Since time immemorial, Indian people have always adored wood as a suitable plastic medium in their daily life. We have already come to know that the earliest indirect reference to this art of woodcarving goes back to the Indus Valley (c 3500-2500 BC), whereas Rgveda (VIII.42.3, IX.95.1, X.32.7 and X.81.4) provides us with the first literary reference. However, the earliest material specimen was the sculpture of mother-and-child, dated c 3-2 cent BC – hailed from the Gulzarbag locality of Patna. This overview tends to advocate in favour of the possible popularity of wood in making religious divine images as well. Presumably, beside stone, metal and many other mediums, the idols meant for worship were also made of wood; since we all know that early Indian stone sculptures are largely translations of their wooden originals.

The earliest indirect reference to any wooden idol made in India goes to the myth of a sandalwood image of Jīvantasvānī (i.e., Mahāviṃ himself, died in c 527 BC) that was said to be carved in his lifetime; and worshipped by his followers. However, the first epigraphic evidence to this tradition is found from the inscription of Abhirā Vāsudev from Andhra Pradesh that describes an eight-armed wooden image of Lord Viśṇu. The inscription, assigned to c 278 AD, mentions that this very image of Aṣṭabhujasvānī (the lord with eight arms) was installed on the Siddhalahari hill, bordering Nagarjunikonda valley. Moreover, the wooden idol was supposed to have medicinal and energy-giving properties. Unfortunately, the specimen is not materially substantiated, but it tells us very clearly that even in the late 3rd cent, making of wooden idols was a living tradition in this country. Moreover, this very idea is well supported by a series of literary references, dated variably between c late 2 cent to 1500 AD.

In the ancient times as well as the middle ages, there was a conventional and widely accepted rule in this country for the classification of divine images. And despite certain variations, this classification has always been done on the basis of the raw materials used in making them. Surprisingly, each and every such classification, mentioned in the old texts and scriptures, refer tc wood as one of the most suitable plastic medium.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Classification</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Matsya Purāṇa</td>
<td>c late 2 / late 4</td>
<td>Gold, silver, copper, jewels, stone, wood, iron and alloys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ch 258, sūtra 20-21)</td>
<td>/ 6 cent AD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mānāsara Śilpaśāstra</td>
<td>c 5 cent AD</td>
<td>Gold, silver, copper, stone, wood, sudhā (stucco, also mortar and plaster), śarkarā (gravel or grit), ābhāsa (painting) and earth (baked clay)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ch 51)</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

6 see Mitra, Asok (ed). (undated). *Census 1951, Tribes and Castes of West Bengal*. Kolkata: Land and Land Revenue Department
7 Prasanna Kumar Acharya has described ‘ābhāsa’ as marble (?!?) and has subdivided it into three kinds, called citra, ardha-citra and ābhāsa (i.e., citrābhāsa). According to him, ‘Citra’ is sarvāṅgā-ādiyamāna hence transparent (?!), while the other two are half-transparent and partially (one-fourth) transparent (see p 70-71). But, we believe tha
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
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<tr>
<td><em>Hayasīrṣa Pancharātram</em> (ādi kānda, ch 15, sūtra 1-2)</td>
<td>c 5-11 / 7-8 cent / 800 AD</td>
<td>Mrṇmayi (of clay), dārughātī (of wood), lohajā (of iron), ratnajā (of jewels), gandhajā (of fragrance), śailajā (of stone) and kousumī (of flowers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Devi Purāṇ</em> (ch 22, sūtra 9-10)</td>
<td>c 5 / 11 cent AD</td>
<td>Suvarnamayī (of gold), rajatamayī (of silver), mrṇmayī and dārumayī</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Vṛhat Sanhitā</em> (ch 60, sūtra 4-5)</td>
<td>c early 6 cent AD</td>
<td>Dārumayī, mrṇmayī, manimayī (of jewels), sauvanī, rajatamayī, tāmramayī (of bronze) and sauli</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Śāmba Purāṇ</em> (ch 30, sūtra 2)</td>
<td>c 500-800 / 500-900 AD</td>
<td>Svarnamayī, raupyamayī (of silver), tāmī, parthivī (of clay), prastaramayī (of stone), vārkṣī (of wood) and ālekhya (painting)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Bhavisya Purāṇ</em> (vol I, ch 131, sūtra 5-8)</td>
<td>c 500-1500 AD</td>
<td>Wood, clay, jewel, gold, silver, copper and stone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Śukranitisār</em> (ch 4, sec 4, sūtra 147-151)</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Sand, paste, paint, enamel, earth, wood, stone and metal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, the seven major types of images, mentioned in most of the medieval texts are: kārṇī (of gold), rajatā, tāmra, pārthivī, śailajā, vārkṣī and ālekhya. Hence, we come to be convinced that making of wooden idols has always remained a matter of wide collective practice and mass-appreciation in India. Unfortunately, as we have already discussed in the previous chapter, the earliest available specimens are not of much antiquity; though, their refined approach and stylistic maturity indicate towards a rich traditional ancestry.

*ābhasa* has nothing to do with marble, but painting; and its classification is purely on the basis of form. Hence, they should be defined as full-figure (sarvāṅga-drīṣṭamāna), three-quarter and portrait.

11 *ibid*, see the Preface
15 see Arora, Raj Kumar. (1972). *Historical and Cultural Data from the Bhavisya Purana*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers (P) Ltd. p 198
TURNING TOWARDS THE EAST

A brief overview through the accomplishments of the Indian provinces would reveal that this extremely rich and popular tradition of making wooden idols was mostly prevalent in the states of Assam, Bengal (both Bangladesh and West Bengal), Karnataka, Kerala, Nagaland, Orissa and Rajasthan. In this list, except Karnataka, Kerala and Rajasthan, all the other four states are from the eastern region of this country. Therefore, we can presume that the eastern states (four out of seven) used to take a major participation in this particular field of artistic excellence. In this connection, we can also recollect about the earliest wooden sculpture of India (dated c 3 cent BC) – along with most of the other specimens of appreciable antiquity (one assignable to c 2 cent and the rest 9-12 cent AD) – that has been hailed from this particular region.

In this entire scenario of regional supremacy, Bengal has always taken a significant and major role; and there are two fold aspects behind this phenomenon to be popularized over here: (i) unavailability and hence the high cost of stone on one hand, and (ii) easy availability of wood on the other. Obviously, there were other additional factors like ready tractability and soft tactile quality of the material, so on and so forth. All these factors together, resulted in an extremely rich and varied tradition that we are going to study in the following pages.

Now, while focusing on our main area of consideration, i.e., the wooden idols of West Bengal, we would often find it difficult to restrict ourselves within the existing geo-political boundaries. Because, whenever we talk about the historical achievements of the West, it becomes obvious to discuss a lot about the East. Actually, these two parts of Bengal are always inseparable from each other – anthropologically, historically and culturally – since (in all respect) both the regions together share a very common past. Besides this, most of the antique specimens of Bengal origin – except two – assigned to the pre-Islamic era (c 9-13 cent AD), have been hailed from the eastern region, i.e., today’s Bangladesh. And all of them clearly represent the Pal-Sen school of Bengal sculpture.

THE WOODEN IDOLS OF BENGAL

The wooden idols of Bengal, as a whole, admit three broad stylistic divisions: (i) hieratic, (ii) folk-tribal and (iii) a mixture of both. These three divisions, surprisingly, are evident in terms of history, content and style. Among them, the hieratic tradition came into fore only in the middle ages – during the rule of the mighty Mauryas (c 321-185 BC). Its true that we couldn’t find any of the wooden manifestations, assignable to that era, but contemporary terracotta and works in other mediums clearly show us the effect of pan-Indian phenomena on the hieratic level of Bengal art. Various manifestations of Bengal aesthetics, the artifacts – visible in several Museums – would surely advocate in favour of a distinct influence of the Maurya and Sunga17 School of art. On the contrary, the folk-tribal genre was always active, but in cheaper mediums like clay and natural pigment. Carving of stone was unaffordable for them; and it was not before 13-cent AD that they started to try their hand on wood. However, the most interesting part is the mixture of hieratic and the folk-tribal idioms in the new school of Bengal sculpture that came up into shape in the 16 cent AD. So let us study the available specimens chronologically and bring out a clearer picture about this apparently unknown journey of traditional Bengal, as well as Indian art.

17 The Sunga Empire was a royal Indian dynasty from Magadh that controlled vast areas of the Indian subcontinent from around 185 to 73 BC. The dynasty was established by Pusyamitra Sunga after the fall of the Mauryas. Its capital was Pātaliputra, but later emperors also held court at Vidiśā (modern Vesnagar in Eastern Malwa).
PRE-ISLAMIC ERA (c 9-13 CENT AD): THE PAN-INDIAN PHENOMENON

The political history of Indian subcontinent, as we already know, began in c 3500 BC; whereas it's yet to determine, even approximately, when exactly the same happened in Bengal.

