Emergent Events and the Folklore Archive in Bengal

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"… an archivable content of the past… would exist in any case… No, the technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event." (Jacques Derrida *Archive Fever*)

"Genealogy does not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity that operates beyond the dispersion of forgotten things; its duty is not to demonstrate that the past actively exists in the present, that it continues secretly to animate the present, having imposed a predetermined form to all its vicissitudes. Genealogy does not resemble the evolution of a species and does not map a destiny of a people. On the contrary, to follow the complex course of descent is to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion…it is to discover that truth or being do not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents."(Michel Foucault *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*)

The first systematic attempts to document folklore in India are associated with the emergence of ethnographic periodicals in the second half of the 19th century. Most of these were started by colonial officials and printed in government presses and were supposed to be part of the endeavour of knowledge production to aid colonial officials in the processes of governance (Naithani 2005). However some of these periodicals, like the *North Indian Notes and Queries* edited by William Crooke, also included a large number of contributions by Indians. Thus it was the colonial administration that carved out the initial space for articulating an Indian discourse on folklore and the need for an Indian culture archive. However the significance of folklore documentation was not lost on Indian scholars and some of the early collections by Indians date from the late 19th century itself (see n.1, below). The concerns of the Indian collectors were

somewhat different from the colonial folklorists in that they also served a larger political purpose, that is, the constitution of a national identity and the delineation of a cultural history that could serve to articulate this identity.

In this paper I explore the relationship between history, folklore and the constitution of national identity viewed from a location in one region – Bengal. (In India folklore collections have always been region specific, reflecting local histories and specific forms of political engagement.) Even though I do not discuss the archive in its material embodiment, the concept of 'archive' and the process of documentation that produced a body of work that is called folklore are important for the practices of history writing in Bengal. The first steps towards creating a folklore archive in Bengal occurred at a time when political events were producing a self-reflexive relationship to identity and history.[1] Not only did the early attempts at collection and documentation require a new way of relating to the past but they also shaped a particular orientation to the future (Derrida 1995). Thus the first collections of stories and songs began at the end of the 19th century. But this activity gained momentum after the *Swadeshi Movement* (Self-Rule Movement) of 1905-1907 and the partition of Bengal.[2] Bengali intellectuals became aware that folklore had an important role to play in the historical reconstruction of the region, especially in view of the paucity of historical documentation in the pre-Muslim period. To ward

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[1] Rabindranath Tagore was one of the first collectors of folk rhymes in Bangla, and he published two such collections in 1894 and 95. Another important collection was published in 1899 by Jogindranath Sarkar. Dinesh Chandra Sen, a protégé of Tagore, is considered to be one of the foremost folklorists of Bengal. He was appointed a research fellow by Sir Ashutosh Mukherji, the vice-chancellor of Calcutta University, and was given funds to collect and document oral stories from the Ramayana in the 1910s and 20s. Tagore's nephew, Abanindranath Tagore, and Aghorenath Chattopadhya published collections of stories narrated during domestic rituals in 1919 and 1897 respectively. Dakshinaranjan Mitra Mazumdar's collection of folk tales first published in 1907 soon became famous. It was included in the anthropology syllabus of Calcutta University and was translated into German in 1919. Many of these collectors were members of the *Bangiya Sahitya Parishad* (Bengal Literary Association) that sponsored the publication of nationalist literature (Zahrul Haque 1976).

[2] The *Swadeshi Movement* was the first attempt to use folklore for political mobilization. This nationalist upsurge was sparked off by the plan to partition off Bengal. The rationale for the partition was purportedly administrative. However, there were also political reasons such as the threat of a burgeoning Bengali nationalism in the 19th century.

off criticism that Hindus lacked historical consciousness, Bengali scholars turned to folklore to demonstrate that there were other kinds of historical sources apart from imperial monuments and dynastic histories. They argued that folk culture itself could be treated as living history and could be used meaningfully to constitute a telos for contemporary events (Sen 1986). Dinesh Chandra Sen (1985, 1986, 1988) and Gurusaday Dutt (1954, 1990) both thought that the lack of conventional documents used in history writing was a positive symbol of Bengal's anti-imperialist orientation that rebelled against court culture and valorized folk culture (Chatterji 2003, 2004). The orientation to the folk gave historical depth to the national movement and later to the political events that led to the linguistic re-organization of states in the 1950s.

