CHAPTER VIII

Analytical Summary
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The conclusion derived from the field data and textual material analysed in the earlier chapters may now be summed up.

The Patuas of Birbhum originally belonged to a nomadic or semi-nomadic tribe of Dravidian or Proto-Astraloid stock. They left their original homeland, somewhere in Central India, and migrated in various directions in search of food. One branch came to Bengal in the remote past.

They came in contact with the Hindus, gradually acculturised through a process of induction and adopted some Hinduised occupations such as scroll painting, exhibition of scrolls, singing songs on Hindu myths and idol making in addition to their original occupations which included snake charming and abracadabra. The evidence about the economic life of the Patuas shows that scroll painting was never their sole occupation; their occupations always have been multifarious. They assumed the name Chitrakar Patua in a much later period and adopted scroll painting as their caste calling to keep conformity with the caste-occupation pattern of the Hindu society. Scroll painting is an age-old cultural trait which probably originated in, and diffused from, Egypt in the long long past. Scroll painting was neither innovated by the Patuas nor was it their original occupation. It was a later adoption from the Hindus.

47. Bose, Nirmal Kumar: Hindu Methods of Tribal Absorption, paper presented in 1941 at the annual meeting of the Indian Science Congress held at Banaras.

As evident from a study of their habitations the Patuas lived near the Hindus for a long time and acculturised to a great extent, occupying a very low position in relation to the Hindus. With the passage of time they were completely cut off from their original tribal moorings. At the same time they were not completely assimilated with the Hindu community in spite of their long association and acculturation with the Hindus. Acculturation, as Kroeber points out in his article "Acculturation with and without Dominance and Assimilation", does not always continue into assimilation. The traditional contemptuous attitude of the higher castes to the lower castes and the itinerant nature of the Patuas' life and occupations were probably the major factors that have intervened to counterbalance the assimilation of the Patuas to the Hindu community. The Patuas position, therefore, became that of a rootless endogamous group.

It has been shown in the chapter on socio-cultural movement escape that the Patuas swung towards Islam in order to repression and ostracisation by the high caste Hindus which reached its climax during the reign of the Sen dynasty in Bengal in the twelfth century A.D. This movement towards Islamisation was strengthened by pragmatic considerations arising from the fact that the Muslims in India as well as in Bengal were then gaining in ascendancy and power. The Muslim rulers showed favour to converts. Scrolls were a good medium of mass communication and the Muslim rulers encouraged the Patuas to propagate Islam among the masses through scrolls. Evidence of this is provided by the scrolls as known as "Gazir pat", describing the thaumaturgy of Muslims pirs.

Coming into close contact with the Muslims, the Patuas acquired many traits of the Islamic way of life. When moving through Muslim villages they began to take food from Muslim houses. Some came to settle and live near Muslim villages. Like in their contact with the Hindus here also the process of acculturation did not result in assimilation with the Muslim community. The fact that the Patuas could not give up their market among the Hindus which they had built up through so many years thwarted the process of their assimilation to the Muslim community. In the Hindu villages they had to maintain their Hinduised names and Hindu ways of living. They took food from the Hindu houses during their journeys from village to village. In order to maintain their relations with both the Hindu and the Muslim communities they adopted certain clandestine ways such as keeping two names— one Hinduised and the other Muslim. They also developed a secret paratactic language.

With the fall of the Muslim ruler after the battle of Plassy the social stratification in rural Bengal began to change. The most significant feature of this change was the growth of a large stratum of landed middle class— mostly Hindu. The Hindus gradually became economically and politically the dominant and powerful community. Hence the Patuas now found it profitable to swing towards the Hindus from the economic and political points of view. Cunningham pointed that the low caste converts in India occupied a low position in the Muslim community in spite of the egalitarian preaching in the Koran.

Risley wrote that mosque entry was prohibited for some very low castes—Lalbegi, Abdal, Bediya and some others. These observations by Cunningham and Risley are applicable to the Patuas who along with the Bediyas, a sub-group of Patuas, were not allowed to enter mosques and who occupied a very low position if at all admitted in the Muslim community. As mentioned earlier the Patuas of Birbhum are still in that position.

Though the Patuas swung towards Hinduism they could not give up certain Islamic traits such as burial of dead body, jainamaj, circumcision, presence of kaji at the time of marriage, etc. They developed some sort of eclecticism, drawing from both Hinduism and Islam. As a result of this the Patuas virtually remained as an intermediary group between Hindu and Muslim.

From this intermediary position the Patuas swung towards Hinduism during the peak period of the National Movement and then back again, into the intermediary state. The next swing towards Hinduism began with the Hindu-Muslim riots in 1946 and was maintained for some years following the advent of Independence. The Patuas were obviously in search of economic and political security. They sought financial and other help from the Government of West Bengal. At this time the Hinduised political and semi-political organisations also came forward to uplift the social position of the Patuas. The Patuas were asked to observe the Hindu ways of living (Appendix IV) and enroll themselves in Hinduism during the peak period of the National Movement and then back again, into the intermediary state. The next swing towards Hinduism began with the Hindu-Muslim riots in 1946 and was maintained for some years following the advent of Independence. The Patuas were obviously in search of economic and political security. They sought financial and other help from the Government of West Bengal. At this time the Hinduised political and semi-political organisations also came forward to uplift the social position of the Patuas. The Patuas were asked to observe the Hindu ways of living (Appendix IV) and enroll themselves
as Caste Hindus in the 1951 census. There were declarations by some Hindu pandits and leaders that Patuas were Hindus and in many villages the caste Hindus dined publicly with the Patuas after purification rites. But this ardour and zeal declined after the General Election in 1952. I found the Patuas despondent in the years of 1954-55. In the year 1958 the signs of a new swing towards Islamisation became visible. There was a favourable change in the attitude of the Patuas' Muslim neighbour regarding mosque entry and the use of common burial ground.