Archaeological discoveries have furnished evidence of a degree of civilization in certain parts in the beginning of 1000 BC, perhaps even earlier. The Brāhmī inscription from Mahāsthānagār, attributed to the Mauryan period, advocates in favour of a contemporary culture in Bengal. The cities of Pundravardhan and Tamralipti (also known as Tamralipta, today's Tamluk of East Medinipur) appear in full glory even from the pre-Christian era. Several other inscriptions (dated around 4-6 cent AD), the numerous references to various parts of Bengal in early pan-Indian literatures and the discovery of coins bear adequate testimonies in favour of a well-ordered governance.18

Later on, about the second half of 6-cent AD, a line of independent rulers – assuming imperial titles – are found in Bengal.19 However, the first separate political identity of this soil was bloomed only in the 7-cent AD, in Gaur, under the brief leadership of Sasanka. And finally, it was under the stable rule of the Pals (c 750-1162 AD), that Bengal experienced a comprehensive socio-cultural establishment in a greater extent. And inevitably, that political stability worked as one of the major criteria for the overall development of this provinces and the cultural flourishment of its people.

The Pal-rule in Bengal began with Gopal in c 750 AD and ended with the rule of Madanpal in c 1162 AD. During this time – besides a considerable kingdom – Bengal also witnessed the rise of a new and significant school of Indian sculpture, following the grace and grandeur of the Gupta-phenomenon. Because, it was the very legacy of the Guptas, that was uttered in a new language through the masterpieces of this period – both on wood and stone. Though the number of wooden specimen is extremely few, but we shall never forget that "...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."20 Hence, we can surmise that the intrinsic passion of the Bengal-carvers finally succeeded to flower in a full bloom, both on stone and wood, under the stable rule of the Pals and later on followed by the mighty Sens.

Here, we must admit that the available pieces of wooden idols, assigned to c 9-13 cent AD, do not carry anything (so called) Bengali in them. Instead, we can see that all the features of classical-Guptas, inherited by the Pal-Sen school, are clearly evident over there. As a result, though they exhibit a lot of skill and vitality that the local artists of Bengal could achieve; but in actuality, and to be more specific, we can merely call them as a group of pan-Indian sculptures, produced on this soil.

However, in this respect, the Pal-rule provided a stable platform for the sculptors of Bengal to cultivate their skills in the art of carving – both on stone and wood. They got the opportunity to use quality time and material; whereas the iconographies, based on the pan-Indian models, were already set in front of them. So, it became easy for them to devote themselves in the very act of carving; and they started to carve out every possible meticulous detail. Even sometimes, presumably, they seemed to compete with each other on how much delicacy one can show in this particular art of chisel-and-hammer. Hence, all the carvings of that period depict everything in detail – the dress, the ornaments, the accessories, the backgrounds – everything is carved on the surface itself. Even the details of the eyes, nose etc is meticulously carved with all the other luxury and grandeur. And finally, this particular technique became a trade mark of the Pal-school, widely exercised on both stone and wood.

Historically speaking, the Pal-kings – even after being Buddhists – were liberal enough to allow the other religious practices and beliefs to be exercised with equal ease. As a result, we can see such a

18 see Saraswati, Sarasi Kumar. (1937). Early Sculptures of Bengal. Kolkata: Calcutta University. p 6
19 see ibid, p 85
high tide in the field of making divine images – mostly of Lord Viṣṇu (in Vāsudev form)\(^{21}\), Sūrya and others. Obviously, the images of Buddhist pantheons like Tārā, Bodhisattva etc were also being produced in a high number. For example, a few valuable specimen of Bengal origin has survived the corroding effect of time, manifesting both the Brahmanic and Buddhist iconographies. Though quantitatively small and insignificant, this short list bears adequate testimony to exhibit the level of perfection reached by the Bengal-woodcarvers of the bygone days. Except one from Kanheri and the other from Dhamrai, all the other specimens date around 10-13 cent AD; and are presently on display at two different places: (i) State Archaeological Museum, Kolkata, and (ii) Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka.

## : THE BUDDHIST LEGACY :

As a backwater of the Gupta-school of sculpture, the Buddhist legacy – that was generated way back in the Mauryan period (c 321-185 BC) – continued to make its presence felt in the Pal era as well. And since the Pal kings were Buddhist themselves, they promoted their religion through every possible medium of aesthetic expression. This effort resulted in the famous painted manuscripts, as well as a series of sculptures depicting Buddha, Bodhisattva, Tārā and many other gods and goddesses. Though most of the available specimens are made of stone, but we must accept that wood, as a medium, was also in use. The three specimens of Buddhist divinities that we are going to describe would advocate in favour of this argument. Instead of being considered as mere exceptions, they should be accepted as the available representatives of an art practice that was exercised on a perishable medium like wood.

Since all the three following sculptures represent the royal religion and presumably promoted by the state, it was quite obvious that the guidelines were always fixed and provided by the patron. So the artist or craftsman of Bengal had nothing much to do but following those proclaimed norms. But, we must admit that even after being under such limits and several other limitations, what they have produced is really spectacular.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image</th>
<th>Hailed from</th>
<th>Now at</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist Tārā (c 9-10 / 11 cent AD)</td>
<td>Cave 31, Kanheri, Maharashtra</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marījuśrī (c 11 cent AD)</td>
<td>Rampal, Munshigunj, Bangladesh</td>
<td>Bangladesh National Museum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loknāṭh (c 9-10/11 cent AD)</td>
<td>Tongibari, Munshigunj, Dhaka</td>
<td>-do-</td>
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</table>

**Buddhist Tārā from Kanheri (c 9-10 cent AD):**

Tārā, also known as ‘Jetsun Dolma’ in Tibetan Buddhism\(^{22}\), is a female Bodhisattva\(^{23}\) in the **Mahāyān**\(^{24}\) stream of the religion, who appears as a female Buddha in **Vajrayān** Buddhism\(^{25}\). She is

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\(^{21}\) In this form, Lord Viṣṇu is found in an erect standing posture, flanked by two divine women on both the sides. A very small representation of Garur, His mount, is visible flying atop. In Indian and thus Bengal sculpture, it is the most common form of depicting the Lord.

\(^{22}\) Tibetan Buddhism or Lamaism is the body of Buddhist religious doctrine and institutions characteristic of Tibet and certain regions of the Himalayas, including northern Nepal, Bhutan, and India (especially Arunachal Pradesh; Ladakh, Dharamsala, Lahaul and Spiti in Himachal Pradesh; and Sikkim). It is the state religion of Bhutan; and is also practiced in Mongolia and parts of Russia and Northeast China.

\(^{23}\) A Bodhisattva is either an enlightened (bodhi) existence (satva) or ‘enlightenment-being’ or, a ‘heroic-minded one (satva) for enlightenment (bodhi)’. Another term is ‘wisdom-being’; it’s anyone who has generated bodhicitta, which is a spontaneous wish to attain Buddha-hood for the benefit of all.

\(^{24}\) ‘Mahāyān’ Buddhism originated in India. Its the larger of the two major traditions of Buddhism existing today (the other one is the Theravada school). The term ‘Mahāyān’ also refers to the path of seeking complete enlightenment for the benefit of all. In the course of its history, this form of Buddhism spread from India to various other Asian countries like China, Japan, Vietnam, Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, Nepal, Tibet, Bhutan, and Mongolia.
known as the ‘mother-of-liberation’, and represents the virtues of success in work and achievements. In Japan she is known as ‘Tarani Bosatsu’, and little-known as ‘Tuoluo’ in China26.

In the Indian subcontinent, Tārā is a Tantric meditation deity, whose practice is used by practitioners of the Tibetan branch of Vajrayān Buddhism in order to develop certain inner qualities related to compassion and emptiness. However, Tārā is actually the generic name for a set

Major traditions of ‘Mahāyāna’ Buddhism today include Zen/Chan, Pure Land, Tiantai, and Nichiren, as well as the Esoteric Buddhist traditions of Shingon and Tibetan Buddhism. 25 ‘Vajrayān’ Buddhism is also known as Tantric Buddhism, Tantrayān, Mantrayān, Secret Mantra, Esoteric Buddhism and the Diamond Vehicle. The term refers to one of three routes to enlightenment (the other two being the Hīnayān and Mahāyān). It is a complex and multifaceted system of Buddhist thought and practice, which evolved over several centuries. Its main scriptures are called Tantras. One of its distinctive features is ritual, which are Upāy (skillful means), used as a substitute/alternative for the earlier abstract meditations. The period of Vajrayān has been classified as the fifth or final period of Indian Buddhism. It was widespread in Bengal; and the earliest Bengali literature ‘Charyāpad’ consisted of mystical Buddhist songs.

26 It refers collectively to the various schools of Buddhism that have flourished in China since ancient times. This religion has played an enormous role in shaping the mindset of the Chinese people, affecting their aesthetics, politics, literature, philosophy and medicine. At the peak of the Tang Dynasty’s vitality, Chinese Buddhism has produced numerous spiritual masters.
of Buddhas or Bodhisattvas of similar aspect. These may be understood as different aspects of the same quality, as Bodhisattvas are often considered metaphorical for Buddhist virtues.

We have already come to know that a freestanding wooden figure of Buddhist Tārā (see fig 1), the saviour, was eventually discovered by Dr Moreshwar Dikshit, from cave 31 at Kanheri, near Mumbai. The meticulous carving and the overall appearance remind us immediately of the Pal-Sen school of sculpture from Bihar and Bengal. Unfortunately, the present location of the priceless specimen is unknown, but a fine photograph has been published by H D Sankalia, after the death of Dr Dikshit. However, there is a little controversy over its dating; Sankalia has assigned it to c 9-10 cent AD27, whereas Kalyan Kumar Dasgupta has advocated in favour of late 11-cent AD28.

