Muslim religious festivals, solemnisation of marriage by a Muslim kaji, burial of dead body in an Islamic way, etc. So the Patuas' position was now more anomalous and much more degraded among the Hindus than before.

With the establishment of British rule a process of change practically in all departments of life set in. Under the impact of western influence and urbanization the old cultural values and tastes were being transformed or replaced. Scroll painting and scroll shows lost their popularity. Less and less people were interested in the kind of religious themes which the scrolls generally dealt with. The Patuas therefore had to look for other occupations and took to jobs like mason’s work, carding, soldering etc. Thus the special economic link with the Hindus was served or weakened and in course of time the Patuas came to be known as neither Hindu nor Muslim - a position that continued for years.

But a small community out of from their traditional moorings and living in between two great and powerful communities cannot maintain a separate nondescript existence for long. This became particularly difficult when the country was in the throes of a national movement or when fierce riots broke out between Hindus and Muslims. At such times the question of identification with the one or the other of the two big communities becomes crucial. At the height of the National Movement, some Hindu social reform organisations like the Arya Samaj, the Hindu Mahasabha and the Bharat Sevasram Sangha intensified their efforts to reinforce the Hindu revivalist movement including a move for taking apostates back into the Hindu fold on an egalitarian basis after some purificatory rites called "suddhi". This movement touched the Patuas also. Mohan Chitrakar (age 67) of Ahmedpur told me: "In my childhood there was a Hindu revival movement in Bengal. Dr. S.K.Roy was a zealous organiser of this movement in Katwa. He persuaded many Patuas to re-embrace
Hinduism. Though I was circumcised in my childhood and my marriage was solemnised at the age of 17 by a Muslim kağı, I decided to become Hindu with many other Patuas. The re-conversion ceremony was organised at the Kali temple in Katwa on the 9th Magh, 1333 B.S. (February 1926). Myself and 40 other Patuas were initiated into Hinduism by Swami Satyananda. The movement grew and we used to visit Patua houses to persuade the Patuas to be initiated into Hinduism and to observe Hindu rites and rituals. Many songs were composed at the time and I still remember one song:

" Karaha ananda, bhaja Satyananda
Nirananda chite rahi na.
Kudin giachhe, sudin eshechhe
ghucheche maner bedana.
gateta Kalir mahatye pataki
Tarate thakbe na.
Brahma Kopanal haiya probal
Ghatichhilo je birambana
sei Brahma asi karuna prakash
dosharashi karilen marjana.
Sagar bangsha jeman bahudin pare
temni udhbarilen jati chitrakare
Bhagirath saha S.K. daktare patite
tarila dakhona.
Natasire Satish kahila karajore
Taba bhakti kichhu janina
Parama Brahma tumi Satyananda Swami
Kangal bale ghrina korona.

( This song was composed by Satish Chitrakar. But there is no scroll on this theme. The song is sung with the accompaniment of a kind of small cup-shaped cymbals ).

**Free Translation of the Song**

O rejoice in the worship of Satyananda!
Banish all despondency from your heart.
The bad days are over;
Greet the happy time that is here.
The fallen of the Kali yug need fear no more;
Brahma's anger that blocked their salvation is appeased. Through His grace all transgressions are forgiven. Like the clan of Sagar redeemed by Bhagirath after ages of suffering, Behold the Chitrakar community redeemed by Satyananda in the company of Daktar S.K.Roy & Satish, with his head bowed and hands clasped in prayer, pleads:

"0 my Lord Satyananda, you are Brahma, I know no rules of worship; Let not your grace be denied to this humble beggar."

"My father did not know anything about this as I was away from my native village at that time. When he came to know of it he was not annoyed. On the contrary he was pleased. But my parents did not change their religion and expressed their desire to be buried after their death and wished jainamaj to be observed at the time of burial."

A similar incident of re-conversion was narrated by Dulal Chitrakar, who was initiated by Dinabandhu Goswami at Nabadwip along with 30 or 35 other Patuas in the year 1927. After the initiation they received each a picture of Lord Krishna and a copy of the holy Gita. The guru accepted water from them and drank it.

Ananta Malakar (Chitrakar) of Kirnahar said that his father and a group of 30 or 40 chitrakars were re-converted in 1926.

After the Civil Disobedience movement (1930-31) there was a feeling of fatigue throughout the country and a kind of lull in every sphere. When there was no turmoil in the political life of the country, the Fatua came back to their intermediary position of being neither Hindu nor Muslim.

