Comments and Conclusions

In the foregoing chapters, we studied, in some detail, aspects of the Rajasthani phad and the Bengali pata traditions. These two traditions were chosen because they offer strong contrasts to each other in the format and structure of the images, their means of production, the range of style and subject, and the social purposes that they serve.

This chapter will take up some of these points of contrast, and attempt to see them as related to, or as agents of, the differing visual qualities of these images.

Acts of Narration

This dissertation has attempted to study methods of narration used within these images. Yet, it must be stressed, these are not self-sufficient narrative paintings, any more than the picture-showman’s songs are self-sufficient oral literature: the two are bound to each other in a larger complex that brings together image, song and performance, coalescing (or negotiating between) the expressions of painters, performers and audiences. These images are part of performative acts of narration, and it has been the attempt, in this work, to see them in context of the different communities that participate in and view these acts.

The following section will return to information that has already been recounted at various points in the preceding chapters. These points are taken up here in order to attempt a comparative study that articulates the significance of many of the points of contrast.
Variances
To the art historian, it is the difference in the pictorial quality of these two traditions that is arresting. The Rajasthani phad is complex whole made up of simple parts; its range of figural types is small, filled in with a few flat colours. Phads change very little, from painter to painter, or year to year. The pata tradition, on the other hand, is visually complex, with much regional variation and rapid stylistic change. Each image on the pata is likely to be fuller, more detailed in its rendering of figures and settings, than its counterpart on the Rajasthani phad.

Part of the reason for this is that the phads' production is centralised, confined to a single clan of painters, while patas are painted by a large number of artists from several communities, of which patuas are only the best-known. Again, the phad must retain a recognisable form, because the painter and performer belong to distinct groups: the bhopo requires images that he understands, and the painter takes care to fulfil his expectations. The patua, on the other hand, unifies both painter and performer within himself -- or at any rate, within his close circle. Here, the painter has no fear that his images will be unintelligible to the performer, whose task it is to explain these images to the viewers.

But the most significant explanation for the conservatism of the phad, and the innovation of the pata, lies, possibly, in the respective places that the two performances occupy in their social contexts.

The phad banchana is a ritual occasion, devoted to the propitiation of a particular god. The phad is a mobile shrine, an image that holds both the sacred icon, and his sacred narrative. To those who make the phad, or who perform with it, or indeed, those who patronise the performance, it is essential that the phad be 'authentic,' and true to the notional original. Alterations in the phad would be treated not as innovation, but as error.

The pata, on the other hand, is now seen as a medium of entertainment rather
than ritual. It is not worshipped or in any other way treated as sacred; the patua shows, within the same performance, scrolls of various deities, as well as secular scrolls. He must seize his opportunities to turn indifferent bystanders into interested audience, and is encouraged to innovate to hold their interest. The patua's innovations take the form of stylistic change as well as an ever-widening range of subjects.

The conditions of viewing play an important part in modulating our reception of these images.

The phad is an enormous, but single, visual field. 5' high and 35' long, it is displayed in its entirety for the length of the performance. Its space is not marked into discrete and easily understood units, and as it stands, stretched beyond the margins of the vision, in the dimness of the night, it seems an impossibly complex mass of figures.

The complexity of the phad is a matter of scale, being made up of a large number of simple parts. The individual figures on the phad are conceived of in a formulaic manner, and rendered broadly, without much detail. A more detailed rendering would have been wasted on, and indeed, might have further confounded the image which is to be seen thus, from a distance, in the dark, all at once.

Although the figures on the phad are identified minimally, through the colours of their clothes and steeds, the iconographic elements are used with consistency through the whole image, for all the figures coexist on the same plane, and a single episode may take us across great tracts of the phad as we follow a character on his journeyings.

In the pata, the converse obtains: the images are fuller, and more precisely delineated. There is a greater variation in the figural types as well as their attitudes, gestures and expressions, and even the settings are more detailed. This richness may relate to the manner in which we view the scroll, one or two frames at a time. We are able to linger over each image, and they reward
a more patient viewing. Perhaps one should think of it as another form of sufficiency: as the patua sings his lines, the image he holds up in the dazzling daylight should be full enough to engage our attention.