This wooden sculpture in the Round is significantly different from the more popular high-relief sculptures (see the wooden idol of Sthiracakra Marjuśārī from Rampal and the other specimens on stone) of the same epoch. Instead, it shows some close proximity with that of Bodhisattva Loknāth from Tongibari, especially with the sitting posture on a double-petalled lotus. Hence, in spite of a significant difference in scale, it seems that both of them could be assigned to the same period; either c 9-10 or 11 cent AD. In this connection, we have come to know that in Saka 775 (883 AD) someone named Avighnakār from Gaur excavated a monastery at Kanheri for the residence of the Buddhist monks. Hence it’s quite possible that this figure was imported from eastern India sometime during 9-10 cent AD.

In its last available condition, the figure of Tārā was measuring 61cm x 25.4cm x 20.3cm, though originally, when intact, it was presumed to be slightly larger. But, one must admit that even in a decayed form, the figure — as it shows in the photograph — was stylistically comprehensive, as well as artistically beautiful. The goddess was seated in meditation on a Kamalāsana (seat of double-petalled lotus), with her long half-closed eyes and the gaze fixed on the tip of the nose. According to the photograph, she was wearing a dhoti in ‘sakaccha’ fashion, by fastening both ends of the Sari at the back. And the carver, in conformity with the hieratic conception of feminine beauty, has left the upper part of the body completely bare; only a hint of a few necklaces are there to cover her breasts. In addition to this, the goddess was also adorned with an elaborate crown, along with two large earrings. Actually, the women of eastern India, for a long time, seemed to prefer big ‘kundal’s (earrings), which has been documented in this very specimen of wooden sculpture.

As a whole, this idol of Tārā was sensitively sculpted, with a fine blend of fleshly warmth and spiritual bliss. According to Douglas Barrett, such a soft and tender expression can never be seen in the seven Buddhas from Sopara, the standing figure of Tārā at Kanheri, or in several other figures at Ellora.

Marjuśārī from Rampal (c 11 cent AD):

In Mahāyāna Buddhism, ‘Marjuśārī’ is taken as the second (after Maitreya) of the 16 forms of Bodhisattva; and is associated with transcendent wisdom. In Esoteric Buddhism he is also taken as a meditational deity. The Sanskrit name Marjuśārī can be translated as the ‘gentle glory’. Sometimes, he is also called as ‘Marjuĝuhō’ — the gentle voiced one. However, next to Avalokiteśvar, he is quite important in the Buddhist pantheon as the God of Learning with the sword for destroying ignorance and the book of spiritual knowledge.

Benoytosh Bhattacharya — in his pioneering work ‘The Indian Buddhist Iconography’ — has mentioned about 13 variant forms of this lord. Among them, the Sādhana for the worship of Sthiracakra does not give the description or ‘Dhyāna’ of the lord at a stretch, but it is scattered

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28 see ibid
29 see Dasgupta, Kalyan Kumar. WCOE1. p 51
30 see ibid, p 52 (foot note 58)
31 Maitreya (Sanskrt), Metteyya (Pali), or Jampa (Tibetan) is a future Buddha of this world in Buddhist pantheon; whereas in some of the Buddhist literatures he is also referred to as Ajīta Bodhisattva. However, he is a Bodhisattva who is to appear on Earth, achieve complete enlightenment, and teach the pure Dharma. According to scriptures, Maitreya will be a successor of the historic Sākyamuni Buddha. The prophecy of the arrival of Maitreya references a time when Dharma will be forgotten on Jambudvīpa (name of the ancient Indian subcontinent).
throughout the text. From the information gathered together, it appears that in one of his hands he carries sword, which — by radiating light — destroys the darkness of ignorance; while the other displays the ‘Varadā’ mudrā. His colour is white and he is decked in garments of the colour of the bee; whereas he sits on the moon supported by a lotus, and wears the Cirakas (a kind of scarf) and princely ornaments to display the sentiment of passionate love. According to the Sādhana, he is supposed to be accompanied by the beautiful Prajñā, but it’s not something essential.\(^{33}\)

In this connection, Nalinikanta Bhattacharli has found several resemblances with that of the description mentioned above — such as the boyish look, brightened with tenderness and sensuality, wearing ciraka, princely ornaments and the sword; and thus, was convinced enough to identify this specimen as none other than ‘Śhiracakra Maṇjuśrī’.\(^{34}\)

However, this magnificent piece of wooden idol is carved in high relief like most of the stone carvings of the same era. It was hailed from Rampal of Munsigunj, Dhaka and is now kept in the Bangladesh National Museum (E-188). Here, we must recollect that, once this Rampal was known as Śrīvikrampur, the ancient capital of Bengal.

This relief-sculpture, measuring 137cm x 40.5cm, is depicting the god beneath the ‘āmalaka’-top of a ‘Rekha-deut’ (see pl 2). The deity is standing in a ‘Tribhāṅga’ posture, with half-closed eyes in meditation, and holding a short sword in his right hand very softly. The lord is wearing a short dhoti, as it was customary then and a very common phenomenon, in sakaccha fashion; along with a long ciraka wrapped loosely around his torso. The ends of his garments are hanging in folds — from the girdles — on two sides; while his left hand is engaged in holding one of those ends. Moreover, he is exquisitely adorned with a cylindrical crown, earrings, a thick bunch of necklaces, bangles, and even ornamental anklets.

Apparently, in terms of its ‘bhaṅga’ (breaks) and ‘bhaṅgi’ (pose or posture), the visual appearance of this male deity is strikingly feminine in nature, exposing the desired tenderness and sensuality. In this regard, it has a pronounced similarity, in every aspect, with the Surasundari from Kaji-kasba. The arch above, the crown, ornaments, the folds of the dress — even the posture of the figure and the floral design on the base — are very much identical with each other. The only difference is that the short sword of Maṇjuśrī has replaced the parrot of the Surasundari here. However, it seems that both the specimens are the works of the same carver (or the same group of carvers), though they have been retrieved from two different places\(^{35}\), in different dates.

**Loknāth from Tongibari (c 11 cent AD):**

In general, all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas can be called as Loknāth, i.e., lord of the world; but in a more specific sense of the iconography, he should be considered as one of the forms of Avalokiteśvara. He is said to have originated from the seed syllable ‘Hrīḥ’ and is white in colour. Four Sādhanas have been devoted to him and only one Sādhana describes him as accompanied by Tārā and Hayagrīv. The same Sādhana adds further that eight Bodhisattvas and four goddesses should also accompany Loknāth; and thus it gives us the constitution of the whole Mandal of the lord.\(^{36}\) But images depicting him in this form are extremely rare.

Loknāth, the principal god has two hands, carries the lotus in the left, and exhibits Varadā mudrā in the right.\(^{37}\) When represented, the lord is generally alone and is occasionally accompanied by Tārā and Hayagrīv. According to three different Sādhanas, he may sit in three different āsanas (sitting postures) — Lalītā\(^{38}\), Paryānīka\(^{39}\) or Vajra-paryānīka\(^{40}\).
Now, the wooden idol of Loknath, hailed from Tongibari of Munshigunj, Dhaka, is a very rare specimen of the Pal-Sen school. Assigned to c 11 cent AD (if not earlier), it is somewhat unique in both approach and scale. The huge piece, measuring 49” x 17”, is perfectly matched and accompanied by an elaborately carved pedestal — which is not often seen even in the stone counterparts of the same era. This sculpture in-the-round — unfortunately covered with thin cracks all over — is presently kept in the Bangladesh National Museum (E-189).

The pedestal of this sculpture (see pi 3) is carved out of the same wood — as it was customary then — and is divided into three prominent layers: (a) geometric motifs and patterns on the base, (b) two circular floral motifs, with three human figures (probably, the fourth one is broken apart and missing), and (c) a double-petalled-lotus carved ornamentally. Above this, we find the lord sitting on the lotus in a relaxed ‘lalita-vibhanga’ posture. However, we couldn’t be sure about the exact ‘bhahgi’ (gesture) of the figure — since both the legs are broken above the knee and the right arm is also missing from the shoulder. The only indication about his possible ‘Lalita’ asan might be the left arm, which is supporting the entire balance of his torso.

On the other hand, the broken legs of the lord do not give us any clear idea about what exactly this Loknath figure has used as apparel. Presumably, he is wearing a very short dhoti, as usual; tied with a thin girdle. The upper half of his body is fully naked, while his long hair is gathered together and tied on the top of his head. Apart from the girdle, the lord is adorned with only a pair of earrings and bangles. As a whole, this wooden idol has a soft and tender physique, with a fleshy mass and feminine sophistication. His chest is broad, belly is round and arms are (one is broken) long. He has a full face with a beautifully sculpted chin, long nose (broken today), big eyelids (though half-closed) and elongated ears are really somewhat typical to the Indian classical tradition. Somehow, this Loknath becomes closely associated with the traditional depiction of Buddha-images — as described in the ancient texts. However, in a material perspective, this significant specimen of Bengal woodcarving can find a similar rendering (at least) in pl 54 of ‘Tantrayana Art and Album’ written by S K Saraswati.

