

Stylistic Evolution of Wooden Idols: Changing Faces of History in Bengal Art

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Abstract

Idols, i.e., divine images for worship, have always been an important component of Indian sculpture. Throughout the ages, these idols have simultaneously been carved in wood and stone – however the history of wood dates back much earlier than the other. But, the perishable nature of the material and the hot-and-humid climate of the subcontinent didn't allow the wooden-specimens to survive till date. Hence the rich and varied tradition didn't get their due importance in the prevailing texts dealing with the history of Indian art. This paper hence attempts to come up with a comprehensive account on the same in order to enable a broader perspective of Indian art and enhance the scopes of further research and discoveries. The methodology included both field-study and academic-research that resulted into a comprehensive overview of this artistic evolution – through the ages – against the panorama of Bengal art.

Keywords: Wooden idols, Bengal, India.

Introduction

Bengal, as a historical and cultural notion, comprises with today's Indian-state of West Bengal and the neighboring-country of Bangladesh. The art of this soil, alias that of mainland-India, has always been closely connected with religion – illuminating its aspects in each and every step. Ritualistic practices of this soil have always reflected the collective aesthetic sense of the people through various modes of visual-expression. Among them, the tradition of making idols – i.e., divine images for worship – has been one of the most profound and significant one.

Since an early time, though not identified yet, these religious-idols have been made of clay, stone, metal and other plastic-mediums; while wood in particular was preferred for its easy-availability and ready-tractability. (Dasgupta, 1990) But the perishable-nature of the material – intrigued by the hot and humid climate of the region – didn't allow the earlier-specimens to survive till date. In any case, plenty of other resources testify the antiquity of making wooden idols within the panorama of Indian art. (Coomarswamy, 1972) Mostly carved in-the-round and occasionally in high-relief – these images were installed in the sanctum of the shrine either independently or in a group. All of them constitute a long traditional ancestry, beginning from c. sixth century BC – if not earlier – which has evolved through the ages to be found alive even today.

Early References to Wooden Idol: The earliest mention of any wooden idol made in India goes to the legend of *Jīvantasvāmī* – a sandalwood-image of *Mahāvīra* – that was said to be carved in

his lifetime and worshipped by his followers. Refer could also be made of the tradition of *Yakṣa Moggarāpāni* outside the city of *Rājagṛha* – i.e., today's Rajgir in Bihar. (Dasgupta, 1990)

Later in second century AD, *Matsya Purāṇa* (Agrawala, 1963) is found as the earliest textual-reference – describing wood as a suitable medium for the sculpting of cult-icons. (Tarkaratna & Nyayateertha, BS 1394) But the first concrete-evidence to this tradition comes from the third-century inscription of *Abhirā Vāsudeva* that describes *Aṣṭabhujaśvāmī* – an eight-armed wooden-sculpture of Lord *Viṣṇu*. (Chakraborti, 2001)

For the next six-hundred odd years, the tradition continued with all its vitality and context – and was documented in a series of indigenous literature like *Mānasara Śilpāsāstra*, *Hayaśīrṣa Pañcarātrama*, *Devī Purāṇa*, *Vṛhat Samhitā*, *Śāmba Purāṇa*, *Bhaviṣya Purāṇa* and *Viṣṇudharmottaram*. Mention could also be made of the historical accounts by foreign-travelers like Huen Tsang, who referred to a sandal-wood image of Kuan-tzu-tsai Pusa, i.e., *Avalokiteśvara*. (Watters, 1961) Three more sandal-wood images of Lord Buddha were taken by him back to China, (Samaddar & Ghosh, 1988) traces of which remain unspecified yet. These references however advocate in favor of wood to be used in the making of Buddhist-icons during late-sixth or early-seventh century AD.

Continuation of this lineage is later substantiated by a freestanding-sculpture of *Tārā* that was found from cave XXXI at Kanheri, near Mumbai of Maharashtra. In terms of iconography and style, it belongs to c. ninth-tenth century AD and is considered to be an import from eastern-India (see Fig 1). However, its present location is yet unknown, while a photograph – published in *Marg* (36/1, 1982) – remains the only evidence, reminding about the *Pāla*-figures from Bihar and Bengal. Similar Buddhist-icons – collected in a monastery at Chittagong, Bangladesh – ranging in date from about ninth to twelfth-thirteenth century AD, (Spooner, 1990) could also be mentioned in this regard.



Fig 1. Buddhist *Tārā*, c. 9th-10th cent., 24 x 10 x 8 in., present location unknown.