The present study shows that in Birbhum district 95.89% Patuas enrolled themselves as Muslims and 4.11% as Hindus. The two main reasons behind the latest swing towards Islam were: (1) minority communities in India had regained their sense of security and (2) scroll-painting and idol-making—the two activities which formed the basis of the Patuas' economic tie with the Hindu community—were becoming uneconomic as occupations. The pro-Islam tendency of the Patuas was reinforced by the indifferent attitude of the Hindus on the one hand and the active encouragement given by the Muslims on the other. It has been shown in the chapter on demographic study that Patua households in any one village are very few in many cases there are only one or two families. Under such circumstances, they have very much to depend on the help from their neighbouring communities. The social interaction between the Patuas and the Hindus or the Muslims is visibly poor, the more so in the former case. In rural areas Hindus, do not touch the dead bodies of other castes and more particularly of other communities. So when a death occurs in a Patua family, the Hindus do not come forward to be of
any assistance whereas the Muslims, who shrink from any social intercourse with the Patuas, come forward and render help at the time of disposing a Patua dead body. The Patuas, naturally grateful for this act of sympathy, regards it as a social recognition. The Patuas consider the job of mason and hodman as Musalmani Kaj, that is, as a traditionally Muslim occupation. In fact the mason's work has been almost monopolised by Muslims in the district of Birbhum as well as in West Bengal for a long time past. The graph of the dynamics of occupation for three generations shows an upward tendency for this profession among the Patuas of Birbhum. The cherished desire of a Patua guardian is that his or her ward should become either a school teacher or a mason. In the village Pachchira I found that the highest ambition admitted to by a Patua was to become an Imam or some functionary for service in the mosque. The desire obviously was for recognition as full Muslims and attainment of social prestige in the Muslim community. This movement towards Islamisation was found to be strong during recent years particularly among the young Patuas.

In spite of their zealous movement towards Islamisation and their eagerness to be absorbed in the Muslim community, the Patuas are not treated socially at par by the Muslims. It has been noted earlier that the Muslims are not willing to establish any marital relationship with the Patuas and although a Kaji and Egin perform certain rites in a Patua house, they never take cooked food from the Patuas. The detailed study of cultural life reveals that the Patuas still carry relics of tribal, Hindused and Islamised traits of culture all mixed together.
Despite Islamisation large sections of the Patuas community, particularly the older generation, are still nostalgic of their old traditions. As a result, the entire community is suffering psychologically from a crisis of identity and restlessness. This was evident from their overt expressions and their unconcealed unhappiness, even exasperation with at their present cultural position. Robert E. Park has described the plight of the "Marginal man" whom "fate has condemned to live in two societies and in two, not merely different but antagonistic cultures...., his mind is the crucible in which two different and refractory cultures may be said to melt and either wholly or in part, fuse." 52 A comparison also lies with the position of the hero in George Santayana's book "The Last Puritan - A Memoir in the form of a Novel," who was born in Spain but fate ordained that he should live most of his life in America and England and who always more or less feels as an alien, always conscious of his different traditions and of intimate and indissoluble connections with another. 53

Similar is the psychological condition of the Patuas community as a whole who always have a feeling of estrangment even when they make a bid for attachment to one or the other of two big groups, that is, the Hindus or Muslims. The Patuas being an unsophisticated


and poor community always suffer from a sense of insecurity along with the feeling of alienation. This psychological condition may be a potential basis for one or more swings in the future. This phenomenon of two-and-fro movement of a small and weak group may possibly be termed 'cultural oscillation'. Although the term 'cultural oscillation' is not in vogue in the fields of sociology and social anthropology, the use of the word oscillation is not altogether new. David Hume (1956) used the word oscillation (between polytheistic and monotheistic views) in his book 'The Natural History of Religion'.

Gellner wrote an essay on the 'Pendulum swing theory of Islam' in 1968. Levi Strauss showed 'oscillation of constant amplitude' in the structural analysis of the Asdiwal myth of the Tsimshian tribe of South Alaska.

It has been sought to show in this dissertation that the Patua oscillation is a function of security in the broader structure of Indian society in which effective relationships are tight and closed and group economics, status and social prestige count for much in in-group social acceptance to the disadvantage of those on the fringes with the result that the latter's sense of insecurity is further enhanced in psychological terms, when they are cut off from their traditional moorings.

55. Ibid.
Thus a hypothesis on cultural oscillation may be derived from the study of the Patuas as follows:

If a small rootless cultural group or community is by circumstances/historic reasons forced to live in between two groups, it oscillates, probably in search of both economic and political security and/or social prestige, till the group withers away, that is, it is absorbed into one of the two dominant groups or through a process of disintegration, into both, and the dynamics of such group behaviour may possibly be termed cultural oscillation.
The Patuas: A STUDY ON INTERCULTURAL OSCILLATION
Conducted by: Binoy Bhattacharjee Adhyapak, VISVA-BHARATI

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