Woodcarving in Bengal
a brief historical overview

The history of woodcarving in Bengal – comprising both what is now known as West Bengal and Bangladesh – and thus in India greater, seems to be very old. From time immemorial, the artists and craftsmen of this region have always adored wood, highly as well as widely, as a plastic medium for carving. There are, generally speaking, two major reasons behind such popularity: (i) prime availability and (ii) ready tractability. But, unfortunately, due to the perishable nature of wood as a material and, especially, the hot and humid climate of India in general, the earlier specimens haven’t lasted long. Where we can find the oldest piece of woodcarving of the world to be dated as far as c 25 cent BC1, there its Indian counterpart can hardly be pushed back to the Mauryan period (c 322-184 BC)2. In spite of this, there are several other resources that give us enough testimony to prove, and almost everyone has agreed upon, the antiquity of woodcarving as a medium of artistic activities in India and thus in Bengal.

Most Indian woodcarvings of perceptible antiquity, including the earliest one, mentioned above, has been found from the eastern region of this country; though the oldest specimen from Bengal dates back only to c 2 cent AD3. However, it gives us a few glimpses, at least of the age-old tradition, which resulted in a new school of sculpture that rose in these provinces in the later part of the medieval period. This fact has been supported not only by 20th century scholars like Rakhal Das Banerji4, but also by Taranath5, the Tibetan Lāmā (monk), in his early 17-cent work on the History of Buddhism in India. He has advocated in favour of the new school founded in the reigns of Dharmapal (c 783-818 AD) and Devapal (c 818-858 AD). Along with that, he has also mentioned about two highly skilled artists of the Nāgā tradition, Dhiman and his son Bitpalo, who used to practice various techniques like metal casting, engraving and painting.

Taranath didn't make it clear at all whether Dhiman and Bitpalo had any knowledge on the art of woodcarving; but, fortunately, we can accumulate enough evidences to ensure the high quality of this craft in Bengal, during 9-13 cent AD. References are also there, both material and textual, those advocate the continuation of this legacy even in the centuries to follow. Majority of the available specimens belong to the 18-19 centuries; and thus, the tradition has continued with its full glory and grandeur, at least up to the second or third decade of the 20 cent AD.

Woodcarving, as an aesthetic medium, has frequently been used by the Bengali craftsmen – in respect to various time, space and individual. On each and every socio-economic strata (i.e., folk, social and religious), ample evidences could be found in different corners, and in different manifestations. For example, we can have a look at the village-huts and other houses, the ‘candilamapā’s (shrine of Goddess Durgā), ‘āḍṭālā’s (thatched roof with eight parts), ornamented doors, ‘sinṭhāsān’s (throne), ‘rath’s (processional cart/chariot) and the related relief or free sculptures, ‘vṛṣa-kāṭṭhā’s (funeral totem), carved ‘pāṭā’s (cover of palm-leaf manuscript), palanquin, ‘hāōdā’s (seat on elephant’s back), boats and barges, various musical instruments, masks, puppets.

2 see ibid, p 7, fig 3
3 see ibid, p 9
4 “A prolonged examination of the mediaeval sculptures found in North-Eastern provinces of India leads one to the conclusion that a new school of sculpture rose in these provinces in the later part of the mediaeval period (800-1200 AD).” see Banerji, R D. (1933). Eastern Indian School of Mediaeval Sculpture. New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India. p 18
5 “During the time of Devapala and Sri Dharmapala, there lived a highly skilled artist called Dhiman in the Varendra region. His son was called Bitpalo. These two followed the tradition of the Naga artists and practiced various techniques like those of metal-casting, engraving and painting….. The son used to live in Bangla.” – Taranath; see Asher, Frederick M. (1980). The Art of Eastern India, 300-800. Minneapolis: Minnesota Press. p 4
and dolls, furniture, 'sinduk's (volt), designed walking sticks, utensils, mould of various sweets; and last but not the least, the idols of various Gods and Goddesses. Dwelling on such a long and varied list, the visual emotion of Bengali folk has been (and still being) explored and expressed with utmost care and delicacy.

A wide range of these stray and detached examples, mostly dated between 17 and early 20 centuries, has been preserved in various museums and private collections. Among them, the collection of Bangladesh National Museum (Dhaka), Asutosh Museum of the University of Calcutta (West Bengal), Gurusaday Museum at Joka (South 24 Parganas, WB) and State Archaeological Museum, Behala (Kolkata) are considered to be the best. Of others, the collection of Bangiya Sahitya Parishat and Anchalik Naksa Kendra⁶ (both in Kolkata), Ananda Niketan Keertisala near Bagnan (Howrah), Amulya Prathnasala at Rajbalhat (Hooghly), Jogesh Chandra Purakriti Bhavan at Visnupur (Bankura) and Bardhaman University Museum are also quite worthy of a notable mention. Interestingly, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London also has collected a few specimens (panels and pilasters, dated c early 19 cent AD) from a rath of Mahishadal, East

⁶ previously known as Art in Industry Museum, Govt of India (now closed)
Medinipur (see fig 1). Above all, many other living examples of this age-old tradition can yet be experienced in the day to day life and culture of the Bengali folk. They can be found almost everywhere – such as various parts of temples, candimandaps and âtçâlas, old ancestral houses, and the residential buildings of aristocrats of the past.

: TURNING TOWARDS THE HISTORY :

Indian history began in c 3500 BC in the Indus Valley, while a typically ‘provincial past’ of Bengal has always been surmised merely as a kind of backwater of the main flow. Though we all know that there were at least three remarkable exceptions that Bengal could cherish for:

- the greatness of its prehistoric culture ¹⁸,
- its mammoth contribution to the medieval Indian architecture (especially the Mauryan Period) ⁹ and
- the brilliant but transitory rise of Sasanka ¹⁰, the first monarch of Bengal.

However, the political glory of Bengal was bloomed only in the beginning of the 7-cent AD, under the brief rule of Sasanka, who is often attributed with creating the first separate entity in Gaur. Hence, the ancient Bengal came to life at a time, when the rest of India reached a stage of apparent stagnation. Before that, we can get a couple of glimpses of its ‘history’, but mainly as a mere addition to the imperial powers based at Magadh. Only after the rise and fall of several civilizations and dynasties in the rest of the country, Bengal finally came to witness the flowering of a considerable kingdom under the Pals (c 750 AD onwards).

So, we can see that the political as well as cultural past of Bengal, at least in the hieratic level, has always remained closely associated with the history of the rest of the country. So it’s never surprising to find that the earliest surviving specimens of Bengal woodcarving (assignable between 2 to 12 cent AD) are less Bengali and more Indian in spirit and expression – connecting both the pan-Indian and local traditions. On the other hand, the relatively abundant harvests of the 18-19 centuries are found to be penetrated and passed through a kind of local idiom, typical to this very soil.

It is difficult to guess when exactly this local idiom started to be ascertained in the medium of wood, because of two specific reasons:

- lack of firmly datable specimens; and
- the apparent gap between the preceding examples from Bangladesh National Museum (dated c 10-12 cent) and the rich and varied corpus of the 18-19 cent.

¹⁸ see the discoveries in the excavations at ‘Pându Râjâr Dhibî’ in West Bengal; also see the rich collection of State Archaeological Museum, and Tamralipta Museum and Research Centre (East Medinipur)
¹⁹ ‘…..the Buddhist Emperor’s extraordinary building activity must have created a great demand for Bengali master- builders, and thus have established the reputation which they had even in Akbar’s time.” [see Havell, E B. (1915). The Ancient and Medieval Architecture of India: A Study of Indo-Aryan Civillisation. London. p 20]
¹⁰ Sasanka ruled approximately between 600 and 625 AD and was contemporaneous to Harsavardhan. His capital was called Karnasuvarna or Khônsonâ and is located in modern Murshidabad. The development of the Bengali calendar is also attributed to him as the starting date falls squarely within his reign.
In stone and terracotta, the typical Bengali idiom has occurred in the late 8 or early 9 century — though merely in its infancy — mostly in the art of Maynāmati and Pāharpur, now in Bangladesh. And hence, we can surmise that the same idiom might have also been evident in the now-lost specimens of woodcarving; since for a long period of time, artists and craftsmen of Bengal have been working in all the four mediums — stone, clay, wood and paint. A mere glance would reveal that the existing woodcarvings of antiquity, presently with the Bangladesh National Museum and State Archaeological Museum (Kolkata), are very much parallel to their counterparts in stone — both thematically and stylistically.