In this paper I organize 'history' around a series of discrete events that are interconnected through the discourse of folklore. My understanding of 'event' has been influenced by Foucault (1972) who draws our attention to its contingent quality and tells us to deconstruct historical unities into fields of dispersion. I also use Mead's conception that some events are emergents in that they stick out of the flow of time and have the power to reorganize the past, present and future (Joas 2000). I read the two 'emergent events' – i.e. the Swadeshi Movement and the reorganization of states in the post-independence period – against the backdrop of Bengal's literary history as has been delineated by scholars such as Sukumar Sen and Suniti Kumar Chatterji, both of whom have written texts that are considered definitive for the understanding of Bangla language and literature. Texts such as the *Origin and Development of Bengali Language* (Chatterji 1986) and *History of Bengali Language* (Sen 1960) emerge out of a self-conscious historical orientation that was a product of the Swadeshi Movement – a modern sensibility that stressed the importance of history as the dominant mode of "acting for the future" (Banerjee 2006: 1).

Sen's book presents a linear and continuous history that reflects the progressive development of a national consciousness in Bengal. Thus, as Jawaharlal Nehru says in the introduction to the book, "devotional and lyric songs and mystical poetry are followed by narrative poetry" (Sen 1960: v). Literary prose, drama and finally modern fiction in the form of the novel succeed each other as stages in the growth and development of the language and literature. However Sen's account is complicated by the fact that texts that he uses for historical reconstruction are part of a living literary tradition and are constantly being renewed in the process of transmission. Sen treats such texts as archeological sites to excavate earlier forms of the Bengali language. However, dating the texts, especially in the light of his view of time and history becomes problematic as we shall see later.

As I have already said I am not concerned with the folklore archive as a material resource but rather with the *idea* of an archive – with the practices of documenting folklore that still form an important part of national identity in Bengal. The paper is divided into two sections. In the first section I discuss the significance of history-making for modern Bengali intellectuals and its role in constituting Bengal's national culture.[3] In the second section I examine some of the controversies around the texts whose 'discovery' in the early decades of the 20th century continue to trouble the notion of a linear and progressive history that is associated with the development of a national literature. I conclude by considering some of the ways in which the folklore archive may address its subjects and also how the work of folklorists may form a potential archive that might speak to and be addressed by the very people whose lore they/we document. I suggest that in India, as in most other parts of the world, contemporary folk culture

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[3] By 'modern' I mean the period that begins with British colonization and continues up to the present.

has been shaped by the practices of folklorists, and it is no longer possible to study these cultures without locating them within self-reflexive circuits of knowledge and power.

Before I end this section, a few words about the conflation between nation and region in the folklore discourse are in order. In India, ideologies pertaining to folklore and nationalism were inflected by the concept of 'region.' The term 'nation' was sometimes conflated with the 'nation-state' but more commonly referred to the idea of 'genus,' 'people,' or 'race'. India is rarely referred to as a single race or people in folklore. Instead 'genus' or 'race' is associated with 'region.' 'Region' is thus not merely a geographical location but a site that is self-consciously constituted and has a distinctive signature. I think of it as a field constituted by overlapping networks that are economic, cultural, based on kinship and flows of knowledge. The region is identified not so much with certain sorts of material conditions and social practices but rather with styles of doing and saying. History writers in Bengal, especially when they discuss literary and folklore, tend to identify Bengal as a region by invoking styles that come to express ideas about location and locality.

Folklore and the Historical Imagination

The affirmation of India's spiritual distinctiveness occurred in tandem with the rationalization of colonial rule (Kaviraj 1995). According to one of the dominant perspectives in colonial India – Orientalism – India's lack of historical awareness went hand-in-hand with an otherworldly orientation and a lack of political will (ibid. 1995). For nationalists like Benoy Kumar Sarkar, writing after the Swadeshi Movement, historical consciousness, i.e. history writing, became a way of legitimizing India/Bengal's capacity for national sovereignty and for political domination.

