CHAPTER - II

ORIGIN AND HISTORY
Origin and History

The caste name Chitrakar or Fatua is derived from occupation, namely, scroll painting and scroll exhibiting and in common parlance, in Bengal, the Chitrakars or the Patuas have become synonymous. But scroll painting, though it is regarded as the caste calling of the Patuas, is not a monopoly of theirs, nor is idol making. Before going into the history of the Patuas it should be stated that scroll exhibiting accompanied with versical racital of the stories depicted on the scrolls was in vogue for long in many countries of the world in the past. Descriptions of Chinese, Japanese, Burmese and Italian scrolls for instance are plentiful in literature and in museums. For example, in the village Hatserand, Police Station Bolpur, district Birbhum the Sutradhars draw Durga images on scrolls and many of the Fauzdars of Bishnupur, district Bankura earn their livelihood by scroll painting. Idol making is done not only by the Acharyas or Sutradhars or Kumbhakars but now a days by many formally trained artists of any caste. At the same time the Chitrakars or the Patuas themselves do not depend on scroll painting only for their livelihood. More about this is in the chapter on the economic life of the Patuas. Although the Patuas have a number of occupations they claim scroll painting, scroll exhibiting and idol making as their traditional caste occupations. Due to the lack of records the history of the Patuas has to be reconstructed from field data, available legends and references of the scroll painters in ancient sanskrit literature.

7. There are some collection of these scrolls in Kala-Bhavana, Santiniketan, Bangiya Sahitya Parishad and Ashutosh Museum, Calcutta.
Professor Deva Prasad Ghosh, ex-curator, Ashutosh Museum, Calcutta University mentioned in a talk at Bangiya Sahitya Parishad on 4 May, 1971 that references to Chitrakars are available in old Buddhist literature. The great poet Kalidas incidentally mentioned the name Chitrakars and the exhibition of scrolls in his dramas Abhijnan Sakuntalam and Malabikagnimitram. According to historians these dramas were written in the 5th century. The poet Banbhatta wrote his famous drama Harsha-Charita early in the 7th century. He utilised the Chitrakar with his yama pata to create the dramatic effect before the death of Prabhakar Bardhan, father of Harsha Bardhan. In the 8th century Bishakhadutta also mentions in his Mudra Raksh/Chitrakars' coming to the statesman chanakya, of legendary fame in pataliputra, after collecting secret information from different parts of the Maurya Empire. Scroll showing occurs also in Uttara-Ramcharita of Bhababhuti (8th century). The Brahmavaivarta Purana (written probably in the middle of the 13th century) dealt with their origin, occupation, caste affiliation etc., and mentioned clearly their expulsion only recently (i.e., the 13th century) from the recognised Naba Sayaka caste group (nine occupational castes) who were supposed to be originated from the union of Visva-Karma, the celestial architect with Ghritachi, the celestial nymph (apsara) for drawing paintings 'untraditionally' and stigmatised them as outcastes. Originally nine castes of the group, namely Malakar, Karmakar, Kangsakar, Sankhakar, Kumbhakar, Tantubya,----------------------------------------
Sutradhar, Swarnakar and Chitrakar used to enjoy the same rank in the social hierarchy. But the Chitrakars lost their rank and were ousted from the Naba Sayaka group for their deviation from tradition in their paintings. The exact words of the Purana are as follows:

(Byatikramena chitranam sadyaschitrarakarastatha
Patita Brahmashapen Brahmanancha Kopata)

वत्त्रमन चित्राम्स सयसिचत्रबरस्ताथा ।
पतिती ब्राहमापि ब्राह्मणानां कौपन: इ!

"Chitrakars for drawing paintings untraditionally have just been expelled (degraded) from society by the angry Brahmins."

The leaflets published by the Bangiya Chitrakar Unnayan Samiti (Association for the upliftment of the Chitrakars of Bengal) and the Bharat Sevak Sangha also quoted this verse from the Purana to prove that originally the Chitrakars were a clean caste within the Hindu social organisation but due to their own fault they lost caste-status and were ordered by the Brahmins to be regarded as 'Mlechcha' meaning Muslim. Later on being partially pardoned they assumed a position midway between the Hindu and the Muslims. Besides these references in literature there are many legends current among the Patuas regarding their origin and later fall in social position.