These woodcarvings of the 10-13 centuries belong, quite convincingly, to the prevailing hieratic-art denominator of India in that particular period. So, in order to develop a deep insight on the historical development of this regional phenomenon, we must achieve a clear vision about the traditional legacy of the country as a whole in this regard. Because, we all know that the chronicle of a regional history can never be separated from the collective achievements and failures of the country as a whole; and similarly, the history of a country can never be summarized without the characteristic basis of localized annals.

: ANTIQUITY OF THE ART OF WOODCARVING IN INDIA :

As all the other ancient civilizations like Egypt and China, India also has a very old tradition of woodcarving. Though the earliest specimen, as we have already discussed, are not that of much antiquity, but the testimony of indigenous literature and many other references leave no room for doubt that early Indian stone sculpture and architecture is largely the translation of their wooden originals.

INDUS VALLEY CIVILISATION (c 3500-2500 BC):

It's true that, no material specimen of woodcarving has been found till date that could be assigned to the days of the Indus Valley; but that doesn’t mean that the people of that era were not at all aware of the usage of wood.

The historians have agreed upon the fact that the Harappans have made use of wood in various aspects of their architecture. For example, it is said that the roof of their buildings (in the cities) were flat and made of wood, reed and mud-plaster (see fig 2). We have also been informed that those inhabitants used to use timbers in order to construct the upper stories of their buildings, the roofs of which were built of stout beams covered with planking finished with a top dressing of beaten earth.

Hence, we can say that the antiquity of the earliest 'evidence' of Indian woodcarving goes well beyond the earliest specimen of the world. Because we can see that even in the 35 cent BC, Indians had a comprehensive knowledge on the art of woodcarving, while the earliest material specimen from Egypt came to the fore after a long interval of 1000 years or so.

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12 "...a motif was not necessarily invented or borrowed at the date of its first appearance in permanent material; indeed, a first appearance in stone is almost tantamount to proof of an earlier currency in wood." — Ananda K Coomarswamy
14 see Wood Carvings of Eastern India. p 11
THE VEDIC PERIOD:

The Vedic people of India also – even after their dynamic contribution in so many fields of excellence – didn’t leave any specimen that could testify their craftsmanship on wood. But, fortunately, they haven’t showed any parsimony in documenting the very references. In Rg-Veda only, there are at least three prominent hints that focus on the use of wood as a major medium of utilitarian as well as aesthetic venture. Such as:

► "...May we ascend the ship that bears us safely, whereby we may pass over all misfortune." (Book VIII, hymn 42.3)\(^\text{15}\)

► "Loud neighs the Tawny Steed when started, settling deep in the wooden vessel while they cleanse him." (Book IX, hymn 95.1)\(^\text{16}\)

► "What was the tree, what wood in sooth produced it from which they fashioned out the earth and heaven?" (Book X, hymn 32.7 & 81.4)\(^\text{17}\)

So, presumably, wood was one of the chief mediums (besides clay and metal) that have been widely used in the Rg-Vedic and later-Vedic era. It was used in order to make different articles of daily use – like various structures, images, utensils, household accessories etc. Even in the epics of Rāmāyan and Mahābhārataf, we get many examples describing various doors, chariots, sinhāsans etc manufactured by the highly skilled ancestors of today’s woodcarvers.

MAHĀVIR AND BUDDHA (c 6-5 cent BC):

In the cultural history of India, the era of c 6-5 cent BC is marked as the ‘Age of Saints’; but even that couldn’t provide us with any hand on specimen of woodcarving. Though, it bears enough testimony of an indigenous tradition that proclaims in favour of this very art.

\(^{15}\) see Griffith, Ralph T H (ed). (1897). *Hymns of The Rigveda*. Vol II. Benares. p 185

\(^{16}\) ibid, p 354

\(^{17}\) ibid, p 497
In this connection, we may recall the story of a sandalwood image of Jivantasvāmī (Mahāvīr himself, died in c. 527 BC) that was said to be carved in his lifetime; and presumably worshipped as well by his followers.¹⁸ We can also mention here another tradition referring to a wooden effigy of Yaksā Moggarāpāṇi in a shrine outside the city of Rājagṛha (modern Rajgir), dist Nalanda, Bihar.¹⁹ Though none of these specimens have been materially substantiated, but both of them clearly indicate the use of wood as a very common practice in making sculptures of cult icons.

Apart from these, many other references also advocate in favour of the same tradition. It is said that the Blessed One (Lord Buddha, died in c. 488 BC) granted permission to the Bhikṣus for using several wooden articles and furniture. A long list of such articles is recorded in Cullavagga, Ch 11, Khandaka of the Vinaya Pitaka.²⁰ Besides this, we should not forget the sandalwood monastery, built by Pārśva, which is said to have been visited by Lord Buddha himself. Once again, we don’t have any material evidence, except a beautifully executed painting of the monastery, on the wall of cave 2 at Ajanta.²¹

In any case, all such direct and indirect references make it very clear that the Indians in the remote past have paid a lot of attention to cultivate and develop this age-old tradition of woodcarving.

THE MAURYAS (c. 322-184 BC):

In the history of woodcarving in India, the age of Mauryas bear the first prominent landmark; since, this is the era that offers, apart from all sorts of literary and other evidences, the earliest material specimen ever found. And for the first time, the testimony of those Classical accounts mentioned above, finally got materially substantiated in this era.

Here, we can mention the remnants of wooden buildings at the Mauryan sites like Bulandibagh and Kumrahar in Patna; and also the upper portion of a Mauryan stockade, reported to be kept in the Indian Museum, Kolkata. Though, among these two, unfortunately we couldn’t find the later one — mentioned by Kalyan Kumar Dasgupta²² — in existence, as the Museum couldn’t help us with any updates in this regard. However, in this connection, we may also mention about the discovery of 26 wooden pillars at Vairat (Rajasthan),²³ which could be assigned to the same era once again.

Apart from the material evidences mentioned above, we can also recall some literary references in this regard; like the wooden imperial residence of Chandragupta Maurya (ruled c. 322-298 BC) described by the Greek traveler Megasthenes, who came to India at that time.²⁴ He says, in his famous book named 'Indica', that — apart from the royal palace at 'Pālībothā' (i.e., Patāliputra, now Patna) — the cities were mostly made of wood as well on riverbank or the seacoast;²⁵ and there was a wooden wall, surrounding the capital city.²⁶ Though, once again, none of these references have been materially substantiated, but the indication seems to be very clear.

In this connection, we may mention about the series of chambers, built by Emperor Asok (c. 274-237 BC) for the Ajivika sect of ascetics. These caves were carved into several boulder masses, duplicating the traditional wood-and-thatch construction of the Indian, especially Bengal, villages. The two most noteworthy wood-imitating chambers are that of the Lomas Rishi (c. 3 cent BC) and the Sudama caves.²⁷ It is also said that the major part of the 84000 stupas, erected by Asok, were built of wood-and-thatch.²⁸ Moreover, it has also been surmised that "...the Buddhist Emperor's extraordinary building activity must have created a great demand for Bengali master-builders, and thus have established the reputation — which they had even in Akbar's time."²⁹ And

¹⁸ see WCOEI, p 11
¹⁹ see ibid
²³ see Catalogue of the Wood Carvings in the Indian Museum. pp 3-4
²⁴ see WCOEI, p 13
²⁵ see Majumdar, R C. (1960). The Classical Accounts of India. Kolkata: Firma KL Mukhopadhyay. p 223
²⁶ ibid, p 262
²⁹ see footnote 9 of this chapter
thus, for the first time, we come to discover some connection between Bengal and the history of woodcarving in India.

Now, in comparison to the indirect references mentioned above, we would like to mention about the earliest material specimen; and it’s a mother-and-child sculpture (see fig 3), dated to a period between late 3 and early 2 cent BC. This rarest of the specimens depicts a mother with her two babies – one in her lap and the other standing close to her left leg. Its 20 cm in height and was hailed from the Gulzarbag locality of Patna; now belonging to the private collection of Gopi Krisna Kanodia. Even in a corroded condition, this freestanding sculpture in wood apparently shows a stylistic kinship with the famous Yaksini figure in stone from Didargunj.