However, as Kaviraj (1995) shows, 'history' became a double-edged weapon in the hands of the Bengali nationalists – not just to demonstrate Bengal's capacity to become a world power but also to point to the constructedness of the past. History showed a world in the making, a contingent world in which societal arrangements could be shown to be fluid and open-ended, pointing to alternative possibilities that were theoretically plausible even if never actualized. Folklore provided an essential component of this new social imaginary by highlighting a pragmatic, materialist orientation to the world. Collections of folk stories and songs revealed a sensibility that was secular and agnostic (Sen 1988). Gods and goddesses displayed human traits and were spoken off with irreverence that betrayed a certain intimacy with their devotees. Dinesh Chandra Sen's *Eastern Bengal Ballads* (1923), collected from the predominantly Muslim population of Mymensingh district, revealed a social order and literary sensibility that was very different from that of modern or even medieval Bengal. The kind of temporality that these texts discussed was very different from our modern sense of history. The time represented in the songs was primordial time, articulated in everyday acts of creation and destruction, beyond historical chronology and progress (Banerjee 2006). This sense of primordialism could only be recovered through folklore – through a history available as oral literature – in ballads, stories and children's rhymes (Sen 1986).

Folklore's capacity to conjoin a dynamic this-worldly orientation with a sense of the past is a product of its disciplinary position as regards history and culture as much as it is of an innate capacity of the folk (Chatterji 2007). Barbara Kirshenblatt–Gimblett (1998) says that the temporal dislocation between the site of origin and the present location of particular cultural forms signals the presence of folklore. Culture is conceptualized as heterogeneous, layered and composed of multiple strands that are interconnected in rather haphazard and contingent ways.

This sense of contingency comes about through the juxtaposition of different time-scales within the site that may be termed 'the local.' The idea of the local also allowed for the conceptualization of 'Indian tradition' as discontinuous and therefore open to selective re-appropriation. Thus, in the Bengal school of painting Abanindranath Tagore could borrow the Japanese wash technique to portray a distinctive spiritual quality to his paintings while some of his students, Nandalal Bose and Jamini Roy, turned to folk art and to the narrative style of scroll painting still practiced in rural Bengal.

Similarly in the works of Chatterji (1986) and Sen (1960) on the history of Bengali language and literature there is an effort to trace the *laukika* (folk, literally – belonging to the people) styles and languages from broad categories such as 'proto Indo-Aryan' and so on. Not only is there a recognition of the importance of the laukika in the discussion of regional variation in languages such as Indo-Aryan but it is also acknowledged that the vernacularized speech that became 'Bangla' and the Bengali people as such emerged from the 'debris of history' (Sen 1960: 15). Repeated conquests and attempts at colonization by successive waves of Aryans, Turks and Afghans gave Bengali culture its distinctive emphasis on folk forms. Thus even though folk forms (laukika) are characterized as deviations (literally, 'a falling off') in the ancient texts on language, it is folk literature that survives the onslaught of foreign rule rather than literary Sanskrit, and goes on to become the dominant literary form in the courts of the Muslim kings in the late 15th and 16th centuries (Sen 1960). This demonstrates, according to these nationalist scholars, that Hindus and Muslims share a common language and culture that antedates the coming of both Hinduism and Islam to Bengal.

Documents as Memorials

As I have already mentioned the early decades of the 20th century were marked by a kind of collection frenzy – some of the important collections of stories, ballads and paintings.[4] date from this period. Some manuscripts that are of critical value in the reconstruction of literary history were also 'discovered' at this time. A point to be noted here is that some of these manuscripts disturb the conventional view on literary history that would seek to impose a continuous time-line between important texts.