According to the most widely current legend, the Patuas were expelled from the Hindu social organisation as the punishment for a sacrilegious act, namely, polluting the brush with which a picture of...
of Lord Mahadeva had been drawn. I collected this story from Midnapur in 1954 and subsequently also from all other districts mentioned earlier. The late Gurusadaya Dutta had also got the same story with little differences in wording from Chhabilal Chitrakar of the village Panuria in 1930. The story goes as follows:-

Once upon a time a Patua was drawing a portrait of Mahadeva without his consent and it so happened that just then Mahadeva was coming along that way. The Patua was frightened out of his wits. In fear of Mahadeva's anger which was sure to be aroused by the picture, the Patua, trying to hide his guilt, put his brush inside his mouth and thus polluted it with which the scroll's portrait had been drawn. Mahadeva, being a god, of course, understood everything and became all the more annoyed to see his misbehaviour. In his anger he then cursed the entire Patua (Chitrakar) "community " From today you will become Mlechcha (Muslim)"- Then all members of the community came and with loud lamentations fell at Mahadeva's feet, repeatedly begged his forgiveness. They implored the God to tell them how they could henceforth earn the livelihood. By now Mahadeva's anger had cooled down and the God declared that henceforth the Patuas be neither Hindu nor Muslim, they would follow the customs of Muslims, but earn their livelihood by painting and making images of Hindu gods and goddesses.

Many other legends collected from the Patuas of Birbhum need to be mentioned here.
Panchkari Chitrakar (60) of the village Bagdola narrated this story:

Once Ballal Sen, the King of Bengal, set a Swarnakar (Gold Smith), a Sutradhar (Carpenter) and a Chitrakar (Scroll Painter) each a job to be finished in a very short time. None of these three could do it. The angry King then declared their whole communities as outcaste. The Swarnakars and the Sutradhars continued their Hindu customs and though fallen in Status remained Hindu. The Patuas continued their Hindu profession i.e. scroll painting and idol making but took to Muslim customs, thus occupying a position which was neither Hindu nor Muslim.

Samadish Patua of Purandarpur said that they were Hindus. During the reigns of Muslim Nawabs a levy called the 'zizia' was imposed upon the Hindus. In order escape this repressive tax the Patuas along with many other poor low-caste Hindus became Muslim. The other castes were assimilated in the Muslim community but the Patuas could not be so assimilated as they had to continue their profession among the Hindus. That is why the Patuas could not be absorbed either by the Hindu or by the Muslims and assumed a social position in between the Hindus and the Muslims.

Banku Patua of the village Sardha said that the Patuas became Muslims for protection by the Nawabs from the attacks of Marhatta plunderers- the Bargis. The Patuas are docile by nature. They became Muslims in the hope that the Muslim rulers would protect them. Thus the Patuas remained in a midway between Hinduism and Mohammadanism.

Majid Patua originally of the village Pachthubi of Murshidabad district and now settled in Sardha, Birbhum narrated this legend:
There was a sage, part of whose daily routine was to cut into pieces two cows belonging to his two sons and afterwards, with the help of his magical power revived the cows. One day after the cows had been dismembered the sage's elder son hid a piece of meat and a bone inside a heap of cowdung. When the sage revived the cows he found that the lowest rib of the left side and a portion of flesh near waist were missing from the elder son's cow. When the sage demanded to know what had happened to the missing parts of the cow, the elder son confessed that he had hidden them. When he was ordered by the sage to produce them the son went and found that the bone had turned into an onion and the meat into a garlic. So he could not carry out his father's order. The sage then cursed him in anger "since you have a craving for beef you will become a yaban (Muslim) from this day". The Patuas are descendants of this elder son and from that day onward they became Muslims and the descendants of the younger son remained Hindu.