THE AGE OF STUPAS (c 2-1 cent BC):

We have already come to know that early Indian architectural monuments, like early Indian stone sculptures, are largely translations of their wooden originals; and that is very much true for the architectural splendours of Sanchi (c 2-1 cent BC), Amaravati (c 2 cent BC), Bharhut (c 2 cent BC) and Bhaja (c mid 2 cent BC). In each of these specimens, the basic knowledge and technology of the art of woodcarving has worked as the backbone and has been enhanced towards further accomplishments.

30 see WCOEI, p 81 and Description of pl 20 (p143)
First of all, many parts of these stupas were made of wood in particular. For example, we can recall that the original ‘toran’s of Sanchi (see fig 4) and the umbrella of Bhaja were probably of plain timber-work, just like their railings, which have been replaced later by the stone-ones. In this regard, we can mention about a scripture on the southern gateway of Sanchi, which suggests that the artists and artisans employed to build the stupa were primarily skilled in woodcarving, metal casting and ivory-work. So, we can easily understand that the woodcarver’s skill and technique somehow got manifested in many aspects of these constructions. And that’s the reason, why the shallow-relief technique, applied on the Bharhut sculptures (see fig 5), clearly suggests that it was the work of skilled woodcarvers, attempting to use stone for the first time.

In this connection, we can also talk about various specimens of Amaravati sculptures, suggesting their town gateways to be built of brick, along with the wooden guard-houses above them. On the other hand, the mortise-holes, cut into the stone, surrounding the entrance of Bhaja, clearly indicate that once upon a time, in its earlier days, an elaborate wooden screen was

31 see Indian Architecture Through The Ages. p 28; also see Indian Art: A Concise History. p 53
33 see Havell, E B. (1928). Indian Sculpture and Painting. London. pp 90-91
34 see The Ancient and Medieval Architecture of India: A Study of Indo Aryan Civilization. p 30
added to that very chamber. Moreover, it is also presumed that the roof-ribs of this stupa were increased by nothing else but wooden members inset into the high vault. Unfortunately, none of these specimens could materially sustain to meet up our quest for evidence.

However, we can also refer to the structural nature of all these stupas, mentioned above, where the technique of wooden construction – especially the wood-and-thatch construction of the Bengal village-huts – is evident. At the same time, it is also said that most of the sculptures in these architectures, just like their wooden predecessors, were surely painted when new. Moreover, in this connection, we can recollect that most Indian relief-s in stone and clay of appreciable antiquity have originally carried some colouring on them. So, here, we can discover a somewhat unity in various artistic activities that advocates very strongly in favour of the prevailing practice of the art of woodcarving.

FIRST AND SECOND CENTURIES AD:

The legacy of stupa, along with many of its attributes, continued in the chaitya-architectures of the next two centuries. Especially, the typical wood-and-thatch construction of the Bengal cottages remained a significant character of the ceilings; and that is evident in Karli (c 1-2 cent AD), the famous chaitya of Andhra Pradesh. A detailed illustration, drawn by Outhett and engraved by Cooper (in the year 1811) – illustrated in fig 6 – would be self-explanatory in this regard.

Apart from the other prominent features, we can also see that the main component of the screen immediately behind the only remaining column was a central façade. And considering the presence of numerous mortise-holes over there, one can easily claim that originally it must have supported a wooden gallery, which was placed across the whole front of the entrance.

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35 see IATTA. p 53
36 see Indian Art: A Concise History. p 62
38 see IA:ACH. p 58
fig 7. The dolls from Chandraketugarh

Now, in this connection, we must talk about somewhat more direct evidence in favour of the practice of woodcarving in this period; and that too from a Bengal connection. And this is for the first time that we come to experience any material specimen of Bengal origin, the main component of this chapter.

These three specimens of Bengal woodcarving (see fig 7) were discovered from Chandraketugarh, West Bengal, and could be assigned to c 2 cent AD. However, these small wooden dolls – a male and a female figure, along with a fish – constitute another group of rare specimen of remote antiquity. Most importantly, these are also the earliest material specimen of this soil. Both the male and the female figure are in a standing posture; while their dress code – especially the headgear and the ornaments of the woman – suggest them to be manifested under the aegis of Maurya or Sunga legacy. The fish is rather a simple one, with angular lines intersected on its body to create a designal surface of its scale. However, though in a fragile condition, all the three specimens are now with the State Archaeological Museum, Kolkata.

EPIGRAPHIC AND TEXTUAL EVIDENCES (c 3-11 cent AD):

Various inscriptions and texts, belonging to the medieval period, are considered as critically important elements in discovering the missing links and understanding the continuation of woodcarving tradition in India39, and thus in Bengal. For example, the Nagarjunikonda (Andhra

39 An exception in this regard is the horoscope-shaped window above the entrance of Cave 19 (c mid-5 cent AD) of Ajanta, which is elaborately carved, based upon wooden architectural models. [see Behl, Benoy K. (7 Dec, 2007). Simply Grand. Frontline, p 71]. Other than that, the tradition of making rock-cut imitations of wooden beams in the
Pradesh) inscription of Abhira Vasudev (dated c 278 AD) tells us about an eight-armed figure of Lord Viṣṇu, carved in 'Udumbara', i.e., fig-tree (ficus glomerita). It also mentions that this image of 'Astillbujasvānti' (lord with eight arms) was installed on the Siddhalahari hill, bordering the Nagarjunakonda valley.  

Many of the indigenous texts, datable to this period, are also full of hints and references to the art of woodcarving. For instance, we can recall the 'Kāma Sūtra' of Vatsyāyana (written in c 4 cent AD) that includes carpentry as a major component in the list of 'Cauṣṭā-kalā', i.e., sixty-four arts. On the other hand, chapters XLIII, LIII and LIX of 'Vṛhat Saṃhitā' of Varāhamihira (written in c 6 cent AD) and chapter 89 of khaṇḍa III of 'Viṣṇudharmottaram' (dated abruptly c 400-500/450-650/600-900/600-1000 AD) give us intricate details about how to procure timber for fashioning divine images and fabricating furniture. Both the texts have discussed about three significant aspects: (i) the suitability of different varieties of wood for respective purposes, (ii) the trees that should be considered as forbidden and (iii) when and how the relevant trees are to be cut down. However, similar instructions are available in 'Viṣvakarmā Prakāśa', and, in spite of some minor variations, Rajaballabhava, a comparatively late authority follow the older tradition in this regard.

Now, 'Puruṣottam Saṁhitā' (ch IV, sūtra 1-6), a medieval Pañcarātra Vaśiṇav text, describes wood as the best possible material for constructing a temple. Another Pañcarātra work, the 'Viṣṇu Saṁhitā' (ch XIII, sūtra 83-87), also indicates wood as a suitable material for the same purpose.

In this connection, apart from these textual references, we can also talk about some material specimens that exist even today. The three wooden temples of Himachal Pradesh dated between c 8-11 centuries AD, are:-

- Laksana Devt Temple at Bharmaur in Chamba district (c 8 cent AD),
- Sakti Devt Temple at Chatrari (c 8 cent AD) and
- Mrkula Devt Temple in Lahaul (c 11 cent AD).

All of them are richly carved and reminds us either of the Gupta-tradition in the northern-plains (Laksana Devt, for example), or the Buddhist-tradition of the Kashmir artists (Sakti Devt). But, above all, we must say that in all the three temples, the rhythmic grace and joyousness of the hills have been clearly manifested.

Now, since our discussion is mainly based on the epigraphic and textual references, we can also recall the description of Huen Tsang (or Yuan Chwang), the Chinese pilgrim, who visited India in the first half of the 9 cent AD. According to his version and other literary sources, Huen Tsang went to a provincial state, where "...two or three li south from the Pigeon Monastery... was a tall isolated hill well wooded and abounding in flowers and streams..." And it becomes very much true as we come to know that the Pigeon Monastery mentioned here was in Magadh, today's Bihar-Shariff. In addition to this, Huen Tsang has also described "According to the Life the marvelous image of the Kuan-tzu-tsai Pusa was made of sandal wood, and it was enclosed by railings..." Here, the Kuan-tzu-tsai Pusa is none other than Avalokiteśvar; and it's sandalwood image only that the pilgrim is talking about.

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45 see WCOEI. p 7
46 see ibid
47 see WCOEI. p 12
48 see ibid (fn 6)
49 see Behl, Benoy K. (25 April, 2008). Mountain Magic. Frontline, p 74; also see COTWCTIM, p 4
51 see ibid
Though none of these wooden marvels, except the three temples of Himachal Pradesh, could survive the corroding effect of nature and other unavoidable phenomena, but all these indications – mentioned above – leave no room for doubt about the antiquity of woodcarving tradition in this very soil of India.