Fig 2. Bodhisattva *Lokanātha*, c. 9th/11th cent., 49 x 17 in., BNM, Dhaka.



Fig 3. *Sthiracakra Mañjuśrī*, c. 11th cent., 54 x 16 in., BNM, Dhaka.

The Earliest Specimen: Most Indian wooden idols of perceptible antiquity and aesthetic excellence – either originate, or belong to the eastern-region of this country. Earliest of this genre is the *Tārā*-image mentioned above; while the *Bodhisattva Lokanātha* from Tongibari of Munshigonj in Dhaka (today's Bangladesh) is the oldest of the surviving specimens (see Fig 2). In terms of form and style, both the figures bear a striking similarity with each other that lead towards the latter to be assigned to c. ninth-tenth century AD. Yet official records attribute a much later date – i.e., the eleventh – making Lokanātha contemporary to the *Sthiracakra Mañjuśrī* from Rampal, also in Munshigonj (see Fig 3). In that case, both the specimens – presently on display at Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka – become contemporaneous with the tradition of *Balarāma-Subhadrā-Jagannātha* of Puri in Orissa.

The refined approach and stylistic maturity of these earliest surviving wooden idols affirm a high quality practice, generated by an extremely old and rich traditional ancestry. It must have a long history of evolution, though undocumented, which took shape in c. AD 800 and resulted into a new school of Indian-sculpture in the eastern-provinces. (Banerji, 1933 and Asher, 1980)

Wooden Idols of Bengal: the early stage

The wooden idols of Bengal admit three broad stylistic divisions: hieratic, folk-tribal and a mixture of the two. (Dasgupta, 1990) The first one emerged in the urban-settlements constituting the earliest body of works, while the second came up from the pastorals and joined the lineage sometime between the thirteenth and fifteenth century. The last one, however, evolved in the sixteenth – introducing a new visual language and aesthetics.

Historically, Bengal has always maintained its own cultural identity that was closely associated with the proceedings in the mainland. Multiple terracotta-pieces and works in other mediums showcase the influence of pan-Indian phenomena on the hieratic level of early-Bengal art. Various available specimens kept in different Museums clearly advocate in favor of a distinct influence on the aesthetics of this soil that has borrowed relentlessly from the *Maurya* and *Śunga*-traditions.

Following this pan-Indian dynamics, hieratic tradition of wooden idols in Bengal came to the fore only in the middle ages – during the rule of the mighty Mauryas. Although no material specimen has been found till date, but other references advocate in favor of this forgotten episode.

By that time, Bengal was already in high-demand for its woodcarving-techniques, designs of wooden-construction, (Craven, 2001) the skilled carvers and the experienced architects. (Havell, 1915) Many of these artisans were working in the mainland in ambitious projects that required their knowledge and skill in the works of wood. In this process, they developed a close proximity with the political, economic, artistic and cultural activities in the mainland. Hence they must have observed and studied the uninterrupted-lineage that connected the *Jīvantasvāmī* of sixth-century BC with the *Aṣṭabhujaśvāmī* of third-century AD. This close association must have inspired them to try their hands back home in carving their own icons in wood. Their skill and effort must have produced various wooden-divinities meant for worship – that, unfortunately, couldn't survive the corroding effects of time.

In parallel to this, the folk-tribal genre of divine images in Bengal was always active in cheaper-mediums like clay and natural-pigment. They couldn't afford stone-carving and were

unacquainted with the medium, while wood was exposed to them much later in the thirteenth century AD.

The Pāla-Sena School

In the history of Bengal, many abrupt independent-rulers assuming imperial-titles are found till the second-half of sixth century AD. But, the region got its separate political-identity only in the seventh-century at Gaur, under the brief leadership of Śaśānka. Later on, following the rise and fall of several dynasties in rest of the country, Bengal came to witness the flowering of a considerable kingdom in the mid-eighth century AD. However, sculptural activities prior to that era have been suggested by several authentic evidences. (Saraswati, 1962) The three-hundred odd temples that already existed during the early-ninth century AD (Watters: 1961) must have led to the plastic-creation of gods or goddesses – either in clay, wood, stone or metal. However, the earliest surviving specimen of wooden idol – in the form of *Bodhisattva Lokanātha* – could only be retrieved from the era of the *Pāla*-dynasty.

The Pāla-school: *Pāla*-rule in Bengal, beginning with king *Gopāla* in c. AD 750 and ending with *Madanapāla* in c. AD 1162, provided a stable and comprehensive socio-cultural establishment, which in turn worked as a major boost for the overall development of this region and the cultural flourish of its people. It gave birth to a new and significant school of sculpture following the classical grace and grandeur of the *Gupta*-phenomenon. In fact, the masterpieces of this period – both on wood and stone – uttered the very legacy of the *Guptas* in a new style and aesthetic-language.