To be able to understand why these texts were very important and troublesome at the same time, it is important to understand the ideological positioning of Bengal as a region. Bengal's eccentric position vis-à-vis India as such are attributed to the fact that it was left out of 'Aryandom' till fairly late - 9th-10th century (Sen 1986). It thus came to represent a different kind of social order and literary standard than that imposed by Brahmanicism, the institution that was largely responsible for disseminating Aryan culture. This was the reason, according to Sen (1988), why Eastern Bengal was an important area for folklore collection: "The old order continued in areas branded as forbidden tracts" (ibid. 1988: liii).

I shall now give a brief account of the events surrounding the 'discovery' of three manuscripts and the debates that took place regarding their authenticity and antiquity. One could think of the texts and the debates centered on them as a discursive formation in which meaning is sedimented over time to crystallize into an institutional pattern. Thus Bengal's marginality vis-à-vis Brahmanical India was given greater legitimacy by these manuscripts whose so-called antiquity helped to establish its cultural autonomy. If an important socio-religious movement like Vaishnavism in the 16th century, which had its origin in South India, could be shown to have

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[4] Gurusaday Dutt an officer in the Indian Civil Services was one of the first Bengalis to systematically collect the folk paintings known as *pata*. His collection includes scrolls that can be dated to the early part of the 18th century.

existed in nascent form in Bengal through some newly discovered texts, it would help to establish its distinctiveness as a region. The fact that all the texts that I shall describe were found in out-of-the-way locations gave an added dimension to Bengal's self proclaimed marginality.

A. *Charyapadas*:

The charyapadas are Tantric Buddhist songs composed from the 8th to the 12th centuries in Eastern India and discovered by the Bengali scholar Mahamohopadhyay Haraprashad Shastri in the library of the king of Nepal in 1916, written in Nepali script. The original manuscript is now lost but Shastri claimed that it was an example of early Bangla literature, written in a proto-Bengali language, interspersed with a few Apabhramsha, Oriya, Assamese and Maithili words. (This of course means that there are rival claimants to the text, and the sections on the origins of Oriya, Maithili and Assemese literature of the government-sponsored Sahitya Akademi's[5] anthology on Medieval Indian literature all cite the charyapadas as being the only surviving relic of their early literary history.) Subsequently a 'complete' Tibetan translation was discovered by Prabodh Chandra Bagchi and the so called 'lost songs' of the charyapadas were translated into what seemed to be the original language aided, according to Bandopadhyay (1997), by the fact that the Tibetan scholars had attempted a literal translation of the original text.

B. the Shri Krishna Kirtana:

Bodu Chandidas's Shri Krishna Kirtana is supposed to be the second oldest specimen of Bangla literature after the charyapadas (Bandopadhyay 1997). A manuscript copy of this long narrative poem depicting the divine play of Radha and Krishna was found by Vasantaranjan Rai Vidvatballabh in 1909 in a small village called Vanavishnupur in the Bankura district of West Bengal. Vasantaranjan Rai was convinced of the antiquity of this manuscript and it was

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[5] The Sahitya Akademi is the National Literary Academy that undertakes to bring out translations of all-important literary works in the major Indian languages as well as in English.

subsequently published by the *Bangiya Sahitya Parishad* (Bengal Literary Association) in 1916. The first and last sections of the manuscript are missing and, while the manuscript seems to be very old as is evident from the language and the script, the admixture of some more modern words in a more recent script has led some scholars to cast doubts on its authenticity.[6] There are jottings in the margins in Persian script and three Muslim names have been added. Also, there are words of mixed Persian and Arabic vocables that, according to scholars like Sen (1960), date the text to the Muslim period. As he says, the Radha Krishna story was the subject of popular entertainment for Hindus and Muslims alike, and this version was most likely to have been the script for a puppet play. The text displays a hybrid form, with Sanskrit *shlokas* giving a running outline of the plot and Bangla songs supplying the "entertaining embellishments" (Sen 1960: 53).