Now, the glory of the Pal-kings were followed by the Sens (c 1070-1230 AD), who ruled from Bengal through the 11 and 12 centuries. Their reign was founded in 1095 AD by Hemanta Sen, who was a part of the Pal-dynasty until their empire began to weaken. Later on, at its peak, their empire covered much of the north-eastern region in the Indian subcontinent.

The Sens were dedicated follower of the Brahmanic pantheon and were known as ‘Brahma-Ksatriya’s. They were famous for building temples and monasteries; but didn’t take much interest in promoting the other religious cults. During their reign, Buddhism — that had dominated Bengal for centuries — was in decline due to the loss of its institutions at Nalanda and Vikramasila. Deities of the Buddhist idiom were stopped from getting any royal patronization, while the Brahmanic tradition continued just like before.

In any case, the carvers — both on stone and wood — continued to follow the same carving technique set by the Pal-school; and gradually, the approach towards carving of all the meticulous details — based on pan-Indian iconography — became a pronounced signature, known as the Pal-Sen school of Bengal sculpture.

: VIŚṆU OF BHĀGAVAT :

Lord Viṣṇu, the ‘Preserver’ and the most popular iconography of the later Brahmanic Trinity appears to have evolved from the combination of three different entities: such as the Vedic sun-god...

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41 One of the delicate feminine postures.
42 The noticeable change in respect of apparel lies in the fact that in distant past the dhoti of the present days, a single unstitched garment (paridhan), worn by males was shorter than that now in general use. Short dhoti is found as an apparel not only of the commonality but also of the deities...” — WCOEI, p 122
43 Consult ch 56 of Mānusāra Silpaśāstra (see Manusāra Series. Vol II, pp 78-79)
45 Those who were Brahmins first and later became Kṣatriyas
46 Brahmanic-trinity: Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Mahēśvar.
Aditya-Visriu, the cosmic-god ‘Nārāyana’ (described in the texts like ‘Pancavāsinga-Satapath’ etc) and the man-god ‘Vāsudev-Kṛṣṇa’ of Mahābhārata.

In the primary level of emergence, the worshippers of Visṛu were not known as ‘Vaiśrava’; instead, they used names like Bhāgavat, Śātva, Ekāntik and Parīcātarik. Among these, the term Bhāgavat denoting a particular religious group is extremely old and most widely used. At the root of this religious cult, was Vāsudev-Kṛṣṇa, a kṣatriya chief, who – along with Sankarṣan (elder brother), Pradyumna (eldest son by Rukminī)63, Śamba (son by Jāmbava)64 and Anirudha (grandson, son of Pradyumna) – came to be deified as the holy ‘Paśca-vīr’-s of the Vṛṣṇi clan. Later on, eventually, Śamba was eliminated from the group and the rest – with Vāsudev as the central icon – were regarded as different aspects of Parā-Vāsudev. Then the Vi概念 concept was transformed into the ‘vyūha’ or expansion, to which was added the concept of incarnation. This concept of ‘Caturvyūha’ appears to have been formulated by the 2-cent BC, though later the number of vyūhas was increased to 24 in the Gupta period.65

Historically, the scripture on the Garur-column of Vesnagar (Madhya Pradesh), dated c 2-cent AD, is the earliest available literary evidence of a Vāsudev Temple, though unfortunately it has not been supported by any physical specimen. Instead, the earliest depiction of the lord has been found in the coins of Greek emperor Agathoklis, who ruled in the north-west India for some time in the mid 2 cent AD. There, we can see the lord with two hands, holding something like the earliest available literary evidence of a central icon – were regarded as different aspects of Parā-Vāsudev. At Nagarjunikonda of Andhra Pradesh that describes an eight-armed wooden image of Visṛu – the earliest reference to any wooden idol in India. But, unfortunately once again, the physical specimen is not available, since wood – we all know – is perishable in nature. However, from the reference we could infer that even in c 278 AD66, wooden idols (at least of Visṛu) used to be made in India. Later on, the most popular iconography of the four-armed Visṛu-Vāsudev took its final shape in the Gupta period (c 500-600 AD) only. Moreover, in the mean time, Māṇāsara Śīlpaśāstra (written in c 5 cent AD) devoted a full chapter (ch 59) to a minute description of this iconography.67

The chapter describes that, along with Brahmā and Śīv, Visṛu is also four armed, but has one head, whose mukuta (headgear) is called the ‘kīrā’. He wears a yellow garment, while the colour of his body is dark blue. His chest is adorned with the symbol of Srivatsa54. His attributes are – sarīkha-caakra-gadā-padma (conch-discuss-mace-lotus). Among the numerous ornaments covering his body and limbs there is a garland (known as vana-rāla) which hangs down up to (and sometimes well-below) his knees. At the back of his head, there is an ornamented nimbus and he is attended by two goddesses (Ṣaktī), apparently known as Śrī or Laksṇi and Bhūdevī (the earth-goddess, later known as Sarasvatī). It is also stated that the pedestal should be of the padma-pīṭh (lotus-pedestal) or the maha-pīṭh (big, elaborate pedestal) kind, and be furnished with a canal, an ornamental arch and an ornamental tree. However, many specimens depicting this form of Lord Visṛu – though not on wood – are available that could be assigned to this very time-span. This series of stone sculptures were mainly hailed from northern India; while in the south, the legacy came into fore only in the post-Gupta era of Pallev and Chalukya.

Similarly, in Bengal also, depicting Visṛu – both on stone and on wood – was a widespread phenomenon of the Pal-Sen period. Though the state religion was Buddhism, as we have already told, the Pal-Kings were secular enough to allow other religious practices to be exercised freely. At the same time, obviously, there was also a huge demand in the mass level, most of whom were non-Buddhists. Later on, the Sen-Kings took the charge and continued to promote this very form of Bengal art in a full swing. As a result, almost all the museums of Bengal

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47 see Pratimāsilpe Hindu Devdevi. p 9
48 Among the 16,108 queens of Lord Kṛṣṇa, Rukminī is the first and most prominent one; also considered to be an incarnation of goddess Laksni. At her request, Kṛṣṇa kidnapped her from an unwanted marriage (described in Bhāgavat Purāṇa).
49 Jāmbavat is the only daughter of the king-bear Jambavan (described in the 10th book of Bhāgavat Purāṇa) and the third most prominent one of the eight principal queens of Lord Kṛṣṇa.
50 see Donaldson, Thomas Eugene. (2001). The Iconography of Vaishnava Images in Orissa. New Delhi: DK Printworld (P) Ltd. p 1
51 see PHD. pp 10-11
52 see Chakravarti, Shyamal Kanti. Wood Carvings of Bengal in Gurusaday Museum. p 7
54 Śrīvatsa – one of the 108 names of Lord Viṣṇu – is an ancient and auspicious symbol or mark on the chest of the lord where his consort Śrī or Laksṇi resides. It is said that his 10th incarnation, Kalki, will also bear this mark on his chest.
today — and many of the old shrines — exhibit a massive number of sculptures depicting the four-armed Viṣṇu-Vaṣudeva.

As a matter of fact, almost all these specimens of Viṣṇu-image that are widely available throughout Bengal and its adjacent areas are largely made of stone — leaving aside only three rare exceptions; and all those rare exceptions were/are made of wood. But, here also, our misfortune didn’t leave us alone; as one of those wooden idols has been perished completely, another one has already been replicated and replaced, and the third one (after being left abandoned in a Police lock-up for more than two years) has reached the reserve collection of a Museum but not yet restored (till date; see annexure II). Among them, the first two images of Viṣṇu portray the well-known Vaṣudeva-form of the Gupta-legacy; whereas the third one seems to be a bit exceptional.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image</th>
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<td>Yaśo Mādhav (c 724-725 AD?)</td>
<td>Yaśo Mādhav Temple, Dhamrai, Dhaka</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lord Viṣṇu (c 12-13 cent AD)</td>
<td>Krisnapur, PS Muradnagar, Comilla</td>
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<tr>
<td>Viṣṇu-on-Garur (c 12-13 cent AD)</td>
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Yaśo Mādhav:

The famous wooden image of ‘Yaśo Mādhav’ (Viṣṇu), worshipped at Dhamrai, Dhaka has a series of legends, connecting it with someone named Yaśo Pal⁵⁶. This Yaśo Pal was a local chief of the pre-Islamic era⁵⁷; the ruins of his royal palace could be found nearby at the village of Baduibari. It is said (as it’s written on the temple-wall) that the earliest shrine of Yaśo Mādhav was built in BS 131 (724-725 AD)⁵⁸, though there is no other historical evidence advocating in favour of this date.

Unfortunately, the wooden idol today — around 4½’ in height — is covered with a thick layer of paint, hiding all the traces of antiquity (if any); and its carving technique doesn’t suggest for a date too early. However, obviously, the outer appearance of the image imitates the typical iconography of Viṣṇu-Vaṣudeva, followed by the Pal-Sen school (compare with the image from Krisnapur). Just like the earlier tradition, the four-armed lord is standing in a samabhānga posture and has been depicted to be carved in high relief. He is attributed with, as usual, śāṅkha-cakra-gadā-padma; and accompanied by Śrī and Bhūdevi. Only the Kṛita-mukuta is absent and the vana-mālā (if any) is not visible due to the real drapery wrapped around the body. However, the most important feature is the open eyes of the lord, which can never be found in the deities of Pal-Sen period. Hence it seems that presumably it’s a replica of any older version, which actually was installed sometime in the pre-Islamic era. And for this reason, it could be considered as the earliest indirect reference to the tradition of making wooden idols in Bengal.