Fig 4. *Viṣṇu*. c. 12th cent., 52½ x 16 in., BNM, Dhaka.



Fig 5. *Garuḍa*, c. 12th cent., 26 x 11¾ in., BNM, Dhaka.

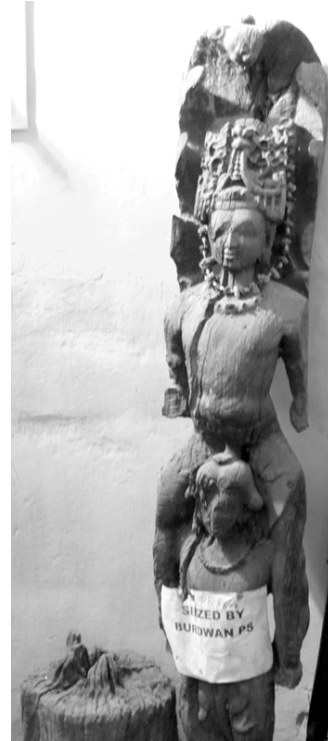


Fig 6. *Viṣṇu-on-Garuḍa*. c. 12th-13th cent., 83½ x 17 x 9 in. (pedestal 21½ x 17 in.), SAM, Kolkata

During this era, artists and craftsmen of this soil used to work simultaneously in all the four mediums – stone, clay, wood and paint. (Mitra, 1951) That is the reason, why all their works in wood closely resemble to their contemporary-executions in stone. Their similarities in content, iconography, approach, technique and style lead them to appear as works of the same artist or group. Although the number of available wooden-idols is extremely few in comparison to their stone-counterparts; but that doesn't prove that the former to be inferior to the latter. On the contrary, '...a first appearance in stone is almost tantamount to proof of an earlier currency in wood.' (Coomarswamy, 1972) Unfortunately, most of those wooden-pieces couldn't survive the ravages of time and hence perished forever. The surviving specimens, however, show us how a favorable socio-cultural-political-economic condition can instigate the aesthetic zeal of the people at large.

These wooden idols, assignable between ninth and twelfth century AD do not carry anything typical-to-Bengal; rather a feature inherited from the classical-*Guptas* is clearly evident in them. As a result of this, even after exhibiting all the skill and vitality of the local-artists, they could only be identified as a group of pan-Indian sculptures, produced on this soil.

Basically, the *Pāla*-rule provided a stable platform for the sculptors to cultivate their skills in the art of carving – both on stone and wood. They got the opportunity to make use of quality time and material to exercise their skills; while the iconographies, based on pan-Indian models, were already set in front of them. Hence, they found it easy to devote themselves in the very act of carving; and they ventured to carve-out every possible meticulous detail. In this process, they depicted everything on the material itself – the dress, the ornaments, accessories, and the backgrounds. In addition to the eyes, nose, lips, ears etc – they also carved all the other luxury and grandeur with extreme delicacy and understanding. The technique as a whole set a trend in the sculptural-art of Bengal and became a typical-identity of the *Pāla*-school, widely exercised on both stone and wood.

The Sena-school: Bengal in between eighth and thirteenth century AD was the cradle of two major socio-religious forces: Buddhism and Brahmanism. The latter in turn included three broad philosophical divisions in the form of Vaishnavism, Saivism and Saktism. Multiple variations of minor-groups, along with the faded-lineage of Jain-pantheon, also shared the panorama of early-medieval religious-practices in Bengal.

Both Buddhism and Brahmanism were equally patronized by the *Pāla*-kings, who were Buddhist by religion and liberal in outlook. Both the pantheons got their deities sculpted – on wood and stone – with equal ease and excellence. Even the same artist or group, assigned with icons of both the sects, came-up with various scales of images – depicting the Buddhist-deities like *Buddha*, *Bodhisattva*, *Lokanātha*, *Tārā*, *Mañjuśrī*; Brahmanic-deities like *Surya*, *Viṣṇu* (see Fig 4 & 6), *Durgā-Mahīṣamarddinī*; and demigods like *Garuḍa* (see Fig 5), *Gaṇa* etc. Such a multi-dimensional and aesthetically-secular practice came up with icons of all the religious-beliefs – sculpted relentlessly in the same technique and style that was typical to that era.

