CHAPTER VI

Material Culture and Language
instinct or a sense of passionate attachment to permanent possessions—land or other durable property. Perhaps this is mainly due to the nature of their occupations and their proclivity to move from place to place. This habit together with their low earning power is inimical to saving and any inclination to acquire permanent possessions. On the other hand it encourages a proneness towards a hand-to-mouth existence. The rather disjointed economic life of the Patuas is pervaded by a lackadasical spirit.

**Material Culture:**

The material culture of the Patuas reflects the poverty-stricken condition of the community. Except a few relatively well-off families, the material condition of the community is monotonously poor. A considerable quantity of data on material culture has been collected during the field work but since a detailed account would not be relevant here a short description of the cultural milieu is given.

**Dress and Ornaments:**

The common dress of the adult male is dhuti and shirt or punjabi. Inside the house only a short dhuti covering the lower portion of the body is considered sufficient. The trunk usually remains bare. A few Patua students, like other students, use trousers as their college dress. The womenfolk wear sari. Usually they drape the sari in such a way as to cover both the upper and the lower parts of the body. This is the common dress of both Hindu and Muslim women in rural Bengal. When going out for huckstering or for any other purpose the women also use undergarments e.g. petticoat, brassiere and blouse,
according to their respective economic condition. Elderly women wear only sari even when they go out. One Patua lady, named *Kohinoor,* told me that as Muslims they should use 'Borkha' like the Muslim women when they go out, but neither Kohinoor himself nor any other Patua women including those of the highly Islamised village of Pachcharia, never used the 'borkha'. The male Patuas of Pachcharia prefer lungi to dhuti like the Muslims of the village. Use of dhuti among the Muslims in Birbhum is not uncommon.

Small children, up to five or six years, rarely wear any clothes. Grown up children, particularly, the school going boys among them, wear half-pants and shirt. The girls wear frocks quite often without any undergarments.

Women wear ornaments. These, usually, are bangles of glass, plastic or bronze. Necklaces made of bronze or rolled gold of a cheap variety are also in use. The use of gold ornaments is rare. Very few wear gold chains or ear-rings. Rings and ear-rings of rolled gold are worn by young girls. The old ladies generally do not wear any ornament except one or two bangles. Previously, married women used to wear bangles made of conch-shell and the iron bangle customary for married Hindu women to wear. The Patua women are still seen wearing the iron bangle but they are abandoning the use of conch-shell bangles. The widows, as a rule, do not wear any ornament. The Patuas, neither the men nor the women, tattoo their bodies. I found only in two remote villages - Bonta and Jalundi tattoo marks on the forehead and the arms of three ladies. When asked about the motive behind the tattoo marks they said that they got themselves tattooed at a fair just casually and not motivated by any particular belief.
Utensils:

Utensils in Patua households are of the type commonly in use among poor people in rural Bengal. Pitchers and cooking vessels mostly in use are earthen. Families which are a little well off have pitchers and cooking vessels of bell metal and iron. For purposes of storing they use big earthen pots locally known as 'hola' and sometimes tin can procured from shopkeepers or neighbours. Enamelled tin plates and cups are most commonly use for serving food and enamelled tin glasses for water and tea. Those who are somewhat better off may use crockery of course of a cheap variety. Tea drinking has now become common in rural Bengal. The habit has spread among the Patuas as also the habit of offering tea to visitors as a gesture of hospitality. Indigenous varieties of knife and 'da' are used for domestic purposes. Bedding consists of mats made of palmyra leaf or persimmon leaf, rags or 'kanthas' and small pillows. A few well-to-do families possess wooden cots, quilts, mattresses and bedcovers. Similarly, a few families, in the near-urban areas, possess bicycles, transistor radios, electric torches and wrist watches. All these have become articles of bridgroom demand as dowry. The impact of these demands on the social life has been referred to in the chapter on marriage.

Tools in use differ from family to family according to occupation. As very few Patuas at present are engaged in scroll painting implements of painting brushes, colour pots, etc.--are not to be found in most houses. Old scrolls and 'chowkis'-rectangular slightly raised platforms made of bamboo for holding scrolls at the time of exhibition
are found in almost every house though now a days a Patua would not readily admit that he had any scroll in his house. The more Islamised Patuas have sold their scrolls to other Patuas or to collectors of scroll paintings. In the houses of Patuas who are practising 'go-baidyas', the implements for treatment of cattle—special rope, iron hook, iron scraper will be found. Trowels are found in the house of a Patua who work as a mason or hodman. Instruments used for carding are found in the houses of Patuas whose occupation is carding. Covered baskets made of bamboo plastered with cow-dung paste are found in the houses of snake charmers. No traditional recreational instruments, except a 'madal' (small tom-tom) used as an accompaniment of songs sung during marriage ceremonies, are found in most of the Patua house.