At this juncture I would like to pause for a moment to reflect on the material embodiments of the texts that I have just described. The charyapadas, unlike the Shri Krishna Kirtana, have come down to us only in translation; even the document, now lost, containing the original language that has been described as old Bangla, was available only in Nepali transcription. The historical veracity of the Tibetan version is based on the fact that it is supposed to be a verbatim translation. Although the second text, the Shri Krishna Kirtana is accessible in its original language and script, these lack the uniformity that indicates a single date. It is precisely the lack of a standardized temporality that makes the manuscript suspect. Historical dating seems to require that documents must be frozen in time or be static. Documents like the two discussed above pose problems to history because they are transmitted over time and across space. The use of the term 'discovered' in connection with these texts implies that after the period of their composition they were hidden away, untouched by human hands as it were.

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[6] Vasantaranjan Rai gave the text its current title.

However the very fact of its materiality, which allows the document to be fixed in time and to be used as a historical source, also accounts for its ambivalence. Precisely because they are material objects, texts travel and change hands. Omissions, alterations, overlapping additions of scripts and vocabularies, all point to texts as being part of ongoing traditions; they indicate their status as contemporary even if they do look back to a distant past. A society's relationship to its past is variable – Bengali literary historians have sought to treat these texts as discrete and autonomous documents. Other members of their society think of these texts as living documents, as part of a continuous tradition of storytelling. In this tradition old manuscripts are constantly renewed as they get worn out through repeated use. As Asad reminds us tradition is all about practice. "About learning the point of a practice… and making it a part of oneself…" (2006: 186).

In the village where I did my fieldwork, hand-written collections of riddles and songs that had been passed down the generations had to be reconstructed periodically as the pages on which they were written were eaten up by termites. Sons would try to reconstruct the answers to the riddles that their fathers had once composed or fill in words and lines of poems that were no longer decipherable. No one thought of these collections as homogeneous documents. The point that I am trying to make here is that unless a text is considered to be sacred and is kept carefully, it is rare to find the manuscript of a popular text in pristine condition. As a popular narrative, the manuscript of the Shri Krishna Kirtana that was found in a village hut in Bankura must have passed through many hands that renewed it as it became decrepit through use. Other popular texts like Kirtibash's Ramayana, the first Bangla Ramayana written in the medieval period, have the added problem of being continuously in print since the 18th century, so that scholars do not always know how to separate the original core text from later additions.

Are these problems with dating, with the construction of an authentic culture archive, caused by a lack of historical sensibility or is it rather due to the way that some scholars constitute the past as one-dimensional and therefore as something finished? Foucault's approach to past events in terms of the genealogical method disrupts this one-dimensional view. Genealogy re-tells "history by tracing contingencies that have come together to form an apparently natural development" (Asad 2006: 234). It allows for alternate appropriations of the archive and gives the past a heterogeneous quality normally associated with the present. Thus, cultural activists, who claim that the border districts of Bengal are part of a continuous adivasi[7] region, insist that the charyapadas and the Shri Krishna Kirtana are remnants of a pre-Hindu and therefore adivasi (tribal) literary tradition (Mahato 2000). The construction of an alternate subaltern genealogy for these two texts is based on the same material – on the names mentioned in the texts and on literary style. Mahato (2000) says that the sensuous language and erotic sentiment displayed in the Shri Krishna Kirtana indicates not merely its status as a plebeian text but also its tribal origin. The language used in the text is very different from that of other old Bangla poems – in that it is often 'coarse' and explicitly sexual. This, for Mahato, indicates a pre-Vaishnava (i.e. pre-Hindu), secular and therefore adivasi poetical tradition of erotic love that pre-dates the first narrative poem on Radha and Krishna in Eastern India – the Gita-Govinda of Jayadeva the 12th century poet who composed his poem in Sanskrit (cf. Chatterji 2006).[8]

Oral literature, especially folklore as a historical source, is considered to be problematical for a different set of reasons. The Mymensingh ballads first noticed by folklorists in the 1920s were considered fake, or at least not representative of the ancient folk consciousness as

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[7] 'Adivasi' literally means 'first inhabitant' and entered the popular vocabulary only recently.
[8] The charyapadas are supposed to be of adivasi origin for the same reasons – literary style and sentiment as well as the names of some of the poets included in the texts which, according to Mahato, are similar to adivasi names (Mahato 2000).

embodied in medieval literature, because they were secular and not religious (Zbavitel 1963).