But, things didn't remain the same forever. The glory of the *Pāla*-kings was shared by the *Senas*, who began to rule various parts of Bengal since late-eleventh century AD. Being known as *Brahma-Kṣatriyas*, they were dedicated followers of the Brahmanic-ideologies and were not so open-minded like their *Pāla*-counterparts. Their reign was famous for building temples and monasteries; but none of the kings took much interest in promoting the other beliefs and cults.

During this time, Buddhism – after dominating Bengal for centuries – was in decline due to the loss of its institutions at *Nālanda* and *Vikramāśilā*. The *Sena*-kings added to this distress by

withdrawing their state-promotion for the making of Buddhist-deities, even though the declining *Pāla*-dynasty continued to mentor the tradition. The Brahmanic-idiom, on the contrary, was widely benefited from the augmented-interest of the emerging Sena-capital.

In any case, the carvers of Bengal went on exploring the same approach, technique and style – both on stone and wood – that were set by their *Pāla*-predecessors. Such meticulously-carved pan-Indian icons gradually established a profound-signature of Bengal-sculpture between the eighth and the thirteenth century AD. These five-hundred odd years – together – constituted a significant style, what we know today as the *Pāla-Sena* school.

The Age of Transformation

The folk-tribal tradition of Bengal-sculpture, unlike the hieratic genre, has always remained virile without any promotion from the elite-class of the society or the royal-state. Their divine images were mostly made of clay and natural-pigment, since lavish exploration of wood, stone and metal was affordable only to the patronized-artists of hieratic-genre. However, things started to change – suddenly and with immediate effect – following the Islamic invasion in early-thirteenth century AD.

Bakhtiyar Khalji defeated King *Lakṣmaṇa Sena* and founded the Islamic-rule at Lakshmanavati or Gaur. The kingdom thus became known as the Sultanate of Bengal – being ruled at regular intervals from Delhi (Bandyopadhyay, BS 1405) – while the Hindu political-identity got limited to mere chieftainships and baronships under the new rulers.



Fig 7. *Balarāma*, c. 14th-15th cent., height around 132 in., Boro, PS Raina, Bardhaman.



Fig 8. *Kṛṣṇa* with *Rādhā* (later-addition), c. late-15th cent., height around 24 in., Saptagram, PS Magra, Hooghly.

Renewed circumstances changed the royal-religion and the new-patrons were firmly against all sorts of image-worship. They withdrew the promotion of five-hundred long years – resulting into several idols being left in the midway. Many of the highly-skilled artists took refuge to the neighboring Hindu-kings, while the rest were appointed in carving the royal-furniture and accessories. Their meticulous skill, which had remained a trademark of the *Pāla-Sena* school, got employed in the carving of those intricate-designs – both organic and geometric. Worshipping of idols became a secret-activity, while the hieratic-deities began to be made of clay and natural-pigment – instead of wood or stone.

In short, it was an era of acute turmoil in Bengal – be it in politics, economy, society or culture (Sen, 1999) – observing a silent-period in art; since specimens assignable to this era are extremely rare. Even the divine-images produced earlier were drowned into various water-bodies in order to save them from being humiliated by the Islamic-iconoclasts. (Dhamija, 1988) Fragile-nature of wood and destructive agents like worms and white-ants were equally responsible for the ultimate disintegration of many of the specimens.

However the tradition sustained its demand, while their royal-patrons were replaced by local-chieftains and Zamindars. Even the poor common-folk began to initiate for raising funds to install the images of their beloved deities.

Stylistic Changes: In absence of the hieratic-artists, new commissions of wooden idols preferred the folk-tribal artisans, as they were easily-accessible and financially-affordable to the new-patrons. However, they were neither acquainted with the iconographic-specifications of the hieratic-order, nor habituated in working on permanent-materials like wood. New situations brought both the genres close to each other – forcing them to compromise with their habit and adjust with the new. The folk-tribal craftsmanship tried to meet up to the intricacies of hieratic-aesthetics, while the latter became lenient in detail to adjust with the limits of the former. As a consequence of these, carving of the deities became much flat and simplistic, while the details became less intrinsic and meticulous. Paint was introduced for the convenience of depicting the facial-features and other intricacies. The basic dress-materials – along with headgear, earrings, necklaces, bangles, waist-bands, anklets and other ornaments – were still being carved on the surface, but the minute-motifs were replaced by the painted-ones (see Fig 7).

In these renewed circumstances, the hieratic-images refused to imitate the *Pāla-Sena* idiom of large half-closed eyes – depicting a gesture of self-meditation. They rather followed the folk-tribal genre of eyes, split wide and open that look-up straight to the devotee. What was once private and restricted thus became open and public – resulting into a major-step towards the religious-democracy that took its final-shape in the sixteenth century.