There is no fixed pattern of orientation for Patua houses. In some cases the house are road-facing but in most cases the backwall of the house is on the roadside and the entrance is from the inside courtyard. Except in the village Pachchiria, there is a 'maruli' at the entrance of almost every Patua house. Regarding the 'maruli' the Patuas have the same belief as the Hindus in its efficacy to preserve the health and prosperity of the inmates of the house. A similar belief attaches to the five or seven vermilion dots to be seen on the upper portion of the door-frame in many a Patua house. Though

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* A circular portion of about 18" diametre, coated with cowdung paste at the entrance of the house or middle of the court yard, found in almost Hindu house in the rural areas of the district Birbhum. The belief behind it is that Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth would not leave the house and this would also keep the members of house free from disease.
the Patuas are known as an artisan community and have an artistic tra-
dition as scroll painters there is no sign of any artistic work on
the outside or the inside walls of their houses such as can be seen in
the Santal dwellings, irrespective of economic condition, in the area.
In Patua dwellings the common pattern of decorating walls consists in
hanging calendars with pictures, or pictures cut out from calendars or
newspapers. Among the Islamised Patuas the pictures are of Mecca, Medina,
the black stone of Kaba, etc., or they relate to some Islamic legend.
Among the Hinduised Patuas the pictures are of goddess Durga, Kali,
Tarapith; etc. In the remoter villages pictures connected with both
Hindu and Islamic legends are found together. In some Patua houses dolls
and terracotta idols are kept in a niche. An idol of Ganesha** may be
seen in a niche in the house of an Islamised Patua. In a few houses,
generally near some town, pictures on holy subjects are seen side by
side with pictures of semi naked girls obtained from cinema journals.

Dwellings:

The Patua dwellings in a village are clustered in one area on the
fringe of the village, in most cases near the dwellings of low-caste
Hindus. It is not so in the village Purandarpur which is fast developing
into a town and is situated only seven miles away from the district
headquarters and has become the most important junction for bus routes
as all the major bus routes to the district headquarters pass through
it. The Patuas' nearest neighbours at Purandarpur are Swarnakars and
Sadgopes- communities within the Naba Sayak caste group. One Patua
family lives separately behind a shop on the main road away from the
Patua para. In Itaguria which is a Muslim village situated six miles
away from Suri and seven miles away from Sainthia town, the Patuas

* A holy place of the Hindus in the district of Birbhum.

** See note on 'Ganesha'
...are on the outskirts with a Bagdi dwelling nearby, remoter places such as Tarachi, Kanachi, Malanchi, Taloan Aya, Jhanpara, Bonta, etc. Usually the Patua habitation is found on an isolated upland. The local Hindus and Muslims refer to it as Bede or Bediya para or Bede danga.

The ground plan of a Patua hut is rectangular. The walls are made of mud which are colourwashed on the inside only in the case of the houses belonging to a few comparatively well-off families in Purandarpur, Itaguria, Sardha and Shibagram. In all other cases the huts have a poverty-stricken look. There are only three double-storied mud houses,— one each in Purandarpur, Chandpara and Kanachi. The frames for the roof are made of bamboos or pieces of 'tal' (palmyra) wood or a combination of them. These frames are fixed by dovetailing and tied with coir-ropes. The doors are usually made of single planks or plaited bamboo-splits except those in the few houses of the well-to-do who have wooden doors. There are no windows but only pigeon holes in the walls just below the roof on three sides. The roof is usually two-sloped and thatched.

Narendra Patua (63) of the village Bonta stated that according to old Patua custom a Patua house should have compartments; also, bamboo poles were not to be used its construction. Rakhu Patua of Bagdola said that it was customary with the Patuas to have only temporary settlements. They would choose a site near some tank and build huts of palmyra leaf. They would stay for two or three months and then break up the settlement...
and move to a new site. Sometimes they would return to the same place after a few months or after a year.

The usual Patua house today consists of a single room of approximately 10' x 8' and a verandah approximately of 10' x 5'. Cooking is done in one corner of the verandah. Some Patuas have two-roomed houses. Only the few two-storied mud houses mentioned earlier have more than two rooms. I did not come across any studio for scroll painting anywhere except in a house in Itaguria, one in Shibagram, one in Madian and the biggest one belonging to Banku Patua of the village Sardha. Banku Patua is the single soul now in Birbhum who makes his living by idol making and selling scrolls throughout the year. In the general pattern of Patua housing there is no provision for keeping livestock or poultry. Many Patuas said that animal husbandry and bird keeping were outside the community's tradition. At present a few families which possess land keep cattle for the purpose of agriculture. A few families have taken to keeping in Purandarpur under the impact of community development work in the block. No kitchen garden was seen attached to a Patua dwelling in any village, there being hardly any land beyond what the clustered houses stand on. Also, the peripatetic tendency of the Patuas staying away from home sometimes for months together goes against gardening and keeping domestic animals.