As a matter of fact, this temple has been attacked and attempted to be destroyed several times throughout the history. Even in the mid-20 cent, the Islamic fundamentalists ransacked the temple and hence the idol was severely damaged.⁵⁹ Therefore, it is quite possible that the earlier version of Yaśo-Mādhav — the wooden idol — could not bear with the circumstances and has been perished completely; and hence has been replaced by the present replica in the same medium.

Today, the existing specimen of wooden idol that we can see there, depicting the common four-armed iconography of Viṣṇu, is presumably a modern piece of carving (see pl 1) — imitating the age old idiom of the Pal-Sen era. The image is painted, as we have already told, with a thick layer of enamel paint; though we do not have any specific information whether the Pal-Sen

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⁵⁵ We think that the date specified on the temple-wall is arbitrary, whereas the original effigy should be dated much later (c 10-12 cent AD)
⁵⁷ see ibid, p 82
⁵⁸ as on 30.12.2010
⁵⁹ as told by Gopal Sarkar, a local resident of Dhamrai, on 30.12.2010
versions were also used to be painted or not. However, the facial features – the eyes, the nose, the lips etc – along with the fingers and the attributes do not resemble the earliest school of carving technique in Bengal. And most importantly, meticulous carving of every possible detail, the most important signature of the legendary style of Pal-Sen era – is clearly absent over here. Instead, most of the minute works, as it were, have been executed with brush-and-paint only. So, we can easily infer that apart from the iconographic similarities – in terms of technique and skill – this modern replica is nowhere close to the Pal-Sen phenomena.

Viṣṇu from Krisnapur (c 12-13 cent Ad):

A sandal-wood image of Lord Viṣṇu was hailed – sometime around 1929 – from the village of Krisnapur, PS Muradnagar, district Tippera or Tripura (now Comilla), Bangladesh, and was presented to the Dhaka Museum (now Bangladesh National Museum) by J C French, ICS.60

60 see Bhattashali, Nalini Kanta. IOBABSITDM. pp 82-83
In this 12-13 cent sculpture (measuring 4'4½" x 1'4"), the lord has been represented in his Vāsudev-form, standing in a 'samabhanga' posture on a double-petalled lotus, with his eyes half-closed in a meditative look (see fig 2). He is holding a sānkhā and padma (lotus) in his lower right and left hands, and gādā and cakra in his upper right and left hands respectively. He is wearing a short dhoti, as usual, in a 'sakaccha' fashion, which is tied around the waist with a girdle. Moreover, besides other ornaments like earrings and bangles, the lord seems to be adorned with both kirti-mukuta and vana-mālā as well. At the same time, his Śakti or consort - Śrī and Bhūdevī, also accompanies him. His mount Garuḍa is visible at the bottom (on the pedestal), half kneeling, being flanked by two dancing figures. There is also a man, probably the donor, sitting cross-legged on the bottom-right corner. And on the top, there is a kirtimukha, along with a pair of Vidyādharas on its two sides.

The iconographic details – along with the intricate carving skills – refer this to be a perfect wooden counterpart of that of the contemporary stone carvings of Pal-Sen era. And at the same time, it advocates in favour of the idea – turning into conviction – that both of the kind were used to be sculpted by the same (group of) artists and carvers.

Now, actually, this very wooden effigy of Viṣṇu was rendered in an extremely bad condition. Even around 1929 AD, it was so fragile with age, as mentioned by Nalinikanta Bhattashali, which could be crushed to powder between the fingers. Later on, the specimen has also been mentioned by Tarapada Santra (1980 and 2003) and Kalyan Kumar Dasgupta (1990). However, not a single word has been uttered about this valuable specimen in ‘Bāṅgāladeśa Dāruśīpa’, the book published by Dhaka Museum (presently known as Bangladesh National Museum) in June 2003. Moreover, during my visit to the Museum in December, 2010, I could not manage the permission to see the specimen in my own eyes, said to be kept in their reserve collection. Hence, it could be surmised (if not officially announced) that this important specimen of Bengal Art has been completely perished and doesn't exist any more.

**Viṣṇu-on-Garuḍa from Goda (c 12-13 cent AD):**

In terms of iconography, the seated varieties of Viṣṇu images, not as numerous as the standing varieties, can be subdivided into several groups based on their particular pose or seat. Such as (a) seated on a simhāsana or throne; (b) seated on the back of mount Garuḍa; (c) seated in Vajraparyanka like a yogī; and (d) seated on the coils of Adīśeṣa (Ananta-Nāg), the primeval serpent. This particular appearance of the lord is known as ‘Bhogāsān’.

In April 2008, a wooden idol of Lord Viṣṇu – depicted in Bhogāsān – has been discovered from a pond at Goda, Bardhaman. The sculpture in the round – portraying the deity with his mount – measuring 83½" x 17" x 9", is elongated in nature; and its pedestal, measuring 21⅓" x 17", is detached at present. This elongated nature, along with the texture on the surface suggests that it has been carved out of a single log of any timber kind of wood, which has hardly been used for making divine images in Bengal after the 16 cent AD. Moreover, for several other reasons (we will discuss later on in ch IV), making of Viṣṇu-images – both on stone and wood – was stopped after the 12-13 cent AD and later it was replaced by the iconography of Lord Kṛṣṇa and Jagannātha. Hence, this very specimen has to be assigned to a date much earlier.

Besides this, the carving technique – especially the intricate details on the crown and ornaments – along with the physiognomic features of the deity and his mount, suggests that this wooden piece is carrying the same legacy that belonged to the Pal-Sen school of Bengal sculpture (c 10-12 cent AD). The same technique could be visible on its contemporary counterparts (assigned to the same period), mostly kept in the Bangladesh National Museum.

However, this antique specimen depicts Lord Viṣṇu (see fig 3 and pl 4) – bedecked with Kūṭa-mukuta, necklace and other ornaments – seated by hanging two legs (on both side) on the shoulder of his mount Garuḍa, who is holding the legs firmly with both the hands. Surprisingly, the lord has two hands; while both are broken from the elbow and missing. Ananta-nāg is hooded on

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61 Vidyādhars, literally 'wisdom-holders', are a group of supernatural beings in Indian mythology; they possess magical powers and dwell in the Himalayas and are considered as 'Upa-deva's, i.e., semi-gods.
62 see Bāṅgālār Kāther Kāj. pp 3, 36
63 see WCOEI. p 53
64 see The Iconography of Vaisnava Images in Orissa. p 32
65 see Deputy Superintending Archaeologist (Customs). (30.08.2010). Inspection Report on Seized Wooden Idol of Viṣṇu, kept in Barddhaman Police Station, Dist Barddhaman, West Bengal. ASI, Kolkata Circle
66 A tall cylindrical crown, usually worn by Lord Viṣṇu.
him with its canopy of seven heads. The lord’s eyes are half-closed in meditation, while the broken arms suggest him to be exhibiting ‘vara’ and ‘abhay’ mudra.

Usually, most of the Viśnū images found in Bengal are of the ‘Vāsudev’-form⁶⁷; and hence the iconography of this very image is not very common in the sculptural tradition of this state, as well as the country. Similar renderings of the lord in Bhogāsan (on Garūra) could be found, but on stone – one in Asutosh Museum, Kolkata⁶⁸, one in Bangladesh National Museum⁶⁹ and quite a number at Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi⁷⁰ – though all of them are much smaller in scale in comparison to their wooden counterpart. And most interestingly, all these specimens, except the wooden one, have been hailed from the ancient Varendra region⁷¹.

Today, this wooden idol of Viśnū is with the State Archaeological Museum, Kolkata, awaiting a very special attention from the scholars. Some of its most striking features are:

- the huge size of the sculpture, and that too on wood,
- two arms of the lord,
- absence of ‘Śrīvatsa’ mark,
- absence of vana-mālā,
- possible absence of any of the attributes,
- human face of Garūra, and absence of his wings,
- Garūra – instead of folding his arms in a greeting posture (namaskār) – is holding the legs of his master.

fig 3. Details of Viśnū-on-Garūra from Goda

The erect standing posture of the lord with four hands; it’s a very common iconography, widely available on the stone sculptures of the Pal-Sen period.

Exhibit no T-153/576

Acc No E-77.1175

VRM – 98.59, 99, 2003.63, 2885, 2886, 2912, 2950, 3613

Varendra (or Barind) was a region of Bengal, now in Bangladesh. It included the region of Pundra Kingdom, known as Pundravardhan. According to Cunningham, the boundary of Varendra was the Ganges and the Mahananda on the west, the Karatoya on the east, the Padma on the south and the land between Coach Bihar and the Terai on the north. The Varendra Brahmins originated from this region.
Therefore, in every possible perspective, this Viṣṇu-image from Goda is a very important specimen of Bengal Art; and hence Annexure II would like to take a closer study of the specimen. But, even after that, further research is very much required; since it could reveal some unknown episode of our history and culture.