So, now we can see that the visual emotion of Indian folk has always been – and still being – explored and expressed on wood, as a medium with enormous possibilities. Moreover, in this process, each and every region has developed their own subject and style – in a spontaneous manner – simply by following the local tradition and using the available variety of the medium. At the same time, this rich and varied heritage – just like its counterparts on clay, stone and metal – has always extended its influence well beyond the political boundaries. Even today, we can find the imprint of this age old idiom throughout the neighbouring countries like Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Nepal and Tibet.

: FOCUSING TOWARDS THE EAST :

Actually, most Indian woodcarvings of perceptible antiquity have been found from the eastern region of this country; where, even the earliest material specimen – the sculpture of mother-and-child, assignable to c 3-2 cent BC – was hailed from. Hence, this region has always claimed a very prominent and significant position in the history and tradition of woodcarving in India.

In terms of form and content, the woodcarvings of eastern India can be classified into three major categories: (a) hieratic, (b) folk and (c) tribal. Here, both the folk and tribal form of expression are quite distinct from the hieratic art; and also stand at a distance from each other. But, somehow, this distance between themselves is sometimes so marginal – anthropologically, historically, as well as stylistically – that it becomes difficult to separate them from each other. Hence, it would be safe to consider them together under the term ‘folk-tribal’, as coined by Kalyan Kumar Dasgupta.

However, the specimens of hieratic tradition showcase the age-old idiom with almost similar orientations, by changing gradually with the impact of time and foreign influence. On the other hand, the folk-tribal style comes out of the collective unconscious/subconscious of the common people and also bears a very close relation with the similar tradition of the other regions. Though, exchange of basic values and other significant achievements often takes place between the folk, tribal and the hieratic as well; and thus each of them get benefited by the other.

Now, let us have a quick look through the various regions of India and find out, which are the states (as the regions have been politically defined today) – apart from Bengal – that have contributed both historically and aesthetically throughout the rich tradition of woodcarving in this country:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STATE</th>
<th>WOOD MOSTLY USED</th>
<th>SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTION</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>Teak</td>
<td>Nāmghar (place of worship), large mythic figures, simhāsan for deity etc. (contd)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

52 see WCOE1. pp viii-ix
53 For the contribution of Bengal woodcarving, please refer to the previous pages.
Here, the list above shows that most Indian woodcarvings of not only perceptible antiquity (including the earliest one), but also of aesthetic excellence have been and are found from the eastern states of this country, where Bengal holds a very significant position.

### WOODCARVING IN BENGAL – A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW:

Among all the states of eastern India, the contribution of Bengal woodcarving is both historically significant and aesthetically varied in nature. Though the oldest material specimen dates back only to the 2 cent AD, but we have seen that the antiquity of the earliest indirect evidence goes well beyond that. We have also come to know that during the time of emperor Asok (c 274-237 BC), there was a huge demand for the Bengali master-builders. And it would have never been possible unless and until Bengal already had a well-developed tradition in the art of woodcarving. So, the history of this art over here can easily be pushed back – if not more – well beyond the 3 cent BC, whereas the dolls from Chandraketugarh is assigned only to 2 cent AD.

Since the earliest days, it could be presumed, the tradition of using wood in various aspects of daily life was a continuous phenomenon in Bengal; and that is what finally resulted in such wondrous and varied range of specimens, assignable to the Pal-Sen period (c 783-1197 AD).

The earliest of this genre is a freestanding wooden figure of Tārā, the Buddhist goddess, assignable to c 9-10 cent AD. It was discovered by late Dr Moreshwar Dikshit, from the debris of cave 31 at Kanheri, near Mumbai. It is considered to be an import from eastern India and reminds us of the Pal-figures from Bihar and Bengal. Unfortunately, the present location of this rare specimen is unknown, but a fine photograph – the only remaining document of the same – has been published in Marg (36/1, 1982).

### PILLAR-CAPITAL FROM SONARANG (c 9-10/12-13 cent AD):

A pillar-capital, measuring 4'4" x 1'3" x 1'5", carved in high relief from a solid block of wood, was discovered from a water-tank, immediately north of the deul (temple) at Sonarang, in Tongibari PS of Dhaka. This corroded, yet magnificent, piece of Bengal woodcarving (E-30, as it was numbered by NaliniKanta Bhattacharji) was presented to the Dhaka Museum (now Bangladesh National Museum) by Babu Ratnesvar Sen of Sonarang.

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54 see fig 1 of ch II of this book
According to some scholars, this elaborate piece of woodcarving should be assigned to c 9-10 cent AD55, while the others are of opinion that it's an execution of c 12-13 cent56. However, the most surprising fact is that even after remaining immerged for centuries in loam the original carving has remained quite intact — as described by Nalinikanta Bhattashali57 — on the outlines of the arch and on the perpendicular bands on both the sides. But, unfortunately, we couldn’t see the original specimen, as it has been announced to be in an extremely fragile condition.58 Hence, our only source of reference is the available printed photographs in:
- Iconography of Buddhist and Brahmanical Sculptures, pl LXXIV; and
- Bānglādeśer Dāruśilpa – Zinat Mahrukh Banu, pl 60

fig 8. Pillar-capital from Sonarang, PS Tongibari (taken from WCOEI, pl 22)

In those pictorial references, we come to see that in the centre of the wooden piece, there is an image of Viṣṇu, seated in dhyanāsan59, under a trefoil arch that is supported by two pillars. Here, the Lord has placed his lower arms on the lap, while the other two upper arms have gone upwards (the outlines could be distinguished) and holding indistinct articles. The arch is flanked by two flying figures; and two more figures flank the Lord and form brackets, which resembles the sculptural approach of the Sanchi gateways.60 It’s quite understandable that when intact, the capital must have been a vigorous piece of excellence Bengal woodcarving.

SPECIMENS FROM ARIAL (c 10-12 cent AD):

There are four valuable specimens of Bengal woodcarving that has been retrieved from the Sanbari area of village Arial, district Vikrampur, Bangladesh: (a) broken half of a pillar, (b) a sculpture, (c) a pedestal and (d) a long carved wood.61 All of them have been assigned to c 10-12 cent AD.

The base of the broken pillar is quadrangular in shape, whereas the upper part is hexagonal. The ‘kṛittimukh’62 on the base is quite significant because of its importance in the three-dimensional art of 10-12 centuries. However, the middle portion of the 10’ pillar is beautifully carved with floral and figural designs and motifs; while the top part is also carved with equal importance.63
The second specimen of this lot is an interesting relief-sculpture of a man. He is standing in an 'atibhanga' posture, with his left hand on the right thigh and the right hand holding a knife. Probably, it was not any divine image, but merely used as a part of any sculpture or architecture.

Along with these two, a broken pedestal of a sculpture and a big long wooden piece, richly carved, were also discovered from the same place. A detailed account of all these specimens has been discussed by Nalinikanta Bhattacharji in his essay 'Vikrampure Prapta Ekti Kāṣṭhastambha', originally published in 'Alokā', in Agrahāyana, BS 1343. And unfortunately, that remains our only source of information regarding these. Because, in reality, we couldn't encounter them in our visit to Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka; and the officer-in-charge also couldn't help us with any specific information.

'SURASUNDARī FROM KAJI-KASBA (C 11/12 CENT AD):

A beautiful figure of mythical Surasundari (celestial nymph) was retrieved from north Kaji-kasba of Munshigunj, Dhaka, and is now preserved in the Bangladesh National Museum (E-75.298). The beautiful wooden piece is 147.5 cm in height and carved in high relief. Some say that it's a work of c 12 cent AD, whereas most of the others assign it to the c 11 cent, which is also mentioned on the display tag of the Museum.

At a first glance, apparently, it seems to be a stylistic descendant of the female figures from the famous pillars of Mathura railing. But, actually, this Surasundari is comparatively less voluptuous; though her facial character is very much classical in appearance.

However, the Surasundari is placed under a trefoil arch, while five gradually receding tiers are surmounted by an elegant 'āmalaka' above the arch; and thus it has constituted an interesting structural feature of the composition. In addition to this, the base of the sculpture is finely carved with a repetitive design of floral patterns. The woman is standing in a rhythmic 'Tribhanga' posture, with half-closed eyes in meditation, and holding a parrot in her right hand. Here, this use of parrot is not only in tune with the tradition of Mathura, but also very much a folk motif, typical to the mythological tradition of Bengal.