These ballads posed a problem for the literary historians because they were very different in style

and theme from the two main branches of classical Bangla literature, i.e. Mangala Kavyas and

Vaishnava literature. For Zbavitel (1963) it is precisely its secular character that gives this

collection its historical status. As there was no formal recognition of folk literature in the

imperial courts, it continued to exist uncensored, transmitted by both Hindus and Muslims, and is

therefore an uncontaminated source for historical reconstruction. Dinesh Chandra Sen, who

compiled the Mymensingh ballads, thought that their secular sentiment revealed the agnostic

spirit of primordial folk consciousness that preceded the advent of the two contemporary

religious traditions of Bengal, viz. Hinduism and Islam (Sen 1988). One could say that the

peculiar character of folklore, i.e. the fact of being out of sync with the times, allowed folklorists

to re-contextualize the ballads and to create a folklore archive that could produce alternate

accounts of Bengali history.

As we have seen, differences of interpretation regarding authenticity, community of

origin, periodization and so on arise from the different uses to which these texts have been put.

Scholars have sought to open them up to meaning and to history by grouping them in different

categories, securing context through the juxtaposition of other, more stable texts. However, with

documentary collections, the creation of an archive is itself a construction open to multiple

readings and context construction, and it is to this that we shall turn in the final section.

Images of the Past

In a path-breaking work on the ethnography of archive construction, Joanne Rappaport

(1994) reminds us that for some societies 'history' is embedded in *images* of the past. Perhaps

we should also think of the documents described in the previous section in terms of such images.

Surely the task of history writing for the nationalist Bengali scholars was more than just a chronological account of past events. It was rather a way of forging a link with an unknown time and thereby "recreating it in the present" (Rappaport 1994: 154).

In this section I look at the practices around archive making, collection and the display of documents from the perspective of history as a series of images of the past. In a thoughtful analysis of the context-generating possibilities of museum collections, Pika Ghosh (2000) describes some of the ambiguities of interpretation that are inevitably associated with the materiality of objecthood (especially those objects that come to be classified as collectable).

In 1964 three 'separate' *patas* (scroll paintings) entered the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. They were part of Stella Kramrisch's collection and were displayed in 1968 as part of the exhibition titled, *Unknown India: Ritual Art in Tribe and Village*, curated by Kramrisch herself. She identified two of the pieces as fragments of one scroll that narrated the story of the Ramayana and the third piece as a *Shakti Pata* (depicting the Goddess Durga as demon slayer, a manifestation of divine feminine power). She also suggested that this scroll belonged to a slightly later period in the 19th century than the two Ramayana pieces. In 1998, while working on an Indian installation in the museum, Ghosh realized that all three pieces were probably fragments of one long scroll depicting a regional variant of the Ramayana. She had witnessed the storytelling performances of the pata painters from rural Bengal at another event in the US and realized that the paintings' meanings were tied to the storytelling context in which the scrolls were displayed rather than to their internal composition. Ghosh knew that the Bangla Ramayana includes events pertaining to the Goddess Durga, a fact not considered by Kramrisch, an indologist trained in the classical Sanskrit Ramayana. She also adds that Kramrisch probably bought the patas at the Shantiniketan fair when she visited Rabindranath Tagore's famous

university and did not hear the *patuas* (pata makers and singers of the stories) narrate the story. Ghosh makes the point that the meaning of the pata can only be deciphered from the storytelling context in which the pata would have been displayed register by register. Its display in a museum space where it can be grasped as a single image changes its meaning – the depiction of Durga as a character in the story becomes a sacred icon that is discrete and autonomous.

Even though Ghosh's intervention in the ongoing debate on whether the meaning of folk art can be captured only as performance or as semiotic structure through an analysis of its internal meaning is important, I feel that it tends to ignore the object status of the patas that were after all sold to Kramrisch by the painters in a village fair. The commodity value of patas is not a new idea for the patuas, as the first pata collections date back to the 19th century. In my own work with the patuas of Naya village in the Midnapur district of West Bengal, I find that the idea of the pata as commodity, as an object that is collectable, is part of the life world of the patuas. The composition of narrative songs still accompany (probably precede) the painting of the scrolls,[9] but the painters are alive to the possibility of selling their patas, traditionally viewed as story-telling aids, as paintings. This has also led to innovations in painting style and to a new self-consciousness about style itself.