: GARUR – THE EVERLASTING ICONOGRAPHY:

Among the group of pan-Indian iconographies executed in Bengal, Garur – a semi-divine being (mythic creature) and the mount of Lord Viṣṇu – might be considered as an everlasting phenomenon. It has been widely depicted, both on stone and wood, by the Bengali carvers of the Pal-Sen period; and even today it’s among the most popular subjects for today’s artisans. Throughout the ages, he is the only god-mount, who has been depicted singularly with so much of care and attention. Such a wide range of proclamation, for a semi-divine character, is really something significant and exceptional.

72 For example, see the Garur images used in the Rath of Nijabalia, Howrah (see fig 29a of ch V of this book).
Actually, it was 'Supama' of Vedic literature, who was gradually transformed into a combination of human and bird; and described as the supreme ideal (apart from Hanumān) of loyalty and faithfulness. In the beginning he was depicted as a complete bird and later on – in both painting and sculpture – he started to be depicted as a mixed form; i.e., partly as a human and partly bird.

However, in terms of historical date, the oldest reference is probably the stone pillar (known as Garur-dhvaj or Garur-stambha)\(^73\) erected by Heliodoras (the Greek messenger of the king of Viḍīśā) at Vesnagar of Andhra Pradesh, assignable to c 2 cent BC.\(^74\) But a more distinct iconographic description has been provided by the 5 cent text, Mānāsāra Śīlpaśāstra (ch 61).\(^75\) There Garur is depicted as being of a terrific appearance and figured in an erect or sitting posture, meditating on lord Viśnū with his joined palms. He is supposed to have feathers, with wings painted in five colours, and a beak. He is to wear various ornaments, including a crown, and is to be gorgeously painted in a great variety of colours. Later on, in some of the specimens, he started to be depicted almost as a humane with very small and symbolic wings at the back.

In this connection, we can discuss about an independent representation of Garur (measuring 26" x 11½"), a high-relief sculpture in wood, which has been retrieved from Raghurampur, near Dhaka, and is kept in the Bangladesh National Museum\(^76\). Its close proximity to the sculptural legacy of the Pal-Sen period has pushed it back to c 11 cent AD\(^77\). The semi-divine lord is sitting on one knee (see fig 4) – on a double-petalled lotus – and folding his arms as usual. This greeting posture (namaskāra) is his most common appearance that we could see even today. But the speciality of this specimen is his outspread locks of hair, which is wide-spread and beautifully carved in the form of a halo, creating a sort of nimbus around his head. His wings are small and stiff, carved in a low flat relief on the surface behind. Moreover, the lord is wearing a short dhoti (sakaccha-fashion) with a girdle; and adorned with a crown, earrings, necklaces, bangles and ornamental anklets. As a whole, he has been depicted with equal grace and grandeur, just like his master used to be.

However, this independent depiction of Garur has many counterparts, made in stone – assigned to the same time-span – that bears the same technique of carving. In this regard, we may compare this wooden effigy with the seven stone-images of the same divinity (some are broken) recovered from Mandoil (VRM 14), Nagail (VRM 236), Deopara (VRM 382-383) of Rajsahi, Malda (VRM 474) of West Bengal, Briddhigram (VRM 666) of Bogra/Bogura, Taras (VRM 3677) of Pabna etc.\(^78\). A similar image from Chowrakasba, Rajsahi, has also been reproduced by Huntington (fig 246).\(^79\) All these images are datable to the Pal-Sen period; and in respect to the quality of carving, grace of form and delicacy of expression – they belong to a common stylistic denominator.

As a whole, the wooden idol that we are discussing about is of quite a good workmanship and shows the deity in a cheerful expression. Unfortunately, his folded arms are broken away and lost; otherwise – considering the fact that it was buried under loam for several centuries – the image was said to be hailed in a pretty good condition. Though, I couldn't manage to see this rare specimen in the reserve collection (specimen no E-1125) of Bangladesh National Museum, but its physical existence has been well-advocated by Zinat Mahrukh Banu in her book published by the Museum in 2003\(^80\).

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73 The pillar, found in front of many Viśnū temples, on top of which stands his mount Garur.
74 see PHD. pp 10, 254
75 see Manasara Series. Vol II. pp 81-82
76 see IOBABSITDM. p109
79 see WCOEF. p 114
80 Bāṅglādeśe Dārusilpa. pl 131
THIRTEEN TO FIFTEEN CENTURIES AD: THE AGE OF TRANSFORMATION

The Pal-Sen school of Bengal sculpture as we have already seen was mostly patronized – obviously at the hieratic level – by the royal state. Though, the virile flow of folk-tribal genre was also in a full swing, without caring for any such promotion from the elite class; and hence limited itself mostly in cheaper mediums like clay and natural pigment. It was only after the Islamic invasion in early 13 cent AD that things started to change – suddenly and with immediate effect.

Historically, the Muslims have been in India since the 7 cent; but, it was only at the end of 12th that they came to the eastern provinces. Later on, the invaders touched the soil of Bengal in the year 1203/04; while they defeated King Laksman Sen at his capital Nabadvip. Laksman Sen fled away and Bengal came under the Islamic rule.

Later on, Kesab Sen, the last king of the Sen Dynasty, ruled (1225-1230) only in a small area of eastern Bengal (now Bangladesh); and there was Dev Dynasty, which also ruled in eastern Bengal for a brief period. However, these rulers were suppressed by the Islamic power within the mid-14 cent. And hence, Hindu-Bengali kingdoms continued to exist merely in the eastern and southern parts of the state, up to the 1450s, until they were overpowered by the Turkish attacks. Only the Koch kingdom in the north could resist the Turkish and Afghan force through the 16 and 17 centuries; and could also weather the mighty Mughals, up to the advent of the British.

In this period (13-15 cent), Hindu political power of Bengal was limited to mere Chieftainships and Baron-ships under the Islamic rule. The former kingdom of Hindus became known as 'Sultanate of Bengal', and was being ruled at regular intervals from the Sultanate of Delhi. So, apparently, it was a period of political, as well as cultural turmoil. Hence, it is quite understandable, why much specimen of wooden idols is not available in Bengal that could be assigned between 13 and 15 cent AD. During this epoch, a lot of inseparable factors have worked together and resulted towards the same direction; and we can see the inevitable outcome.

► The invasion of Islamic power in the early-13 cent came as a sudden and huge blow to the life and culture of Bengal.

► With this invasion, the state power was transferred to the Islamic rulers and the royal religion was changed. The new rulers were against all sorts of image-worship and didn't encourage any such activity.

► Naturally, the royal patronization of 500 years for making divine images – both in stone and wood – stopped suddenly and immediately; and the making of wooden idols (any idol whatsoever) was left into a deep trouble. As a result, today we could find so many divine images – mostly of stone and assignable to c 12-13 cent AD – scattered all over Bengal; in a state of incompleteness of various degrees. For example; we can take the Visrû image from Kumarpur, Rajshahi and currently with the Varendra Research Museum (VRM 2006.01/92.99). We would find that the sculpture was stopped in the midway of its carving (see fig 4, ch IV of this book); and hence only the rough-cuts are visible. It shows that for some reason or the other, the carver had to stop suddenly and leave his work incomplete.

► In the renewed circumstances, the royal capital preferred designal motifs and patterns as the subject of carving – both on stone and wood. So, presumably, the artists of the royal atelier – who used to carve those divine images earlier – now devoted themselves in making royal furniture and accessories. Their meticulous skill, which has remained a trademark of the Pal-Sen school, now got employed in carving those intricate designs – both organic and geometric.

► The Islamic invaders looted several existing temples and destroyed the respective deities; and the wooden effigies were comparatively easier for them to break or ruin. As a result, there was a mass-panic spread among the local people – mostly Hindus – for drowning their idols (made of stone, metal

81 For India, as a whole, it was a period of renewed scientific and technological contact with the outside world. For example, the spinning wheel – probably a Chinese invention – diffused into India around this period only.
or wood) into various water bodies, in order to save them from being humiliated in the aggressive hands of the invaders. And that's the reason why, even today, many specimens of Bengal sculpture are being discovered from various old ponds and lakes.  

During this time, worshipping of idols became almost a secret activity. At the same time, since the economic power was transferred to the Muslim rulers, there were hardly any large capitals left elsewhere to commission quality works of a sizable scale. So, expensive materials like stone—as it was not available locally—were stopped to be imported, especially in larger quantity or volume. In this regard, presumably the Tripurasundar of Boral (PS Sonarpur, South 24 Parganas) assigned to c 13 cent AD was one of the latest efforts promoted by any royal family. Otherwise, making of big effigies on permanent materials like stone and wood became difficult as it cost a lot of money and time. Instead, the quick use of clay and natural pigment became one of the best possible alternatives.