Now, just like the similar renderings on stone from the contemporary era, this Surasundari is also wearing a short dhoti – as it was customary then and a very common phenomenon – in sakaccha fashion, by fastening both ends of the sārī. Along with this, she also has a long cīraka wrapped loosely around his torso. The ends of her garments are hanging in folds – from the girdles – on two sides, and her left hand is engaged in holding one of those ends. Apart from this, her upper body is naked and hence exquisitely adorned various elaborate ornaments. As a whole, the wooden beauty seems to typify the 'ideal feminine' of this very soil.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{64}}\text{An exaggerated form of Tribhanga.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{65}}\text{see Bānglār Kāther Kājī. Annexure 2, p 112}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{66}}\text{see ibid, annexure 2}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{67}}\text{as on 26.12.2010}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{68}}\text{see BD. p 198}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{69}}\text{see WCOEI. pp 66, 70, 143; also see BKK, p 3}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{70}}\text{It is a disc resembling an 'āmalaka' fruit (pyllanthus emblica), usually placed on the top of a Rekha-deul, the vimāna or tower of a north-Indian temple.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{71}}\text{‘Tribhanga’ is a tri-bent pose of standing/stance used in traditional Indian sculpture, art and classical dance forms.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{72}}\text{...women in eastern India in the comparatively remote times used to wear sāris both in the ‘sakaccha’ and ‘vikaccha’ fashions, the former mode gradually fell in disfavour and for the last few centuries the vikaccha style has been the established norm.” – WCOEI. p 124}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{73}}\text{The ‘sakaccha’ fashion consists of taking the cloth round the waist from right to left and fastening on to it (sometimes with a waist-band), generally below the navel. Then one portion (about one half) – called ‘kachha’ – is passed between the legs and tucked up behind the waist; the other portion – called ‘kocha’ – is suspended in graceful folds in front. Even today, in Andhra Pradesh, Tamilnadu and Maharashtra, women wear sāris in sakaccha fashion.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{74}}\text{Another noticeable feature of the sartorial style of the women, as glimpsed from sculptures of ancient and comparatively recent times, of eastern as well as other parts of India, lies in the accentuation of the contours of the legs of women, human as well as divine, resulting from the tucking up and fastening of both the ends of the sari behind like a kachha.” – WCOEI. pp 125-126}\]
WOODEN PILLARS FROM RAMPAL (c 11/12/12-13 cent AD):

There are two quadrangular wooden pillars that were recovered from the southern end of the great tank of Rampal of Munshigunj, Dhaka. Shaikh Abdul Ghani and Abdul Rahaman – two residents of that locality have presented75 these invaluable specimens to the Bangladesh National Museum (E-1127 and E-1128). But, unfortunately, on my visit to the Museum in December 2010, I was not allowed to have a look at them, kept in their reserve collection.

However, there are controversies with the dating of these two pillars. Some have assigned them to c 11/12 cent AD76; while the others have advocated in favour of c 12-1377. But, in any case, there is no doubt about the fact that these are two invaluable specimens of Bengal art of the Pal-Sen era. Both of them – measuring 114” x 11” x 11” – are carved at the top, middle and bottom (base); but the patterns are not identical.

Pillar I: The base of this quadrangular pillar is carved in low relief on three sides – with a common motif of ‘Vase-and-foliage’, which has been taken from the Indian classical art. One side of the pillar, the back one, has been left un-carved. And at the bottom, there are the figures of dwarfish gana78 appearing in each corner.

75 see Iconography of Buddhist and Brahmanical Sculptures in the Dacca Museum. pp 273-274; also see WCOEI.
76 see BD. p 98
77 see WCOEI. p 54
78 Attendants of Lord Śiva and Pārvatī
On face I, a goddess is represented with a short sword in her right hand and fighting a demon. On face II, there is a prince sitting under a tree in a dejected mood; his bow and arrow are thrown in neglect on the ground. Face III depicts a camel and a deer (or presumably a deer and a doe in union). This very image, taken together with the dejected prince, suggests the story of Prince Pāṇḍu in Mahābhārata — where he kills a deer (actually a Brahmin in disguise) in intercourse and gets cursed by him.\footnote{see Basu, Nagendranath (ed). (1988). Viśvakos. Vol II. Delhi: B R Publishing Corporation. p 164}

**Pillar II:** Just like pillar I, the base of pillar II is also carved on the three sides with the motif of 'Vase-and-foliage'. But this time, the other side is not left untouched; instead, some foliage is carved over there. And at the same time the carvings on the body are also different than the first one.

\footnote{fig 10. (a) Details of pillar I from Rampal (taken from WCOEI, pl 27-28)

\footnote{fig 10. (b) Details of pillar II from Rampal (taken from WCOEI, pl 29, 31)}
Here, face I is occupied by a well-covered kiritimukh; while face II is occupied by a
dancing female figure. And on face III, two ladies are shown attempting to shoot at birds, with the
string of the bow turned towards them; presumably, depicting any popular Bengali myth.

PILLARS FROM NORTH KAJI-KASBA (c 12 cent AD):

In the year 1975, three huge wooden pillars of appreciable antiquity were retrieved along with some
other specimens from a pond at north Kaji-Kasba, Dhaka. Each of these pillars, carved out of single
block of wood, has been assigned to c 12 cent AD.

Historically, it was a time of Hindu-majority in Kaji-Kasba. Later on, presumably,
during the Islamic invasion in the 13 cent, the pillars were thrown into the pond in order to save them
from possible humiliation or destruction. Hence, after remaining under loam and water for so many
years, today they are not in a very good condition. Only one of them (E-75.295) has been possible
to be restored and displayed at the gallery of Bangladesh National Museum, while the other two (E-
75.294 and E-75.296) have been kept in their reserve collection.

Pillar I (E-75.294): This pillar, measuring 388cm x 44cm, is square in shape at the
bottom and octagonal above. The pillar is said to be intricately carved in high-relief,
with various designs and motifs – geometric patterns, humans, flora and fauna, so
on and so forth.80

Now, since we couldn’t see the specimen in our own eyes, the only
source of visual reference for us is the line drawings made by Ms Banu.81 Though,
even those drawings are partly done and hence not adequate to provide us with a
proper understanding of the actual specimen.

Pillar II (E-75.295): This magnificent piece of woodcarving is unparallel and really
something Bengal could cherish for. The pillar, measuring 381cm x 36cm, is
intricately carved in high-relief, on all the three sides – with nine distinct layers. The
first layer shows an elephant, carrying three human figures (one broken) at the back
and holding another dead or injured man with its trunk.

The second layer shows floral designs with another elephant.

The third layer is the most interesting one, which depicts a divine
woman – probably a ‘Surasundari’ – standing in ‘tribhanga’ posture on a double
petalled ornamental lotus. As it was customary, this woman is also wearing a short
dhoti in a sakaccha fashion, by fastening both ends of the sari. The ends of her
garments are hanging in folds – from the girdles – on two sides. Being decorated
with various ornaments, she is probably busy in adjusting her dress. Though some
of the body parts have been damaged, this voluptuous lady with a huge coiffure at
the back of the head is depicting the concept of an ideal feminine beauty, by
following the pan-Indian tradition.

However, the fourth layer of the pillar – which is right above the
‘Surasundari’ – shows various designs; while the fifth exhibits three rows of simple
bordering.

In the sixth layer, we can see a heavenly dancer, in an ‘Attibhanga’
posture, holding two small drums with his two hands.

Besides this, there are floral motifs in the seventh layer; whereas the
last two merely has some border-designs only.

As a whole, this huge pillar – beautifully displayed in the gallery of
the Museum82 – reminds us about the heydays of the woodcarving tradition, as well
as the woodcarvers, of Bengal. Moreover, it also provides us with some idea on the
other two pillars that we couldn’t experience, unfortunately, due to unavoidable
circumstances.

80 see BD. pp 100-101
81 see ibid, pl 216
82 Surprisingly, in the display-card, it has been dated c 11 cent.
Pillar III (E-75.295): This pillar is almost of the same size as Pillar II (381cm x 35cm) and the designs are also said to be quite similar. As described by Zinat Mahruf Banu\textsuperscript{83}, this also has a dominating female figure that resembles with that of the earlier one. But, unfortunately, it's in an extremely bad state of decaying and hence couldn't be displayed in the gallery.\textsuperscript{84}

In this connection, we must mention another specimen (E-75.297) – assignable to the same date, i.e., c 12 cent AD. It has been discovered from the same place and on the same day – from where and when those three pillars mentioned above had been retrieved.