Through this synthesis, sculpture in Bengal freed itself gradually from the shackles of pan-Indian hangover. The surviving-specimens together, although a few in number, exhibit an effort of blending between the hieratic and the folk-tribal, general and local. Their fresh look and appearance represent a tradition that was embodied with prominent-markers of a future-school of sculpture purely of Bengal-origin.

Other markers of transformation in society and culture: Besides the synthesis between hieratic and folk-tribal, traditional life in Bengal turned into a co-existence of different cultural-sects and religious-beliefs. The multiplicity ranged from Saktism, Saivism and Vaishnavism up to the remote-practices of Tantric-Buddhism, other popular-cults and local-beliefs.

However, the last-quarter of fifteenth-century observed a period of socio-political turmoil that inevitably got reflected in the society at large. (Bandyopadhyay, BS 1405) On one hand the

Brahmanic-conservatives were afflicted with several infirmities and limitations of their own; while Islamic-aggression was showing its full might on the other. The conventional-restraints of socio-religious hegemony also gave birth to a long history of poetic and philosophical revolt – with *Candīdāsa* leading from the front.

Padāvalī-literature proclaimed the glory of humanity and exerted a strong influence on the common folk. The vast body of folk-literature – including *Gopīcāndera Gāna*, *Mānikacandra Rājār Gāna* etc – lavishly describes the spirit of human-life, including its pleasures and sorrows, love and hatred. In them, the popular-mind found Gods trembling before men and also being compelled to obey a common-woman like *Maynāmatī*. (Mookerjee, 1946) The *Bāula*-songs, *Purva Baṅga Gītikās* etc openly affirmed the freedom from social-restraints and lead towards free self-expression.



Fig 9. *Jagannātha* with *Balarāma-Subhadra* (later-addition), c. 15th-16th cent., height around 54 in., Mahesh, PS Srirampur, Hooghly.



Fig 10. *Simhabāhinī*, c. 16th cent., height around 66 in., Nijabalia, PS Jagatvallabhpur, Howrah.

Later-verses of the *Maṅgala-Kāvya* tradition popularized many of the folk-deities and established them on the hieratic-level. By the end of fifteenth-century, the influence of folk-Buddhism and reincarnation of Vaishnavism also added great dynamics to the common religious-outlook. A renewed interest towards *Viṣṇu*-worship became evident; while the earlier-tradition of *Bhāgavata*-centralism got shifted to the adoration of *Kṛṣṇa* (see Fig 8) and *Jagannātha* (see Fig 9). All these together lead towards a major paradigmatic shift that came through a series of social, economic, political, ritual, religious and philosophical aspects. The era thus turned into an archetype and set the prelude for the upcoming-flourish of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava movement in the next century.

The Renaissance

In early-sixteenth century, *Caitanya Mahāprabhu* (see Fig 11) and his compeer *Nityānanda* revived the medieval *Bhakti*-movement (Sastri, 1966) and introduced *Gauḍīya*-Vaishnavism in Bengal.

They together – known as *Nitāi-Gaura* – simplified the path of religion for the masses and opened-up the ritualistic-practices for all. The movement lead by them and carried forward by their associates thus brought a renaissance that resulted into multiple-perspectives in the life and culture of the Bengali folk. They accepted the spirit of this revival and reflected the same in their lifestyle, behavioral-pattern, dress-code, food-habit, music, poetry and art.

Following this, the tradition of woodcarving began to flourish, which in turn resulted into a renewed enthusiasm for the making of divine-images in wood. The widespread popularity of *Gaurāṅga* and his association with *Nima*-tree, perhaps, initiated the devotees to get their icons made in the same wood. The collective-emotion also got authenticated by texts like *Manasāmaṅgala* – written by *Varṁśīdāsa Cakrabartī* in AD 1575-76 – prescribing *Nima*-wood as the only appropriate-material for fashioning the images of *Nitāi-Gaura* (see Fig 12). (Dasgupta, 1990)



Fig 11. *Gaurāṅga*, c. early- 16th cent., height around 60 in., Nabadvip, Nadia.



Fig 12. *Nitāi-Gaura*, c. mid-16th cent., height around 54 in., Atisara, PS Baruipur, South 24 Parganas.