41. Majumder, Ramesh and Bose, Nirmal Kumar; Congress; Bharat Kosh Vol.II, p.136, Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, Calcutta.
In 1946 fierce Hindu-Muslim riots broke out in Calcutta and spread like a forest fire in the whole of Bengal, Bihar, the Punjab and the North Western Frontier Province (now in Pakistan). The question of choosing sides was never so crucial as now in the life of the Patua community. That the days of the British raj are numbered was quite evident and the partition of India on communal basis was imminent. Everybody apprehended that there would be a Hindu raj in India and a Muslim raj in Pakistan. In this situation the Patuas made another swing towards Hinduism this time in a more organised way. Bangiya Chitrakar Unnayan Samiti, the Patua association, organised a movement towards Hinduisation (Appendix as III, IV, V and VI). Gurudas Chitrakar, the famous pyrotechnist and a wealthy and important Patua leader in Calcutta, issued leaflets and organised meetings in different districts of Bengal (Appendix-II). The Patuas readily responded to the call of the Bharat Sevasram Sangha (Appendix-VII) which came forward and organised purification yjnas for re-entry of the Patuas into the Hindu social order with an honourable status.

Though secularism was part of the declared policy of the Congress, the ruling party in India, the fact that the country was actually divided on a communal basis nobody could be sure how far secularism would be observed in practice. In such a situation a small and weak community like the Patus naturally thought it safer to be with the Hindus- the majority community in India and so the advent of Independence rather strengthened the movement of Hinduisation. Purification rites were
organised and leaflets were issued by the Bangiya Chitrakar Unnayan Samiti (Appendix V) in which the Patuas were urged to get themselves enumerated as caste Hindus in the 1951 census and faithfully to follow the Hindu way of life, severing all connections with Islam.

As the years rolled on after independence, the suspicions about the sincerity of the Indian rulers' profession of secularism were gradually allayed and the sense of security was regained by the minorities. After the General Elections, in 1952 and 1957, which were conducted on the basis of adult franchise, the minorities' confidence in the secular and democratic outlook of the Government was enhanced. The Patuas saw that the Muslims were enjoying all democratic rights and other facilities in matters like grants of stipends, appointments in services, etc., equally with the Hindus. At the same time they found that in spite of all their strenuous and zealous efforts to re-enter the Hindu fold their position was still one of outcasts. The caste prejudices of the high-caste Hindus were still strong and formidable. How ingrained and powerful these prejudices were could be seen from the fact that some of the high-caste Hindus who had dined publicly with Patuas after a purification ceremony vomited out what they had eaten at the community feast before entering their own houses. The Hindus in general remained indifferent towards the Patuas. They looked down upon the Patuas as before. The Hindus no longer bought idols from the Patuas. The village people practically lost interest in scrolls. In reality the Patuas were banished socially and economically from the Hindu community. The last
The last Hinduisation movement practically failed in Birbhum when Brahmin priests refused to serve the Patuas. In contrast, the Muslims were now demonstrably sympathetic towards the Patuas. Their previous attitude of contempt towards the low-caste converts was changed. They now allowed the Patuas equal rights in the mosque and common burial ground. Muslim neighbours also rendered all possible help to the Patuas at the time of disposal of the dead as I have witnessed on many occasions.

All the above factors resulted in a fresh movement of the Patuas towards Islamisation recently in Birbhum as well as in the rest of West Bengal. Nevertheless, the Patuas are not free from a psychological conflict. In every day life the Muslims do not mix with them. Nazmul Karim, Reuben Levy, Grunnebaum, Cunningham have shown that in spite of Islam's egalitarian message there are hierarchical divisions among the Muslims. The Muslim community in Birbhum is also not free from such hierarchical divisions and they place the Patuas in the lowest amongst all the division. Socially the Muslims look down upon them. But the enthusiastic young Patuas are very much optimistic. They are hopeful that they would be integrated into the Muslim community as soon as they were be able to erase Hindu traits of culture from their lives. But the majority of the Islamised Patuas suffer from a feeling of estrangement from the Muslim community as well as from the Hindus. On the other hand

42. Detailed description has been given in the chapter on Political Organisation.
44. Ibid, pp.115-116
the Hinduised Patuas also are not happy with their present status in
the Hindu community. Sometimes the services of Brahmin priests are not
readily available to them. The Hindus' attitude towards the Patuas is
one of unconcern and indifference. Virtually the Hinduised Patuas are
estranged from the Hindus as well as from the Islamised Patuas. This
estrangement has resulted in a psychological complex. I observed a mood
of restlessness among the Patuas during my field work. It seemed to
stem from confusion or doubt on the question of choosing sides to be
with the Hindus or the Muslims.