The form and structural appearance of the wooden piece – with a height of around 51cm – says that presumably it might have been a part of any temple-top. It is said that there are various designs of floral motif carved on the surface; which we couldn't see with our own eyes. Because, as told earlier, we were not allowed to visit the Reserve Collection of BNM; and once again Ms Banu has been our only source of authentic reference\textsuperscript{85} in this regard.

WOODEN LINTEL FROM NATESVAR (pre-Islamic era):

At the village of Natesvar in Vikrampur, Dhaka, a huge wooden lintel has been retrieved from the soil of a tank, just below the ruins of a temple, dated to the pre-Islamic era (i.e., before 13 cent AD).\textsuperscript{86} The size of the specimen is 10'10" x 8' x 9'; and the door of the frame, of which it was the

\textsuperscript{83} see BD. pp 101-102, pl 217
\textsuperscript{84} as on 26.12.2010
\textsuperscript{85} see BD. p 102
\textsuperscript{86} In East Bengal (now Bangladesh), the Islamic rule started to overpower since 1305 AD
top-piece, was 8’7” wide. But once again, today, it has remained a matter of textual mention as we couldn’t experience them in the Reserve Collection of the BNM.

However, the design was – as it has been described – quite old and familiar, often to be found on stone door-frames of the same period, showing a pair of cobras inter-wined and raising their hoods. The low-relief carving was said to be very finely executed; and fortunately it had been preserved – till then – so well that even at the time of recovery, such intricate detailing like the scales of the cobras etc was quite distinct.

WOODEN PANEL FROM BENGAL-TIBET BORDER (c 13 cent AD):

The specimen of Bengal woodcarving that we are going to talk about now, doesn’t have any material existence claimed by anyone till date. However, we have come to know about this wooden panel, assigned to c 13 cent AD, which was said to be found at the Bengal-Tibet border.

But, unfortunately, much information is not available about this rare specimen, except a pictorial mention in ‘Vrhat Banga’, the epical work by Dinesh Chandra Sen. From there only, we can assume that the wooden plate is beautifully carved, depicting one of the Jātak stories; and was probably used as the pātā to any palm-leaf manuscript.

REFERENCE FROM THE MEDIEVAL TEXTS (c 13-14 cent AD):

We have already come to know that indigenous texts of the medieval period are filled with a lot of references that indicate towards the uninterrupted tradition of woodcarving in India and thus in Bengal. For example, we can go through the ‘Uttar-khaṇḍa’ (chapter 14) of ‘Bṛhaddharmā Purāṇa’, written in the second half of the 13 cent and the ‘Bṛhama-khaṇḍa’ (chapter 10) of ‘Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa’, written in the 14 cent. Both these texts, originated in Bengal, refer to ‘Sūta’s (i.e., Sūtradhars) as a caste of ‘mixed origin’, who used to earn their living by carpentry and woodcarving.

And thus, on one hand we get assured about the prevailing tradition of woodcarving during c 13-14 cent AD; and on the other, for the first time, we come to know about those unknown artists and craftsmen, who played the most significant role in developing and continuing this age-old tradition in Bengal.

FRAGMENTS OF PILLAR FROM SATKISIRA (c 14-15 cent AD):

A few pieces of wood were retrieved from the village Satksira (now a separate district) of Khulna, Bangladesh. These fragments are considered to be parts of wooden pillars that were probably attached to any 14 cent temple. However, just like the earlier occasions, none other than Dinesh Chandra Sen has remained our only source of information in this regard.

87 see IOBABSITDM. p 274; also see WCOEI, p 70
88 see pl 436(d)
89 see Tarkaratna, Panchanan (tr). (BS 1314). Brihaddharmapurāṇam. Kolkata. p 346; also see A History of Indian Literature. Vol II, Fasc 3. p 166
According to Sen, the intricacy of carving on the fragments (see fig 13) resembles the Bengali stone-carving technique of the same period. Though, in comparison to the newer ones – dated c 15 cent AD – the older pieces are said to bear the craftsmanship of a much better quality and skill. By studying this stark difference, it has been assumed that a new pillar was erected (in a gap of 100 years or so) in order to replace any of the older pillars of the temple.

fig 13. Details of the pillars from Satksira (taken from Vrhat Bariga, pl 419a)

WOODEN PILLAR FROM PANDUA (c 16 cent AD):

A living specimen of Bengal woodcarving could be found at Bari-dargāh in Pandua, district Maldah, West Bengal. Here, a rounded thatched roof is resting on some wooden pillars that are assigned to the 16 cent AD. Each of them are carved in a typical traditional style – with various floral and geometric designs – the extension of which is widely visible (even today) in the old ancestral houses and balconies of the Maldah-town.

REFERENCE TO PRATAPADITYA (c 1561-1611 AD):

Pratapaditya (c 1561 – 1611), was the king of Jessore, Bangladesh; and the most significant character among the ‘Bāro-Bhuniās’ (twelve landlords or chieftains) of Bengal, who flourished during the chaotic period of Afghan rule and the Mughal-conquest of Bengal in the 16-17 cent. Besides a born fighter and a strict administrator, he was also a patron of literature, music and fine arts; and promoted many artists, poets and learned men in his court.

Along with this, it is said that he used to encourage and patronize the craft of ship-building, which were obviously made of wood. Many ships – both for trade and war – were made for his fleet. Some of those boats were so big that 64 or even more number of oars was required to sail them in water. And it has remained as a legend that the craftsmen of Jessore were extremely skillful in this work.

In this connection, we must mention about a wooden house, near the village Asasani of Khulna district, that also dates back to the reign of Pratapaditya. The pillars and walls of that house were covered and decorated with elaborate woodcarvings of several gods and goddesses. Along with them, various figures of human, animal, bird etc have also been depicted over there.

92 see BKK. p 3
93 Bāro-Bhuniās were the people of Bhāti region, i.e., the entire low-lying area of southern and eastern Bengal. Being Isa Khan Masnad-i-Āl as the leader, the twelve chieftains were Ibrāhim Narāl, Karimād Musazai, Majlis Dilwar, Pratapaditya, Kedar Ray, Sher Khan, Bahadur Ghazi, Tila Ghazi, Chand Ghazi, Sultan Ghazi, Selim Ghazi and Qasim Ghazi.
94 see VB. p 790
Fortunately, Dinesh Chandra Sen, as mentioned in Vrhat Bariga, collected some of these specimens; otherwise like many other specimens they would have also been lost through the ravages of time forever.

SEVENTEENTH CENTURY AD:

Chronologically, the next set of woodcarvings is assignable to the 17 cent AD. This set consists of specimens that are both wide in number and varied in subject. And apart from their plastic value, they form a significant source of information regarding the socio-cultural history of Bengal of that period.

Most of these carvings, both in relief and in the round, appear as added decorations of various parts of candimandaps, sinhāsans, houses and raths etc. Both in terms of form and content – they are closely related to the contemporary terracottas of the same soil. And thematically, these woodcarvings emphasize on the everyday life of the Bengali folk and faithfully render their overall attitude towards life as a whole.

Fragments of sinhāsan (wooden throne):

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<td>Asutosh Museum, Kolkata</td>
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<tr>
<td>Goddess Kāli fighting with</td>
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<td>State Museum of</td>
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<td>demons</td>
<td>third one in relief) were found from</td>
<td>Tripura, Agartala</td>
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<td>Kṛṣṇa-llā</td>
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<td>Mother-and-child</td>
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<td>Simhāsan</td>
<td>Śyam Cānd Temple, Santipur, Nadia, WB</td>
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<td>Daśāvatār panel</td>
<td>Jagannāth Temple, Dhamrai, north of Dhaka</td>
<td>State Museum of Tripura</td>
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Wooden house of Mītra Tentulia:

In c 17 cent AD, there was a wooden house reported to be in Khulna, Bangladesh, that was said to be exclusively carved in almost each and every part. Though, in the early 20 cent AD, as reported by Dinesh Chandra Sen in Vrhat Bariga, the actual house was not in existence; though fortunately, at least two of the fragments could be retrieved and collected by Sen (see fig 14).

Those two architectural fragments were actually a male and a female figure in wood. Most strikingly, both the figures have a square block form above their head, which the man is balancing, but the lady is holding with both the hands. Here, the block and the figure are carved from the same wood; and hence, it seems that these broken pieces had actually been used as supports to the structure of the ceiling. However, we couldn't find much information about these significant evidences of Bengal woodcarving, except a mere pictorial mention in Vrhat Bariga.

