



PHOTOGRAPHS BY AMITABHA GUPTA

A PATA IS CREATED BY PAINTING ON MULTIPLE SHEETS OF COMMERCIAL POSTER PAPER STITCHED TOGETHER TO FORM THE CANVAS

PAINTED MELODY

BENGALI PATUAS OR CHITRAKARS (painter singers) specialise in narrative scroll painting (*patachitra*, *pata* or *pot*) creations. In an earlier time, the Patuas wandered from village to village. They would unroll each scroll, frame by frame, and sing songs they had themselves composed (*pater gan*). For their performance, they were 'remunerated' with rice, vegetables and coins. Over time, however, this form of mass entertainment faded out. Patuas had to improvise their skills for survival and to save their art form.

A group of Patuas has taken patachitra creation to an art form in Naya village in Pingla block of West Midnapore. At Naya, the Patuas create mainly rectangular- and square-shaped paintings of different sizes. Only one or two Patuas make long, rolled scrolls, of up to 20 feet or more. A few of them sing, but mostly on demand. Addressing geopolitical events like the 9/11 attacks, and movies like *Titanic*, in addition to events from folklore and epics, the artists have rendered themselves relevant to newer generations. Social messages like conservation of trees and AIDS awareness also figure in their paintings. A *pata* is created by painting on multiple sheets of commercial poster paper stitched together to form the canvas. Plant-based colours and lamp black are mixed in coconut shells with the sap of the wood apple tree (*bel*), which acts as a binder. After finishing, a thin cotton cloth is glued to the back of the painting to provide longevity. The Patuas also make painted wooden souvenirs and paint their house walls with striking colours.

With the support of the NGO *banglanatak dot com* and the European Union, the narrative scrolls have found new markets and audiences. Many of the Patuas have won the President's Award, and displayed their art abroad. Since 2010, every November, a three-day festival named *Pot Maya* is being held at Naya. Workshops are held, artwork is displayed for sale, and musical performances by eminent artists start in the evening and go on well into the night.

•AMITABHA GUPTA