So, it becomes evident that a sudden change in the character of patronization, religious and socio-cultural outlook of the state, distribution of political and economic power-structure and many other common and uncommon factors worked together to limit the availability of wooden idols of this era. On the other hand, we should never forget that the fragile nature of wood and the moist climate—along with the destructive agents like worms and white ants—have always been responsible for the ultimate disintegration of many of the specimens. Fortunately, the above mentioned sculptures of the pre-Islamic era survived only because, eventually, they were buried under earth or loam for a long period of time. But, immediately after being exposed to the climate, they started to get disintegrated. The sandalwood image of Viṣṇu, hailed from Krisnapur, is a perfect example to illustrate this point (see fig 5).

In these circumstances whatsoever, it shouldn't be assumed that there was any sudden break in the tradition of making wooden idols in Bengal. Though lack of any high-end patronization affected the volume, scale and degree of production—but nothing could stop the Bengal from carrying forward this age-old legacy.

► The change in royal religion didn't change the religious or ritualistic practices of the common folk; and there was still a demand of divine images—if not in stone, then in clay or wood.

► In the renewed circumstances, the royal patrons, who used to promote earlier the hieratic tradition of wooden idols, were now replaced by local chieftains and Zamindars. But, even they couldn't afford stone and hence opted for a semi-permanent material like wood. Though this time, the demand became limited both in terms of scale and number. For example, the Sīnhabāhini of Nijabalia (PS Jagatballavpur, Howrah), assigned to late 15 cent—was the family deity of Rana Singha, a local Zamindar.

However, for some reason or other, many of the earlier specimens couldn't survive the corrosive effect of time and have perished completely.

► It was this very time-span, when a new era began in the history of wooden idols in Bengal. For the first time, the local common people took collective initiatives in order to install images of their gods or goddesses—and that too in wood; which was obviously a new shift of paradigm in Bengal art. For instance, the famous Balarām of Boro (PS Raina, Bardhaman) was installed some time in c 14-15 cent (see fig 9 and pl 5), as a folk deity of rain and harvest, patronized by donations and contributions from the local mass.

► In the mean time, the royal artists—who were previously skilled and experienced in making the wooden idols—were hardly available any more in this business. On the other hand, the new patrons of Bengal art (local 82 Recollect the antiquities hailed from the great lake of Rampal, now preserved in the Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka.
chieftains and Zamindars, along with the collective folk) were much closer – instead of the royal ones – to the rural artisans; and hence it was they who were preferred for the new commissions. Thus, for the first time, the folk-tribal artisans came into fore, who couldn’t cultivate their traditional language and skill on wood, so far, due to the prevailing pan-Indian hegemony. Now being invited to try their hands in the art of carving wooden idols, for the first time, these artisans got an opportunity to apply and explore their own aesthetic perception – on a semi-permanent material like wood – that they have developed through various collective practices.

Naturally, these newly appointed folk-tribal artisans were not so experienced in this business and couldn’t carve out the intrinsic and meticulous details – which were typical to the Pal-Sen era. Hence, paint was introduced for depicting the facial features and other details on the undulations of simplistic carving.63 Ornaments, the ‘kriṇa-mukuta’ (the crown) and the basic dress-materials were still being carved on the surface, but the carving details were replaced by the painted ones.

So far, the wooden idols of Pal-Sen period – following the pan-Indian ideology – used to have large half-closed eyes, depicting a gesture of self-meditation. But now, for the first time, the deities started to look up and straight towards the devotee; for the first time, we came to see the full eyeball of the supreme. Though quite common in the folk-tribal tradition, but it was really something exclusive in the hieratic idiom of making divine images. And thus, what was once private and restricted – now became open and public. Undoubtedly, it was a major step towards the democratization of Hindu-Brahmanic religious practices in Bengal.

In this way, gradually, Bengal sculpture made itself free from the shackles of pan-Indian hangover. Though surviving specimens are very few in number, but the wooden idols assignable between 13 and 15 cent exhibit a fine blend between the hieratic and the folk-tribal, general and local. And thus, gradually, we got introduced to a purely Bengal school of woodcarving; a remarkable and significant achievement in Bengal art.

This new accomplishment of Bengal sculpture, whatsoever, was clearly reflected in the wooden images like Tripurasundari of Boral, Balarām of Boro and Sirhabāhini of Nijbalia. Though not much in number, but their fresh look and appearance are qualified enough to represent the prevailing tradition of that contemporary era. And apart from these, history has left its mark in several other ways, where the mere absence of datable specimens doesn’t matter much.

Traditionally, in Bengal, whenever any wooden idol used to be worn out due to any reason, in most of the cases it happened to be replaced by a similar replica. This very act of replacement, if only done with wood itself, is known as ‘Navakalevar’64, i.e., the new body. Occasionally, replicas have also been made in some other medium like clay, metal, stone etc. In West Bengal, there are many such divine images, still existing and being worshipped in drastically restored or newly built temples, which are copies of their wooden originals. And fortunately, at least three of these originals, along with another exception, could be assigned between 13 and 15 cent AD.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image</th>
<th>Finding place</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Final replication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Tripurasundari</em></td>
<td>Boral, Garia, South 24 Parganas</td>
<td>c 13 cent</td>
<td>c 1934-35/1940 (in metal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Balarām</em></td>
<td>Boro, PS Raina, Bardhaman</td>
<td>c 14-15 cent</td>
<td>unknown (in wood)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

63 The folk-tribal artisans were always habituated in painting (with natural pigment) their clay-sculptures. Hence, they were more comfortable with the use of paint rather than chisel and mallet.

64 Presumably, this very concept came from the neighbouring Orissa. There, in Puri, ‘Navakalevar’ is the periodical renewal of the wooden images of Sudarśan, Balabhadra, Subhadrā and Jagannāth. This ritual is performed when double Āśārh month (June-July) happen to come in a local astronomical year. Generally it occurs on every 8th or 11th or 19th year.
Tripurāsundarī of Boral:

In the history of human civilization, Fertility-cult is the oldest form of religious practices that gradually transformed into Mother-cult or mother-worship. Similarly, in India and hence Bengal, worshipping of mother-goddess has been one of the most ancient phenomena; but everywhere it has developed with a typically regional and folk character.

In most of the ancient practices in India, the mother-goddess has been portrayed in a visually abstract or non-figurative form; while the earliest specimen was the terracotta figurines hailed from Nindwari (Ornak Valley) of Beluchistan (c 3500-3000 BC) and the Valley of Kuili River (C 3000-2500 BC). However, it was this concept of supreme goddess, which has been described as the mother of the world - 'Jagannātī', Jagajjanāt or 'Sarvaprāpūti-jananī' in the Rg-Veda. Later on, we can find other manifestations, like 'Śākambhari', that gradually gained greater vitality and dynamism and started to be portrayed in various forms. For example, we get the names of Vāk, Usā, Aditi, Sarasvatī and Pṛthvī in the Rgveda; while later in the Yajurveda, various Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads - we get names like Durgā, Ambikā, and Haimavatī etc.

So, it was only a gradual process, throughout the passage of time, and by mixing and matching of various hieratic and folk-elements - that a central notion of the mother goddess was developed. Later on in the Gupta period, a specific group of mother-worshippers came into fore and were identified as 'Śāktā's. In general, the supreme goddess is known as Durgā, wife of Lord Śiva; and her various forms range from the oldest Utarā to the of-late Santāni Mā. Throughout the passage of time, many of the folk deities have gradually got mixed with Durgā and hence increased the number of her names and forms. Today, there are many Mother-goddesses being worshipped here and there that do not resemble with the description of the texts.

The Tripurāsundari or Tripuresvari of Boral (Garīa), PS Sonarpur, South 24 Parganas, seems to be something of that kind (see fig 5); since this form of Durgā is hardly worshipped anywhere else in Bengal. Until date, there is only one more specimen - that too in wood - that has been reported from any corner of this state (Chhatrabhog, PS Mathurapur, South 24 Parganas). Presumably it has emerged and remained as a local deity of South 24 Parganas only.

However, the existing 5% image of Tripurāsundari of Boral is made of 'Aṣṭadhatu' - viz., an alloy of eight metals like gold, silver, copper, lead, tin, brass or zinc, iron and steel - its older version was made of wood only. The oldest shrine (obviously not the existing one) was erected in c 13 cent AD by a descendant of the Sen Dynasty; and hence the wooden idol of the goddess could be dated the same. Later on, for some reason or the other, it became dilapidated and was left as debris.

In the year 1940 - another source says it was BS 1301 (1894-95 AD) - the ancient debris of the age-old Tripurāsundari temple was excavated and a disintegrated wooden effigy of the goddess was discovered. But, unfortunately, due to the lack of historic as well as aesthetic consciousness, the image was thrown into the Ganges. At that time, the local Zamindar Hiralal Ghosh replaced the image with a similar one, made of clay. Later, in BS 1341 (1934-35 AD), it was replaced once again, by the existing effigy of today.

Here, Tripurāsundari is portraying the 'Śorāśī' (a girl of 16 years) form of Durgā; which is one of the 'Daśamahāvidyā's', mentioned in Indian mythology and is believed to have

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85 For example, the circular objects with a hole in the centre, found from Mohenjodaro - along with forms like Śivalinga - are the vagina-symbol of the goddess of fertility.
86 see PHD. pp 109-110
88 see PPPOM. Vol III. p 150
89 see Brhattara Gariār Itibrtta. p 39
90 'Daśamahāvidyā' is the ten different forms of Goddess Mahāsaṅghika. Kāli, Tārā, Śorāśī, Bhuvanesvari, Bhairavi, Chinnamastā, Dhumavatī, Bagalā, Mātangi and Kamalā.
sixteen kinds of desire. However, the goddess, with her four arms and three eyes, is sitting on a lotus that is erected from the navel of a reclining Lord Śīv. On the base of the pedestal, five lords are portrayed – Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Maheśvar, Iśvar and Rudra. And this is for the first time, as we have already told that any divine image with the eyes open is looking straight towards the devotees. Undoubtedly, it was a major step towards the democratization of hieratic religious practices in Bengal.