Yet, because old images are constantly being rolled away, even as new ones are unfurled, the pata's viewing is grounded in the present instant. Memory plays its tricks with the past: some things must be repeated, for they must be brought back to our attention; some things are forgotten or transformed. There are frequent breaks in the continuity in the pata: from frame to frame, the same character changes costume or even appearance.

As the performers interact with their images, they sing and gesticulate, and they may dance and speak. At times the performative acts follow the pictorial structure. The bhopo dances along the length of the phad, measuring his steps so that he may stop at the appropriate point. He gestures to the image with a long pointer, so that he may show his viewers the image without obscuring it.

At other times, the structure of the image seems to take into account the patterns of handling and gesticulation that would ease performance. Many of the patas' frames are arranged in a boustrophedon sequence, reading from left to right in one frame, and right to left in the next, allowing the patua to gesture in smooth, circular movements.

The pata is shown part by part, and the patua sings, and points to images, to clarify what it is we see. The need for clarity is more pressing in the viewing of the phad, whose enormous and enormously complex image stands completely unfurled. Clarity is brought by the diyalo, the bhopo's assistant, who holds the lamp to illuminate the images relevant to the moment that the bhopo describes. While the performers may understand the structure of the phad, for the viewers it remains something of a mystery. Much closer to their ken are the words of the epic. These words are the substance of the phad performance. They are overwhelmingly the more significant part of the proceedings. The flow of words is continuous; only at long intervals, after the

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telling of an event is done, does the bhopo point to the image and say ‘Here he is, doing the things I spoke of.’ And for the better part of the performance, the bhopo sits down and sings. The image behind him remains unregarded.

Perhaps words dominate in the phad banchano, because, for the bard, the image comes to him as an external given. It is an appropriate and iconographically correct visualisation of the text, a sort of book in which the full extent of the tale is put down in a visual shorthand notation, but it is not made by him, and it is not his to remake as he pleases. What are his own are the words. Received from his elders, the verse sections should be memorised verbatim, but the prose arthav is open to improvisation. As he lovingly embroiders conversations and descriptions, the words of the epic swell, and the relative importance of the image dwindles, for as the text increases, references to the image come further and further apart in the flow of words.

For the patua, more often than not, the external given is his song. The short palas he sings often come from sources outside his own community, and are to be sung from memory. There is little space for improvisation here; no prose interpolations are inbuilt into the structure of the recitation; but the images that accompany the songs are the patuas’ own. In the pata tradition, we may think of the songs as the external element of relative fixity, while each making of a pata opens the chance of a new visualisation, prompting changes in the image.

The richness of the image makes the pata performance a visual experience, more than a verbal one. The attention to the image is reinforced during performance, by the patuas’ frequent reference to the image. The constant rolling of the scroll focuses attention to the emergent image, but the patua’s reference to figures within the scroll that come with almost every line of song, reinforce our attention to the visual.

Scale, married to structure, plays an interesting part in the reception of the images, and indeed the texts, in these two traditions. The phad is large, as is
its epic, and the internal organisation of the *phad* follows the logic of space. Locales are identified, and figures forge connections between them as they move from place to place. In the course of a performance, we see events that link together images placed in distinct parts of the *phad*.

In any one performance, the *bhopo* selects one or two episodes from the lengthy epic. The images he points out during the performance relate to these chosen episodes, and are only a small part of the large extent of the scroll. We hear episodes from a tale, and see portions of the image. The whole is not explained to us. We experience extracts. As extract or fragment, the *phad banchana* surrenders its opportunity to give us the pleasures of the whole, the comforting sense of beginnings, middles and ends, the purposiveness of the overall structure.

The *pata*, and the songs that accompany the *patas*, are smaller in scale and are meant to be seen and heard in their entirety; often several scrolls are seen in the course of a performance. As a vertical scroll that proceeds in a given direction, the *pata* has an inbuilt logic of narration, that must follow a temporal order rather than a spatial one. Such an order stresses the operation of cause and effect, marking the importance of beginnings and endings. The form of the *pata* favours a linear progression, and gives one the sense of being purposively impelled in a particular direction. We see the whole story, and as we proceed from beginning to end, we see moral codes being upheld, or justice being done. Scale and structure combine to give the *pata* a moralising and didactic temper. This is the effect of seeing the whole *pata*, as opposed to seeing only fragments of the *phad*.