Nelson Goodman (1975) considers style to be a property associated with an individual or group signature: "…we may speak by extension of work by one another as being or not being in the style of another, or of a passage being or not being in the style of other passages in the same work; but in general stylistic properties help answer the question: Who? When? Where?" (ibid. 1975: 807). The folk art of pata painting is spread over many districts of Bengal. Art historians

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[9] I recently acquired a pata depicting the story of the film *Titanic*. The painter of the pata, Tagar Chitrakar, was not able to sing the song but was able to narrate the story depicted on the pata as she had seen the film on television dubbed in Bangla.

have tried to identify local variation in terms of subject and style (Singh 1995). Thus, one

important type of pata painting is called the *jadu pata* (magic pata), composed by patuas who

live among the Santal adivasis. These patas depict the origin myth of the Santals and are

supposed to be imbued with magical properties. It is said that Jadu patuas would visit Santal

families that had recently been bereaved, display their scrolls, and ask for money to paint in the

pupils of the eyes in the pictures of the ancestors depicted in the scroll. They would threaten the

Santals by claiming that the spirits family members who had died would not go to the realm of

the ancestors unless the patuas were paid to put in the eyes. As I have just said, jadu patas are

painted in a distinctive style – all figures are depicted in profile with a single eye that belongs to

a full-face image. Bengali patas found in Midnapur usually depict figures with three-quarters

face. The so-called adivasi jadu patas have become collectors' items in cities like Delhi and

Calcutta and the market-savvy pata painters from Midnapur now double up as art dealers buying

jadu patas from adivasi areas and selling them in the big cities. They have also evolved a new

genre of pata - the *chokkhu daan pata* (the 'gift of eyes pata') – with figures whose faces are

depicted in profile. (Goodman [1975] says that a style proclaims itself as such.) Also, having

realized the value of the old jadu patas in the art market, they have started cutting up the long

scrolls and selling them as separate paintings. The new chokkhu daan patas are also depicted as

separate panels that are stuck on white chart paper. These can be cut up and sold separately or

used as a single scroll for display in a storytelling session. The depiction of separate panels

surrounded by white borders is now becoming a compositional style. On a recent visit to Naya I

saw a chokkhu daan pata in which the white borders between the separate panels had been filled

in with a decorative pattern – a case of expediency becoming a self-conscious style. This

example also indicates that the commodity phase of the art form, critiqued in much of the

literature on folk art as being alienating and degenerative, is worthy of study in its own right. We still tend to think of communication, especially when it concerns the oral tradition, as a movement between subjects. Instead, following Derrida (1994), it would be more productive to follow the movement itself, tracing the passage of the commodity and seeing whether it offers possibilities for engaging with novelty.

Malek Chitrakar's *Gift of the Eyes*

In conclusion let me turn once again to Foucault. As Foucault (1972) says, the archive differentiates discourses in their multiple existences and specifies them in their own duration. As I have shown, self-consciousness about style, the fact that style must proclaim itself as a style, is only possible if one is working with the idea of a collection or an 'archive.' The use of the figure in profile with an eye that belongs to a full-face signals the presence of another people and another duration in the painterly world of the Midnapur patuas. In some of the recent pata compositions, even compositions about popular and therefore old narratives from the Puranas,

one finds evidence of style as signature. Thus, subaltern people, like fishermen and so on, are

now depicted in the adivasi chokkhu daan style even when other figures in the pata are shown in

three quarter face – a case of a people becoming present through a style of depiction.