In the mean time, *Śakti*-cult was firmly-grounded in the *Rāḍha*-region of Birbhum, Bankura, Bardhaman, Hooghly, Howrah and Nadia. It got flourished with the introduction of the *Kālī*-image by *Kṛṣṇānanda Āgamabāgīśa* – author of *Vṛhat Tantrasāra* – who was said to be contemporaneous to *Śrī Caitanya*.

In this situation, practitioners and followers of both the idioms got into conflict and convergence that included religion, philosophy, social-structure, economy and politics. The proceedings as a whole resulted into the production of numerous pieces of wooden idols all over the region. After remaining suppressed for three-hundred odd years, the tradition got revived by this renewed-interest and an immediate response from the masses. Although this time it became more democratic in content, less-intricate in technique, simple in style and tender in aesthetics. Thus, centuries of synthesis between the hieratic and the folk-tribal got reflected into a new-dimension in the panorama of Bengal-sculpture.

New-School of Bengal Sculpture: In this century, the art of making wooden-idols came up with many dynamics that took a major role in determining the future-course of aesthetic-progress in Bengal.

- Introduction of *Rādhā*-image beside the icon of Lord *Kṛṣṇa*;
- Popularization of the *Jagannātha*-triad;
- Deifying of mortal-humans like *Nitāi-Gaura* and others;
- Popularization of *Nima*-wood for the making of divine-images;
- Simplistic and shallow carving;
- Carving of the divine-images in nude – and then draping with real-clothes, ornaments and other accessories;
- Use of paint for portraying the facial-features and illuminating with other details;
- Combination of yellow, red and black as a most common visual-signature;
- Synthesis between the hieratic and the folk-tribal idioms – influencing the iconographies of all the sects like *Śākta*, *Śaiva*, *Vaiṣṇava* etc;
- Emerging of common people as collective-patrons of wooden idols.



Fig 13. *Gopīnātha* (right, c. mid-16th cent.) with *Rākhāla Rāja* (c. 17th cent.), height around 18 in., Kalna, Bardhaman.



Fig 14. *Kālī*, c. 16th cent., height around 60 in., Sardar-para (Garia-Fartabad), PS Sonarpur, 24 Pgns (S).



Fig 15. *Jayacandī*, c. 16th-17th cent., height around 42 in., Jainagar, 24 Pgns (S).

In this era, Saktism and *Gauḍīya*-Vaishnavism evolved as parallel-forces, while Saivism sustained as an age-old phenomenon. But, the wooden idols were more influenced by the *Caitanya*-phenomena that took a major role in determining the course of aesthetic-progress in Bengal. Vaiṣṇava-deities like *Kṛṣṇa* (see Fig 13), *Jagannātha* and *Mahāprabhu* himself became extremely popular, while dual-images of *Kṛṣṇa-Rādhā*, *Nitāi-Gaura*, and the triad of *Balarāma*-

Subhadrā-Jagannātha were also produced. Images of other legends like *Advaita*, *Srivāsa*, *Gadādhara*, *Abhirāma*, *Uddhāraṇa Datta*, *Yavana Haridāsa* and *Nityānanda's* son *Vīrabhadra* were also installed in different corners. *Śākta*-deities like *Simhābhini* (see Fig 10), *Kālī* (see Fig 14) etc were produced, while the prevailing tradition of the folk-tribal (see Fig 15) and other hieratic deities also sustained in a full flow.

As a whole, the wooden idols of this century introduced a significant and uniform school of sculpture, devoid of any pan-Indian hegemony. It also marked the development of a Bengali-idiom – with its own aesthetic-vision, knowledge and wisdom – which spread uniformly all over the region. Besides wood, it also got reflected in the works of other medium like stone, metal, clay, paint etc.

It is true that many of the available-specimens remaining today are mere replicas that have been executed much later in time. But all of them refer to the era, which actually produced their historic, stylistic and aesthetic originals.

Vaiṣṇava-legacy and Beyond: changing faces of history

In late-sixteenth century AD, the *Ṣaḍa Gosvāmī* at Vrindavan and *Dvādaśa Gopāla* in Bengal took the *Bhakti*-movement forward, while their successors like *Śrīnivāsa Ācārya*, *Narottama Dāsa* and *Śyamānanda Prabhu* followed up the proceedings. In AD 1582 (Das, BS 1396) or 1583, (Unknown, 2008)) the Kheturi-festival was organized as an effort towards developing a unified-concept of *Gauḍīya-Vaiṣṇavism*. (Bandyopadhyay, 1997) There *Narottama* installed images of *Gaurāṅga* and *Viṣṇupriyā*, *Vallabhikānta*, *Brajamohana*, *Śrī Kṛṣṇa*, *Rādhākānta* and *Rādhāmohana*; though the material used in their making remained unspecified. *Śrīnivāsa*, on the other hand, converted *Vīra Hāmbira* of Vana-Vishnupur and initiated the tradition of late-medieval terracotta in Bengal-architecture.