In the study of these two traditions, an area of enquiry that always yielded intriguing and surprising information was the relationship of image to word. How ambiguous the image is, became clear when one saw the divergent re-readings of a single image within the two traditions. The *bhopo* re-reads a single figure as standing for various characters and events, or he re-interprets the scroll dedicated to Pabuji as though it were a scroll of Dev Narayan. And
the *patuas* re-use stock imagery in Ramayana and Krishnalila scrolls, making the same figure stand for different things in differing contexts. Sometimes, a *patua* may read an entirely new content into an old scroll.

Such manipulations of meaning are facilitated by the ambiguity that is perhaps deliberately retained in the image. But it does have sobering effect on those who would seek the meaning of images. 'Seeing is believing' should perhaps be inverted, for what we believe reshapes the objects that we see.

**Further Directions**

The two traditions we have studied here suggest two formats of seeing narrative images. Through the history of art, in different guises, in paintings or bas-reliefs, these two modes of seeing recur in many forms.

In one format, the viewer remains static while the image moves before his eyes. He sees an image at a time, and each image is likely to be viewed with attention, perhaps at close quarters. Within each frame, it is likely that a specific and finite portion of text is chosen for rendition. Subsequent images link in linear succession, in a mode that stresses causality and impels one's attention to the future, and its promise of a resolution.

Such a viewing belongs to the vertical scroll, but is seen also in illuminated manuscripts or books, and in linearly-directed friezes. As successions of individual moments that replace each other before the viewer's eye, this is the ancestor of the cinema.

In the second format, all aspects of the image are co-present in space. In order to read the image, the viewer must move through it, with his body or his eye, seeking its order, temporalising its spatial links.

If the narration is continuous, as it is in the *phad*, or in the murals of Ajanta, or the gateways at Sanchi, there are no arbitrary conventions, like the
conventions of reading, that can direct his decoding of the image, and the
presence of an interpreter becomes necessary. As the viewer or interpreter
moves back and forth, his own movements through real space mimic, in an
abbreviated form, the movements of the characters through their fictional
space. In its identification of sections of space with particular locales, and the
criss-crossing movements of figures back and forth among them, continuos
narration resembles the notation of a dramatic performance. The act of
reading these images -- whether confined to the internal world of the viewer,
or articulated by an interpreter -- is an act of theatre.

In studying the visual narration within *patas* and the *phads*, this thesis has
sought to examine the visible aspects of the image, as well as the manner in
which they are viewed. The communication of the image is effected through
the content and the context of the image, and it has been my attempt to show
the interrelation between word and image, viewing conditions and visual
effect.

When these scrolls are displayed in museums, they are divorced from the
accompanying songs. We come away without a sense of the interplay of word
and image, the clarification of the finger that points, or the lamp that
illuminates. Today we are able to reconstruct the viewing conditions for these
images, and understand how aspects of these images are affected by or
designed for, particular forms of display. But it is not just the pictures of
showmen in which structure and function are interrelated. All images were
made to be viewed in particular contexts, and there was, probably, as much
of an interrelationship between the context and the content of the image,
elsewhere, as there is here. In each case, there would have been a particular
order and distance of viewing; portions of the message would have been
conveyed by the images, while other portions were communicated by words -
even if the words were unuttered, and were the prior knowledge that the
viewers brought to their act of seeing. Only, many of these contexts are lost to
us, and may now be irrecoverable.

Perhaps the findings of this thesis can suggest directions of content-context relation for other categories of images, and other forms of display. The pilgrim's circumambulation of temple or stupa brought her images in a particular, cumulative order. The vast murals on cave walls were perhaps explained by lamplight, to visitors or initiates. The discussions at court over a new miniature painting added an oral context of explanation and interpretation. And the teacher held up leaves from a manuscript, showing his disciples the workings of the cosmos.