Rabia Chitrakar's *Behula meets the Fisherman*

However, the conception of style as a kind of signature should not lead us to think that it

conveys a sense of authorship or group identity. After all Goodman does remind us that we are

free to adopt another's style. By proclaiming itself, pointing to a certain identity, style also

unfetters the work from its author and allows the work to circulate by allowing it to be imitated,

recognized, and identified. The patuas of Midnapur do not 'copy' the adivasi style with the

intention of creating forgeries and thereby fooling potential collectors.[10] Instead they have

incorporated aspects of the adivasi form into their own repertoire of themes, colours and motifs.

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[10] Though rumors of unscrupulous art dealers in Delhi who buy copies of older pieces and sell them as collector's items do circulate among folk artists. The distinction between a copy and an original is not indigenous to the patua community and is only made by the art market.

For instance, sepia tones that index the adivasi style are juxtaposed with the bright greens and reds of the Midnapur style.

Consciousness of stylistic variation also translates into consciousness of temporal difference and location. Foregrounding style as an identity marker has introduced a self-reflexive stance whereby Midnapur patuas now locate themselves as particular kinds of artists vis-à-vis others. Thus a popular new theme in pata painting, *Origin of the Santals*, ends with a depiction of a patua telling the story just displayed to an adivasi audience. A variation on this theme called *People of Ancient Times (adim juger manush)* takes this theme even further by presenting a mythical history that traces humanity's origins to the Santal adivasis. What prevents this depiction from becoming a painterly version of early anthropological accounts of the same subject in Bangla is the parody of the government's civilizational mission towards its marginal populations. The song that accompanies this pata describes people (Santals) who move from wearing bark cloth to 'pant-shirt' as they are introduced to modern culture by government sponsored literacy and health programmes.

"Original" *Gift of the Eyes* from Purulia

Khandu Chitrakar's "copy" of Gift of the Eyes

Let us now come back to history writing and to the archive as a source of such writing, for forging not just a past but a future as well. Roberto González Echevarría (1984) says that the archive disassembles the unified view of history and myth. More than a collection of documents, it is a process of composition which involves "repeated combinations, of shuffling and re-shufflings ruled by heterogeneity and difference" (ibid. 1984: 374) However, precisely because the archive also allows documents from different historical periods to co-exist in the same space, different temporal registers become co-present, opening up new spaces for exploration. For me, questions of style in folk art, rather the consciousness of stylistic differences, emerges only when we think of the archive as a process that allows for the construction of assemblages. Thus, Jyotindra Jain (2004) describes how an accidental visit to the Gurusaday Dutt museum in Calcutta exposed the artist Kalam Patua to new possibilities in the traditional folk style that he followed. Kalam Patua discovered the Kalighat style of pata painting that was popular in the 19th century but had since died out. He revived the style and used it to compose paintings on themes of contemporary relevance.[11]

If we think of the archive not merely as a source for a kind of history but as a space that allows us to make genealogical connections between discrete events, events brought together through the contingencies of time and circumstance, we will be able to think of documents not as passive reflections of temporal passage but as generative objects that produce history and time.

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[11] The genre of Kalighat painting developed around a popular pilgrimage center devoted to the Goddess Kali in Calcutta. Pilgrims who visited the Kalighat temple would buy these paintings as souvenirs of their visit. However the import of cheap lithographs with images of gods and goddesses from Germany led to the extinction of this genre of painting over time. Kalighat paintings depicted a broad range of subjects – gods and goddesses and also satirical pictures that commented on popular scandals in Calcutta in the 19th century. It was this latter aspect, according to Jain (2004), that appealed to Kalam Patua who had until then restricted himself to painting traditional pata themes. Kalam Patua's self-conscious use of the pata archive is by no means an individual idiosyncracy. Bahadur Chitrakar, a Midnapur patua, started collecting old patas in the Birbhum and adivasi styles ten years ago when he first accompanied a German collector on a collection drive to different districts in Bengal. He now has a personal collection of a hundred old patas which he displays at his stall in Dilli Haat – a government sponsored craft fare in Delhi – once a year. He also told me that he was inspired to paint in the extinct style of Kalighat pata painting by Jyotindra Jain's (1999) book on the same subject.

Thus the generative objects that I have been talking about are produced through the combination of style and signature and may become authoritative sources in the future.

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