All these together resulted into an overwhelming response from the Bengali-artists and their connoisseurs in producing their deities in *nima*-wood. Neither the Islamic-rulers nor the mighty-British – could interrupt this long tradition of religious, as well as aesthetic virility.



Fig 16. *Nityānanda-Ṣaḍabhuja-Gadādhara*, c. mid-17th cent., height around 30, 36 and 24 in., Saptagram, PS Magra, Hooghly.



Fig 17. *Raghunātha* with *Kṛṣṇa* and *Śītālā* (*Rādhā*?), c. late-18th cent., height around 42 in., *Raghunātha-tālā* (Paṭha Mahal), Guptipara, PS Balagarh, Hooghly.

Seventeenth Century AD: In this century, making of the *Jagannātha*-triad, *Kṛṣṇa-Rādhā*, *Nitāi-Gaura* and other *Vaiṣṇava*-associates continued in a full swing; while the revitalized *Śākta*-wave also came up with significant sculptural-depictions of goddess *Kālī*, *Caṇḍī* etc.

But, the most significant contribution of this era is *Ṣaḍabhuja* – a six-handed form of *Gaurāṅga* – comprising *Mahāprabhu*, *Rāma* and *Kṛṣṇa* embodied together (see Fig 16). The iconography was described in *Caitanya Bhāgavata* (Ghosh, 1995) and *Caitanya Caritāmṛta*, (Mukhopadhyay, 1999) but appeared for the first-time in early-seventeenth century. Ancient deities like *Caṇḍī* and *Manasā* began to be manifested in wood, while other hieratic-traditions also maintained a close proximity with the folk-tribal genres. The available specimens, however, are quantitatively large but aesthetically repetitive – imitating the guidelines of the earlier century.

Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries: Wooden idols of Bengal datable to eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are numerous in quantity and various in iconographies. Many of them represent the hieratic-tradition and are considered to belong to the higher order; though minor-deities and semi-divine beings like *Garuḍa* and *Hanumāna* were also depicted in high-numbers. Even the folk-tribal icons – lately absorbed in the Brahmanic-idiom – are not rare.



Fig 18. *Mahāmāyā*, c. 18th cent., height around 54 in., *Mahāmāyātālā*-Garia, PS Sonarpur, 24 Pgns (S).



Fig 19. *Viśālākṣī*, c. 18th cent., height around 66 in., *Viśālākṣī-tālā*, Baruipur, PS Baruipur, 24 Pgns (S).



Fig 20. *Manasā*, c. 18th-19th cent., height around 42 in., Rajbalhat, PS Jangipara, Hooghly.

But, stylistically, these two centuries continued with the same legacy that was developed in the preceding era. They were to celebrate the multiple-dynamics of Bengal-school, paradigms of which were well-set in the sixteenth and seventeenth. The basic form and structure – along

with the carving-techniques – remained almost the same; while the artisans were only to meet-up with the high-demand from the patrons and common-devotees. However, the era came up with some remarkable features that are prevalent in most of the living-specimens:

- Buddhist-divinities continued to be carved in a smaller scale and volume. Refer could be made to an eighteenth-century Goddess (*Tārā*?) at the State Archaeological Museum in Kolkata, *Khodā-Khudi* or Pyakom-Pyakim from Achhipur in South 24 Parganas (Chattopadhyay, 2005) and the nineteenth-century Buddha at Ananda Niketan Keertishala in Nabasan, Howrah.

- Lord *Śiva*, an important member of the Brahmanic-trinity, was stopped to be depicted individually. He remained either as a part of the *Kālī*-image or accompanied by his consort *Pārvatī*.

- *Kṛṣṇa* – alone or with *Rādhā* – the *Jagannātha*-triad and *Nitāi-Gaura* remained as the most popular divine-motifs.

- Deities from other pantheons, especially *Kālī* and *Viśālākṣī* (see Fig 19), became extremely popular and continued to be depicted in large numbers.

- Folk-tribal divinities like *Pancānanda*, *Śitalā* and *Dakṣiṇa Rāya* – who were earlier made of clay and paint – began to be depicted in wood as well.

- Ancient deities – like *Mahāmāyā* (see Fig 18), *Caṇḍī*, *Manasā* (see Fig 20), *Hara-Pārvatī*, *Jagaddhātṛī*, *Rāmacandra*-triad with *Hanumāna* – who have been portrayed in other mediums like stone etc, also began to be manifested in wood.