With the increasing Islamisation of the Patuas the legends are changing also. Pashupati Patua of the village Daurka told me "We were never Hindus, we were Muslims. We came to this area from our ancestral home land which was a desert. We came in contact with the Hindus and imbibing Hindu customs, deviated from the path ordained by Hazret Mahammad. For this reason we were expelled from the Muslim community. Now the Patuas are trying to give up Hindu customs. in order to be regarded as true Muslims."
These legends call for critical analysis. The first legend—that in the Brahmavaibarta-Purana about the Patuas' origin and their relegation to the position of outcastes in nothing but to rationalize their intermediary position after the Muslims came into political power. There is no reference of Chitrakars in any scriptural writing relating to the Hindu caste-structure and occupations earlier than the Brahmavaibarta-Purana of the mid 13th century. Scroll painting and scroll exhibition as an occupation have been practised by some people all over the world. The themes of the scrolls are mostly mythological stories or legends connected with some prophet or saint. The Burmese scrolls for instance depict the life of Gautam Buddha. In Bengal most of the themes are taken from 'Mangala Kabya (stories of semi-divine folk gods and goddesses) or the Ramayan or the Mahabharata. Some scrolls depict the supernatural stories about Muslim Pirs. Few scrolls on the life of Jesus Christ and known as 'Khristo pat' have been found in Midnapur. But there are some secular scrolls, too. I witnessed an Italian film which was based on the story of Wolf and Scilla exhibited through a scroll in a village fair. A similar versical story entitled "Manohar Fansira" was collected by me from a Chitrakar of the village Kumirmara, district Midnapur—a story of love and jealousy, plunder and peace, cruelty and kindness.

The use of scroll painting and its exhibition with versical narration as a form of entertainment and also as a medium of mass education has been in vogue from ancient time and all over the world.

9. Film directed by Vittorio Di Sica, Italy.
The origin and distribution of scroll in the context of the diffusion of a world-wide cultural trait would be an interesting topic for research, which, however, is beyond the scope of the present study. Suffice for it to note that exhibition of scroll painting accompanied with versical narration or songs was an institution that existed in ancient India. But there are no sufficient data that could uphold conclusive answers to questions like (1) whether this profession was the monopoly of one particular caste or not or (2) whether the Patuas or the Chitrakars of Bengal were responsible for all such activities in India or (3) whether the Chitrakars, the Patuas, the Chitrakathis, the Chitralekhs found in different parts of India belonged to one ethnic group which has branched and spread in various directions from one habitat. A solution of these questions can be attempted through a comprehensive investigation project including a physical anthropological study. There has been no such study of this group. In this context attention may be drawn to the following brief remark occurring in "Tribes and Castes of West Bengal (census 1951):- "There is striking ethnical similarity between the Chitrakars of South India and Bengal"10 But the social position of the Chitrakars of Bengal is much lower than that of the Chitrakams of South India as the latter " now belong to the Aryya Kshatriya Varna of Chandra Vansa. Mention may be made here of something that suggests the possibility of same ethnic link between the Chitrakars of Bengal and that of Orrissa. The Chitrakars of Bengal

11. Ibid.
draw a picture panel of Lord Jagannath, Balaram and their sister Subhadra at the end of the main theme of the scroll and ends their recitals with the devotional utterance of "Jai Jagannath". I have heard them whenever referring to Jagannath, with the words "Jai Jagannath" (victory of Jagannath). There is a similarity in the lines of drawing as well as colour scheme between the Orissan scrolls and the Birbhum (Bengal) scrolls. This similarity in their works and the ritualistic devotional utterance of "Jai Jagannath" (Jagannath is the patron Diety Of Orissa) provides scope for thinking that there might be a common ancestral link between the Chitrakar of Birbhum (Bengal) and Orissa. Considering the clues of physical affinity and professional resemblance it may be conjectured that the Patuas possibly migrated from some common home land. Somatoscopically the Patuas bear the appearance of the lower castes like Bauri and Bagdis of Bengal. Herbert Risley (1915) pointed out that these lower castes have had tribal origins. Other cultural traits such as taking liquor on every ceremonial occasion, the custom of paying bride's price, etc., also indicate a tribal traits of culture. Burial is also practised by many tribals in India. The Patua political organisation and penology also indicate traits of tribal culture. "We cannot live in one place. Our habit is to move from one place to another. I heard from my grand father that we were nomads, (Jajabar) used to settle by the side of a pond and where there were Palm trees. Our occupations were mat making out of Palmyra leaf, and various

types of juggling, abracadabra including petty thefts. We are also known as Bediya (nomads)\(^\text{13}\). This was from Rakhu Patua of the village Bagdola. Rakhu Patua is the grand son of Satish Patua and nephew of Bhakti Patua who were Patua leaders not only of Birbhum district but of the whole of West Bengal.