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95 see pp 419, 563; also see BKK. p 17
96 see VB. pl 419 (e, f); also see BKK. p 63
97 see VB. pl 419 (c, d, f); also see BKK. p 63
98 see BKK. p 64
99 see WCOEI. p 59; also see VB. pl 419 (f)
100 see pl 419 (d)
Candimandaps:

The Candimandaps have always remained an integral part of the rural life in Bengal; since they were/are the meeting place for the village folk centering on various events and occasions. Hence, it's quite obvious that a rich and varied heritage of woodcarving tradition as of Bengal would like to leave some imprint on this widely used public space. However, there are at least two specimens of the candimandap, both made in the year 1683-84 AD, that could give us a wondrous experience of high-class woodcarving in West Bengal.

fig 15. (a) Details of the Candimandap of Antpur, Hooghly

► The candimandap of Antpur, PS Jangipara, Hooghly, along with an atcalamandap, is a proud mention in the history of Bengal art and aesthetics. It was erected by some Kandarpa Mitra and is still in quite a good condition. Especially, the elaborately carved wooden pillars, along with the structural supports, are a real splendour to watch. Even, the original atcalamandap, which was destroyed
in a great storm in 1864-65, was also made of bamboo, wood and thatch. But, unfortunately, it has been replaced by a concrete structure today; and a few specimens of its architectural fragments are said to be kept in Asutosh Museum, Kolkata. \(^{101}\) Though, we couldn't manage to see \(^{102}\) those broken parts, presumably kept in the Reserve Collection of the Museum.

![Image of the Candrimandap of Ula-Birnagar (photographed in three parts)](image)

The Candrimandap of Ula-Birnagar, Nadia, is rather unfortunate in this regard. Someone from the Mustoufi or Mitra Mustoufi family; who were the cousins of the Mitras of Antpur made it in the same year. However, today, what was considered to be an architectural splendour is now in a terrible condition. \(^{103}\) It has been almost perished; while some of the fragments have been shifted to the Asutosh Museum. The rest has almost been decayed and stacked inside a room in their household premises. Even the Museum has displayed only one (T 6319) of the pillars and the rest are said to be kept in their Reserve Collection.

**Rath-fragments:**

The artists and craftsmen of Bengal have always maintained a high repute in making beautiful raths (processional carts). Many of them happened to be elaborately carved or associated with additional sculptures, both in relief and in the round. And such exquisite pieces of Bengal woodcarving were, and still are, easily comparable with the best of the specimens seen in Orissa.

Here, we would like to mention at least two of them, whose origin can be pushed back to sometime in the 17 cent AD; though, unfortunately, none of them exist physically today.

- The first specimen that we are talking about was the Rath that belonged to the – as mentioned by Dinesh Chandra Sen – Kundu-family of Mahiari in Andul, district Howrah. But there is a bit of controversy with it; as Tarapada Santra has mentioned the family as 'Kundu-Chowdhury' and the place as 'Sankrail', from the same district.

\(^{101}\) see WCOEI. p 57 (foot note); also see Bandyopadhyay, Amiya Kumar. (1973). Dekhā Hay Nāi. Kolkata: Ananda Publishers. p 88; and BKK. pp 10-11, 15

\(^{102}\) as on 23.03.2011

The *rath* (see fig 16), as we have already told, has now been perished completely; and fortunately Sen has collected a few documents of the same. Today, we do not have any other source of reference, regarding this magnificent piece of woodcarving, except a few photographic evidences in *Vrhat Baniga*.

![Fig 16. Details of the Rath of Kundu-family (taken from Vrhat Baniga, pl 419c)](image)

The *Rath-yātrā* festival of Bawali, South 24 Parganas, and hence the *rath* itself, is said to be more than 300 years old. Unfortunately, today the elaborate piece of woodcarving cease to exist; and only a few documents, as well as fragments, were collected by some researchers and scholars. From those scattered pieces, it could easily be assumed that in its heydays, this very specimen of Bengal woodcarving could have been well compared with the later manifestation of Mahesh, in Hooghly.

![Fig 17. Details of Rath-sculptures from Bawali (taken from Vrhat Baniga, pl 419c)](image)

Regarding this *rath* of Bawali, we don’t have any other source of reference, except a few fragments that have been illustrated by S P Ghosh and of course published by Dinesh Chandra Sen. Otherwise, we hardly have any scope to

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104 see pl 419 (c); also see BKK, p 25
105 see Ghosh, S. P. (1982). *Hindu Religious Art and Architecture*. Delhi. pl vi, figs 1, 2 (an aristocrat lady in European dress and a sage with his wife)
106 see VB. pl 419 (b) – A jackfruit seller and a woman with a pitcher on her waist
know in detail about the glorious past of this very specimen. Even today, a rath is pulled in Bawali during the festival, but it is of no aesthetic significance at all.

**Palanquin of Goswami-Malipara:**

Among the various manifestations of Bengal woodcarving, the richly carved palanquins are a significant phenomenon in all the levels of its indigenous tradition – both hieratic and folk-tribal. In this connection, we would like to mention about a specimen, kept in Śrī Śrī Madangopālji Temple, at Goswami-Malipara, PS Polba, district Hooghly.

According to the local legends, this palanquin is said to be more than 350 years old and hence could easily be assigned to the 17 cent AD. It is used to carry the dual images of Rādhā and Rādhāvallabh, along with Vamśībadan and Śrī Śrī Vṛiddhā-mātā. During the Rās-festival, these idols are taken up to the rās-mañca and up to the rath during the Rath-yatra. Once again, much information is not available regarding this specimen, except a brief mention in 'Paścindaṅger Pūjā Pārbaṅ O Melā' (vol II)

**'Jaina ascetic' from Jessore:**

The wooden effigy of a Jaina ascetic (see fig 18) was retrieved from a rath, in Jessore, and is now said to be in an extremely bad state of preservation with the Asutosh Museum, Kolkata. Unfortunately, we were not allowed to have a look at the same from the Reserve Collection of the Museum.

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107 see PPPOM, pp 524-525
However, there is a little controversy regarding the dating of this valuable specimen. Some scholars assign it to the 17 cent AD\(^{108}\); while the others insist it to be the 18\(^{109}\).

In any case, a fine photograph, printed in ‘Great Centres of Art: Calcutta’ (pl 71a), shows the ascetic as bearded and with matted locks hanging down the shoulders. His hands are clasped above the head and one leg is folded in an attitude of penance. Unfortunately, according to the Museum authority, it is in such a poor state of preservation that even in the coming future, there is hardly any chance for it to be displayed anywhere.

EIGHTEENTH CENTURY AD – THE LEGACY CONTINUES:

In 18 cent AD, the art of woodcarving in Bengal grew up in profusion and was flourished in a great degree and volume. A lot of specimen, advocating in favour of this accomplishment, is widely available to stand in evidence. As a matter of fact, this very century marks a high tide of the ancient tradition that continued its legacy at least up to the 2\(^{nd}\)-3\(^{rd}\) decade of the 20 cent AD.

For example, we can see that the Gurusaday Museum alone possesses at least 191 enlisted specimens of Bengal woodcarving\(^{110}\) that belong to this century only; and the scenario in the other collections like Asutosh Museum, State Archeological Museum etc are also the same. So, it becomes very difficult, really, to provide a detailed account of each of those specimens. And hence, in order to summarize, we would like to mention only a few of them, which has drawn some special attention from the scholars and researchers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specimen &amp; date</th>
<th>Hailed from</th>
<th>Now at</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An erotic scene (architectural fragment), c 18 cent(^{111})</td>
<td>Comilla</td>
<td>State Museum of Tripura, Agartala</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pillar of a sinhāsan, c 18 cent</td>
<td>Rajvallabh, PS Pingla, West Medinipur, WB</td>
<td>Anandaniketan Keertisala, Rajbalhat, PS Jangipara, Hooghly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another architectural fragment, c early 18 cent(^{112})</td>
<td>Baliguri, Birbhum, WB</td>
<td>Gurusaday Museum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horse of a chariot, c 18 cent</td>
<td>Nadia</td>
<td>Asutosh Museum, Kolkata</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fragment of a sinhāsan, c 1709(^{113})</td>
<td>Srihatta, Nadia</td>
<td>State Museum of Tripura, Agartala</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carved door, 1726(^{114})</td>
<td>Śyamcand Temple, PS Santipur, Nadia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Three raths, c 1728(^{115})</td>
<td>Dasghara, PS Dhaniakhali, Hooghly</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rath, c 1742 (now replicated)(^{116})</td>
<td>Sadekbagh/Sadhakbagh, PS Jiynagunj, Murshidabad</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