- Even Islamic-icons like *Barkhān Gājī* have been portrayed in wood, though it's one of the rare exceptions.

By the end of nineteenth century AD, the British and other Europeans in India succeeded to influence many indigenous-forms of aesthetic-expression, except a few like the wooden idols. Even today, the surviving-artisans of this tradition follow the norms that were set by the sixteenth-century visionaries; though the art has lost its dynamism and strength.

Decline of the Past Glory

Like every perishable being on earth, the tradition of making wooden idols in Bengal also began to decline in a natural curve. Several factors coincided and lead towards a gradual-disinterest of the Bengali-folk on this form of artistic-expression. By the beginning of twentieth-century, things started changing drastically and turning in a different direction.

- The Permanent Settlement Act, introduced in 1793 and made permanent in 1800, began to show its marvels. The local-Zamindars lost their property and authority; and hence couldn't remain as regular-patrons like before.

- The village-landlords began to spend most of their time and money in Kolkata and other metropolis – reducing or cutting-off their ancestral-connection with the rural life and culture.

- The newly English-educated elite-class began to deviate from their traditional beliefs, customs, rituals and religious-practices.

- Most of the new-generation artisans refused to take-up their ancestral-profession; and hence many of the technical-secrets that were to be passed through generations were lost forever.

- People from other castes and clans joined this trade; but they lacked the hereditary-knowledge and traditional-skills.
- Environmental awareness put restrictions on the cutting of trees; and hence good quality wood was not as available as before.
- Inferior and slack productions generated a sort of disinterest among the patrons.
- Easily-available, cheaper and more-handly mediums like plaster were introduced and people began to prefer them to wood.
- Modern Bengali city-dwellers – rich, in-secured and hence religious – were more influenced by the Europeans and the elite-culture of North and Western India. With these new associations, they changed their taste and began to prefer marble or metal over wood for the manifestation of their beloved-deity.

Thus the age-old tradition began to die down – gradually but surely – yet kept itself alive till the first-quarter of the twentieth-century. The next one-hundred odd years, however, tell us a story of absolute-degeneration; though abrupt-glimpses of the legacy still remained visible.



Fig 21. *Maṅgalacandī*, c. 19th cent., height around 48 in., Bariya (Paschim-para), PS Diamond Harbor, 24 Pgns (S).



Fig 22. *Tripurāsundarī*, c. 19th-20th cent., height around 60 in., Chhatrabhog, PS Mathurapur, 24 Pgns (S).



Fig 23. *Dakṣiṇa Rāya*, c. 19th-20th cent., height around 30 in., Dhanvantarī Kālī Temple, Majilpur, PS Jainagar, 24 Pgns (S).

But now there is rarely any demand for such wooden-images and hardly any artists are surviving on this form of artistic-practice. Even the *Sūtradharas* of Natungram – for instance – do not make such divinities anymore, while those who are in-business at Ekchakra or Nabadvip are not *Sūtradhara* at all. In any case, most of the occasional-orders from a handful of devotees – local, national or international – favored the working-artisans surviving even today. But, as a whole, this very tradition of Indian art could be considered as a dead one.

Last Few Words, But Not The Least

The tradition of making wooden idols in Bengal belongs to an old-ancestry, which evolved through the ages as a collective visual-emotion of the entire clan. In this process, it democratized the portrayal of divine-images – maintaining a close-proximity with the other contemporaneous art-practices. It introduced a uniform-school of Bengal-sculpture, with an aesthetic-identity of its own – irrespective of any religious-bias and independent of any pan-Indian hegemony. It also introduced a unique group of artisans in the form of *Sūtradharas* – producing innumerable sculptural-pieces of artistic excellence. Besides influencing the other mediums of visual-expression, it also provided a distinct identity to the Bengali-intelligentsia as a whole.

It's true that the *Sūtradharas* have left their ancestral-profession and merely engaged themselves in making household accessories. It is also true that a few wooden deities are occasionally made today and that too by the artisans of some other caste or lineage. True again, there is hardly anybody left to know the traditional-procedure of carving; while present-day Bengali-mass has lost interest in this form of wooden-sculpture. Even it is true that the making of wooden idols is already a dead-art...

Even after that, ignoring an episode that comprises a history of twelve-hundred long years and illustrated by seven-hundred odd living-specimens is very difficult. Without an in-depth study of such a comprehensive tradition, the history of Bengal and thus of Indian art would always remain incomplete.

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