Taken together the foregoing facts and legends about the origin and history of the Patuas point to a tribal entity in the long past and although their ancestral home land cannot be clearly traced it was possibly some where from the Chotanagpur area of Malpaharia\(^\text{14}\) (the Patuas are called Paharimal by the Hindus of frontier Bengal) that they entered Bengal and gradually came in contact with the Hindus. It was due to this contact that they adopted scroll painting and later on idol making, for which they found a market among the Hindus. These new occupations were in addition to their original occupations abracadabra, snake charming, juggling, etc. - which they retained. With the advent of the Muslim rule in Bengal they swung towards Islam in search of security and made scrolls depicting miracles of Muslim pirs which came to be known as "Gazir Pat" and "Mohammad Mangal"\(^\text{15}\). They received the patronage of the Muslim rulers. They adopted Muslim names and cultural traits. But acculturation is a long process and cultural assimilation is a still longer process. The decline of Muslim power in Bengal came before the Patuas' acculturation was complete. Muslim patronage having lost its value, they now swung back towards the Hindus, The Hindus while patronising the Patuas' scroll shows and recital of Hindu

13. Bhattacharyya, B; Patua Jatir Paschatpat Prasange, Chochatrak Vol.3; No.1; Autumn Issue
14. Ibid.
mythological subjects, they did not allow any kind of social intercourse with them and kept them at a distance as outcaste because of their Islamised traits. So they assumed a kind of eclectic social position reflected in the first myth (Brahmavaibarta-Purana) regarding the Patuas' origin and intermediary outcaste social position.

The second myth reflects conditions in favour of an increasing tendency towards Islamisation. They were looked down upon by the high-caste Hindus. Their market was shrinking among the Hindus as other castes entered the field of idol making. Scroll shows and recitals was no longer remunerative. They had to sing songs for about half an hour but received very little for this labour. They had to look out for new types of occupations such as mason's work, house painting, carding(sana) etc. In all these occupations training could be had from the Muslims. The social change towards Islam naturally gained momentum with this change in the occupational sphere. The pro-Muslim trend is reflected in the myth in which the Hindu muni cuts cows and the elder son becomes a Muslim. Beef eating is considered as the critical trait that distinguishes a Muslim from a Hindu.

After the great Hindu-Muslim riot and with the advent of Independence there was again a swing away from Islam towards Hinduism. This time the movement was more organised and took a socio-political shape. Leaflets and booklets (Appendix-VII) were printed to prove that the Patuas had previously held the position of a higher caste in the Hindu
social organisation to which they should be restored. Public meetings in support of this movement were organised in all districts (Appendix-II). The Bangiya Chitraker Unnayan Samiti issued circulars, some of these in verse, urging the community to change their pattern of life, to give up Islamic traits and to adopt Hinduised traits (Appendix-IV). Nevertheless, the Hindu priests, particularly in rural areas, declined to serve the Patuas and before long the swing of the pendulum was again towards Islam. An organised movement towards Islam started in 1952 under the leadership of Bhakti Patua of the village Ayas (J.L. No.89). Under the spur of this movement the Patuas began to give up Hindu traits of culture and look down upon idol making and scroll painting as much as upon snake charming and juggling.

In the third myth (narrated by Pashupati Patua) the Patua desire for identification with the Muslims is explicit. It wants to prove that the Patuas originally belonged to the Muslim community and later on they were degraded because of their adoption of Hindu traits.

The oscillation of Patua myths is comparable to what we find in the Asidwal myths of the Tsimshian tribe of the Pacific coast, South of Alaska. 16