\(^{108}\) see WCOEI, p 52

\(^{109}\) see Mode, Heinze. (1973). Great Centres of Art: Calcutta. Bombay: Taraporevala. pl 71(a)

\(^{110}\) see Wood Carvings of Bengal in Gurusaday Museum. pp 18-31

\(^{111}\) see WCOEI, pp 67, 144 and pl 23

\(^{112}\) same as foot note 98

\(^{113}\) see VB. pl 419 (c)

\(^{114}\) see Paśimbanger Sanskriti. Vol III. p 107; PPPOM. Vol II. p 385; also see BKK. p 48

\(^{115}\) see WCOEI, p 72, also see BKK. p 23

\(^{116}\) see PS(2). Vol III. p 50; PPPOM. Vol II. p 71; also see BKK. pp 24, 34
Though this wide and varied range of specimens is still awaiting a detailed and in-depth investigation, as well as documentation, yet we can at least draw a conclusion that the high tide of the 18 cent was really enormous. And this very legacy prevailed, quite convincingly, throughout the first three quarters of the next century as well. Most of the local museums mentioned above and several other corners of rural Bengal bear adequate testimony to prove the uninterrupted continuation of this tradition up to the first quarter of the 20 cent AD.

Therefore, we can have a strong argument in favour of the fact that the surviving specimens and other evidences from variable sources are qualified enough – both in terms of quantity and artistic merit – to offer one of the most distinctive places to Bengal, in the history of woodcarving in India.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specimen &amp; date</th>
<th>Hailed from</th>
<th>Now at</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rath</strong>, c mid 18 cent (now replicated)(^{117})</td>
<td>Guptipara Math, PS Balagarh, Hooghly</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Rādhā as ‘Rāi-Rājā’ (a panel)</strong>, c mid 18 cent(^{118})</td>
<td>Bīrbhum</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carved door, 1764 AD</td>
<td>Rādhāvallabhjī Temple, Vallabhpur, PS Srirampur, Hooghly</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Krṣṇa (panel)</strong>, c 1768(^{119})</td>
<td>Uchhāran, Bīrbhum</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Rath</strong> (now replaced by a new one), c well-before 1793(^{120})</td>
<td>Mahesh, PS Srirampur, Hooghly</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Simhāsah (April, 1797)</strong>(^{121})</td>
<td>Dāmodarjī Temple, Joka, PS Udainaralanpur, Howrah</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carved door, c late 18 cent</td>
<td>Victoria Memorial, Kolkata</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rath</strong>, end of 18 cent (now replicated)</td>
<td>Mahishadal, East Medinipur</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

: **SUMMING UP:**

The woodcarvers of Bengal have always handled a wide range of subjects – both mythological and conventional – and hence have produced specimens of a remarkable variety on wood; which was perfectly accomplished by minute observation and skillful execution. With the help of chisel and hammer/mallet, the anonymous artists and craftsmen of Bengal have left adequate evidences, advocating in favour of their rich imagination and innovative ideas, along with the delightful pleasure of aesthetic expression.

All these specimens of Bengal woodcarving, both in relief and the round, have been classified into four major categories\(^{122}\):

\(^{117}\) see *PPPOM*. Vol III. p 566; *WCOEI*. p 67; also see *BKK*. p 23
\(^{118}\) see *WCOEI*. p 61
\(^{119}\) see *WCOEI*. p 61
\(^{120}\) see *PPPOM*. Vol II. p 616; also see *BKK*. p 23
\(^{121}\) see Santra, Tarapada. (1976). *Howrah Jelār Purākārī*. Kolkata: Pūrta (Pūrātattiva Vībhāg), Pāścimbaṅga Sārkār. p 65; *WCOEI*. p 74 (foot note 82); also see *BKK*. p 64
► gods and goddesses of the Brahmanic, Buddhist, Jaina and other pantheons, and the deified mortals like Chaitanya Mahāprabhu and his associates – along with all their attributes;

► ordinary men and women, with their every possible actions and attitudes – along with the day-to-day accessories including furniture and other household articles;

► animals, birds, reptiles and mythic creatures; and

► floral, vegetal, geometric and other motifs.

fig 19. The intricately carved door of RadhavallabhjTu Temple (1764 AD) of Vallabhpur, PS Srirampur, Hooghly

122 Kalyan Kumar Dasgupta has talked about five categories; but, the first four categories he has mentioned are very much subjective in nature, whereas the fifth one is distinctively objective and hence not matching with the rest (see WCOEI, pp 50-51)
However, in Bengal woodcarving, just like its counterparts in stone and terracotta, it is the human figure that happens to be the most dominant and recurrent motif. Even the divine images here are more human than divine and the human effigies aglow with divine connotation. Hence, men and women from all walks of life assemble here spontaneously and appear in a variety of moods, gestures, actions and attitudes. Even, of course in the works of 18-19 centuries, the Europeans are also found in this pleasant togetherness of wooden manifestations.

In this connection, we can find that the hunting and battle scenes appear to be quite popular, as illustrated on the *raths* and repertoire of the carved doors of temples and other architectures. War scenes in many occasions depict the great epical fight between *Rām* and *Rāvan*, while the Europeans are also found engaged in hunting. Besides this, another genre of relief-sculptures depict figurines of acrobats, gipsy gymnasts called ‘bede’s and ‘bedenTs; along with amorous or erotic scenes as well. But, unlike Orissa, erotic motifs did not seem to be much popular here in Bengal.

On the other hand, just like the neighbours of Assam, Orissa and other parts of India, the Bengalis also had a soft corner for animals like cow, bull, horse, elephant, lion and tiger. These animals are generally found to be depicted in narrative panels, in cult-figures (as mounts of various deities) and as decorative motifs. Among the birds, peacock was favourite while appearing with fashionable ladies, as many specimens of the 18-19 centuries use to depict. A parrot is found, for example, on the right hand of the *Surasundari* mentioned above, in tune with the older tradition as articulated in pan-Indian sculptures. And finally, carved, painted and varnished owls from Natungram (PS Katwa, Bardhaman) and Burwan (Mursidabad) are two significant traditions that were evident, if not earlier, in the first half of the 19 cent AD.

Besides these, the woodcarvers of Bengal – because of their variable and repeatable patterns – chose flowers, leaves, tendrils, buds and creepers. These motifs were used for enriching the decorative value of the sculptural compositions, both in relief and the round. Either naturalistic or stylized, the floral patterns were used – sometimes with geometric designs, in order to demarcate the areas of narrative panels. Along with these, other designs are also found, like the one with a twisted-rope. Another motif, found on some of the Maheshpur pillars, consists of the creeper and swan. And on the pillars from the same place, the ‘chain-and-man’ design have been found; where the chain has been depicted by figures of acrobat, one seated above other’s shoulder. Therefore, we can see that the figurative wooden sculptures of Bengal – be it divine, human or/and animal – use to appear either singly, or in a group. And in many of the narrative panels, generally based on the epic and Puranic stories, the individuals have succeeded in retaining their character and identity. And thus, the thematic range of the Bengal woodcarvings under review becomes remarkably wide; right from the figurative to the geometric, from the earth-bound to the mythic creatures – so on and so forth. And in their vigorous depiction, the anonymous artisans of Bengal have left a strong evidence of their powerful imagination and pleasing expression.

In this connection, we have come to know that the Bengal woodcarvers used to follow the prevailing iconographic formulae in portrayal of various deities. But, in case of the humans, they were free to follow their own way and hence to furnish those figures with the local flavour, taste and outlook. Even, at least occasionally, the traditional deities were converted into mortal Bengali people, as exemplified by the figures of young *Śiv* of the *Śivāyan* tradition of rural Bengal and a carefree *Rām-Sītā* of the elite Bengali class. On the other hand, birds like parrot and peacock, placed as pets with the ladies, look more like the members of their families, rather than mere creatures. Even the world of flora and fauna is also very close to that of the humans. Indeed, all the worlds of divinities, humans, birds, animals, reptiles, and trees and plants – all these appear as to be integrated into a compact organic wholeness, in the magnificent art of Bengal woodcarving.