Ceremonies connected with the construction of a house:

Ceremonial removal of three spadefulls of earth to make a hole in the north-western corner of the site of the proposed house on the 13th day of the bright fortnight of the month of Asvin (September-October) is an essential preliminary to the construction of a new house.
A little mustard oil and vermilion is put into the hold. Patuas are shy of admitting that they observe this ritual. In some cases during my inquiries the denial by the adults was contradicted by the children. After the ceremonial removal of earth the construction of the house can take place at any convenient time during the year.

Some people arrange a 'Milad-Sarif' on the day of the first entry into the new house. The village Maulvi reads a few passages from the holy Koran. The poorer people do without such ceremony. But there is a rule which all observe about who should first enter the new-built house.

The ceremonies in connection with the construction of a new house reveal an admixture of traits of Hindu and Muslim cultures. The observance of a ritual and at the same time the attempt to conceal the fact from outsiders reflect the Patuas' oscillating attitude between Hinduism and Islam. The poor housing condition and the lack of interest in livestock and poultry are due to the peripatetic habit of the Patuas—may be a relic of their nomadic past.
Language:

I heard from my grandfather that we had a language different from Bengali. But at present we do not know any language other than Bengali. This was Rakhu Patua of Bagdola told me. Similar statements were made by a few other Patuas in the district of Birbhum. This and information from Murshidabad and from the Mal Patuas of Purulia suggest that the Patuas might have had a language of their own before they adopted Bengali.

Though at present the Patuas of Birbhum speak Bengali I observed during the field work that their speech does not always follow the local variations in accent in the different regions of Birbhum. For example, the Hindus and the Muslims in the Nalhati area, adjacent to Murshidabad district, have a longish tone in ending each word and some times after a syllable but strikingly enough, these variations are not so pronounced in the speech of the Patuas of the same localities. This difference in intonation and accent makes one speculate that the Patuas possibly are immigrants in the district of Birbhum. In the matter of language, as in some other matters, the Patuas have a tendency towards secretiveness. They have a code language which they use among themselves before outsiders when they want to keep something from the latter. The code language is used particularly when the Patuas need consultations among themselves, as, for instance, when they are giving a magic show or are engaged in some abracadabra in their dealings with outsiders the Patuas take recourse to a good deal of simulation. For instance they exhibit Hindu traits and conceal Muslim traits when dealing with the Hindus and do the opposite when dealing with Muslims.
I heard on many occasions the same Patua using the word 'jal' in a Hindu house and the word 'pani' in a Muslim house, for water. In a Hindu house they will take the meat of a goat killed in the non-Muslim way and deny that they take beef. But in a Muslim house they will take beef and deny that they ever take meat of animals killed in a non-Muslim way. They try to keep Hindus in the dark about their Islamised ways and Muslims in the dark about their Hinduised ways.

The Patuas would not divulge anything to an outsider about their code language. After long efforts I could persuade one or two people to tell me a few words and sentences and their meanings. They are given below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bengali</th>
<th>English synonym</th>
<th>Patua code</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maachch</td>
<td>Fish</td>
<td>Chhimu</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manush</td>
<td>Man,</td>
<td>Noka</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dudh</td>
<td>Milk</td>
<td>Fitkiri</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bhat</td>
<td>Rice</td>
<td>Batun</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jubati</td>
<td>Maiden</td>
<td>Gelen</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jal</td>
<td>Water</td>
<td>Liruni</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mansa</td>
<td>Meat</td>
<td>Nuti</td>
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<tr>
<td>Go mansa</td>
<td>Beef</td>
<td>Khnaju</td>
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<tr>
<td>Muri</td>
<td>Puffed rice</td>
<td>Lulu</td>
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<tr>
<td>Choto chchele meye</td>
<td>Child</td>
<td>Lalo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taka-Paisa</td>
<td>Money</td>
<td>Chubdi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhala</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Satim</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
From the Patua sentences in the above list it will be seen
paratetic though that their structural pattern is some what similar
as that of Bengali sentences. However, in view of the scantiness of
the data no hypothesis regarding this code language of the Patuas
can be hazarded.