Now, we can guess from this present form of appearance that how the original version in wood actually was; while at the same time we can also imagine about the possible vitality and intricacy that it must have portrayed. Obviously, it must have been beautifully carved, portraying all the glory and grandeur of the divine mother in the fullest. Undoubtedly, it’s our misfortune that we couldn’t preserve such a valuable specimen of Bengal art.

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91 The wooden effigy of goddess Hamsesvari of Bansberia, PS Magra, Hooghly, is also a ‘Sorasi’ form of the goddess (see pl 51).
Balaram of Boro:

The thought and imagination of Viṣṇu or Viṣṇu-Vāsudev, as the central deity of a religious cult, was nourished by a major participation and contribution from Vāsudev-Kṛṣṇa, who was a historic character (described in Mahābhārata). At a time, he was a famous warrior, friend of the Pāṇḍavas and the driver of Arjun’s chariot. From the evidences of the epic, Purāṇa and other scriptures, it is found – as we have already told – that he was also associated with Sankarṣan, Pradyumna, Śāṃba and Aniruddha. Later on, all of them were deified, except Śāṃba, and the other four formed a significant form of Viṣṇu, named ‘Ācārya Caturvṛtya’.92

Sankarṣan was the elder brother of Vāsudev-Kṛṣṇa and better known as Balaram. For offering delight to the world, he is called ‘Rāma’ and ‘Bala’ because of his strength and might. In several old scriptures, the name of the two brothers is mentioned where Vāsudev follows the elder Sankarṣan. The myth of their birth has been recorded in numerous ancient texts, Viṣṇu Purāṇ (5.1.59-63) for example, where two forms of Viṣṇu (white and black) are said to have incarnated as Balaram and Kṛṣṇa respectively. Both were sons of Vasudev (not Vāsudev, the name of Lord Kṛṣṇa) and Devakī, but Balaram was taken out of his mother’s womb and transferred to that of Rohiṇī. Hence, he is known as Sankarṣan.93

Balaram’s association with Ananta-Nāg is evident from the very beginning, while the earliest known images are based on the Nāg (snake) figures itself. His identity with the snakes is apparent in his journey to Mathura (with Kṛṣṇa) as narrated in the ‘Harivamśa’ (II.26.48-58). As Kṛṣṇa was addicted to women, Balaram was addicted to wine. In some of his earliest images he holds a wine cup; and in many of the later images his intoxication is often depicted by his wandering eyes.

However, the earliest depiction of the lord was found in the coin of Agathoklios of Aikhanum (c 2 cent BC)94 and a stone sculpture hailed from Mathura (c 1 cent BC), now at the Lucknow Museum, Uttar Pradesh. The Lucknow specimen is standing under a ‘Sarpa-chatra’ (snake hood), as we know that Sankarṣan is another form or incarnation of Ananta-Nāg. Among the other independent depictions of the lord, there are both Gupta and post-Gupta specimen at the Gwalior Museum (Madhya Pradesh), Varendra Research Museum of Rajshahi, Museums at Patna and Nalanda (Bihar), and on the temple-walls at Osian (Rajasthan) and Paharpur (Bihar).95 Though, there are very few independent images of Balaram that could be assigned after the Gupta period.

In any case, in the early medieval period, the lord was always depicted with a wine pot as – we know – he is attached to farming and loves to drink. However, there is another form, where the lord is included in the famous Jagannāth-triad along with Subhadrā and Jagannāth. But, that’s a different story altogether and would be discussed later on.

Now, the famous wooden sculpture of Lord Balaram from Boro, PS Raina, Bardhaman, is a unique specimen (see pl 5); since its iconography is not available in any of the Puranic descriptions mentioned above. Hence, this colossal image (around 11′ in height) – especially, with a heavy beard and moustache – is extremely rare; though the manly torso and the feminine lower part are approved by some similar descriptions.97 Actually, this very icon seems to be a combination of Vedic Viṣṇu, especially, with a heavy beard and moustache - is extremely rare; though the manly torso and the feminine lower part are approved by some similar descriptions.97 Although, there are very few independent images of Balaram that could be assigned after the Gupta period.

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effigy has also been mentioned in 'Śrīkṛṣṇa Vijay', the 15-cent text by Maladhar Basu;\textsuperscript{101} while Sukumar Sen has suggested it to be assigned to a date before 16 cent.\textsuperscript{102} Though, in both the cases, the date of replication is yet to be discovered.

As a whole, this woodcarving of massive scale and volume is a wonderful specimen of the folk-tradition of Bengal sculpture; even though the colour-scheme – based on white and reddish-yellow-blue-green-black etc – along with the rounded eyes, remind us of the Orissan tradition. But, otherwise, it gives us an impression of strength, vigour and vitality. That is why, according to the local traditions of Raina, this unique image of Balarāma is considered as the lord of agriculture and worshipped as the God of rain. In this way, through several centuries, it has been profoundly manifested in the collective consciousness of the local folk.

\textbf{Kṛṣṇa of Krisnapur/Kestapur:}

In the 12-13 cent AD, a variant form of Vāsuped-Kṛṣṇa – Gopināth, also known as Gopīvallabh – appeared in the coastal areas of Orissa and gained popularity very soon. Presumably it was the ‘Gīt Govinda’ (song of Govinda) – a work composed by the 12-century poet, Jaidev\textsuperscript{103} – which was the source of inspiration for this new iconography. It describes the relationship between Kṛṣṇa and the gopīs (female cow herders), Rādhā in particular, of Vrindavan (now in Uttar Pradesh). This work has been of great importance in the development of the bhakti-traditions within the ‘Bhāgavat’-cult of Hinduism.

However, the iconography of Gopināth or Gopīvallabh was a combination of Viṣṇu-Vāsuped of Bhāgavat and Venugopāl-Kṛṣṇa of Gīt Govinda. Here we can see the lord alone, standing in ‘tribhanga’\textsuperscript{104} posture and playing a flute, held with both the hands in parallel to the right shoulder, in the garden. Such specimen of Kṛṣṇa-Gopināth on stone could be found in the Govt Museum of Bhubanesvar and several other collections of Orissa. Moreover, there are specimens at Dharmasala (near Cuttack), Baleswar, Pubasans, Baliaanta etc; and in some places, he is worshipped in individual temples as well.\textsuperscript{105} This ‘varṣidhārti’ (flute-playing) Gopināth was devoid of any Rādhā. Instead, he was accompanied either by Śrī and Puṣṭi (later they turned into Śrī and Bhūdevi, and even after that as Laksñī and Sarasvati), or his wife Rukminī and Satyabhāmā, or all his eight wives\textsuperscript{106} (later identified as ‘aśtasakhi’).

Among the collections of Bhubanesvar Museum, mentioned above, there is a specimen hailed from Dharmasala and is assigned to c early 13 cent, which is unique in comparison to the other renderings of Gopināth. Here, the lord has four arms – two of which are playing the flute whereas the other two are holding Cakra and Śankha. In another specimen kept in the same museum, the lord is depicted with two arms and presented with his eight wives. Garur, the mount of Viṣṇu-Vāsuped, is visible among the cows carved on the pedestal. In this connection, we can also recollect another similar rendering of the lord, also in stone, which is kept at the Baleswar Museum.\textsuperscript{107} And this is the way, how the iconography of Lord Kṛṣṇa was gradually developed throughout the ages; and took its final shape sometime in the mid-15 cent AD.

However, historically, the first-ever wooden effigy of lord Kṛṣṇa (see pl 6) was said to be installed in a temple at Krisnapur or Kestapur (near Saptagram), PS Magra, Hooghly. Today it is being worshipped there at the Śrīpāt of Raghnunath Das Goswami, along with Rādhā and Nitai-Gaur that have been added later on.

Since 12-cent AD, Saptagram (seven villages)\textsuperscript{108} was a famous port on the Saraswati River and an extremely developed business and trade centre. According to Joao De Barros (c 1496 – 1570 AD), a Portuguese historian and civil servant, the port of Chattagram (now in

\textsuperscript{101} see Chowdhury, Jajnesvar. \textit{B:IOS}, p 179
\textsuperscript{102} see Sen, Sukumar. (\textit{Bhādara-Āśvin, BS 1363}). \textit{Boror Balarāma Vigraha. Paricay}, pp 4-5
\textsuperscript{103} Jaidev was born in Kenduli Sasan near Puri in Orissa.
\textsuperscript{104} Tribhanga is a (tri-bent pose) standing body position or stance used in the traditional Indian sculpture, art and classical dance forms. It consists of three bends in the body – at the neck, waist and knee – hence the body is curved in the form of a gentle “S” shape and is considered the most graceful and sensual posture. Lord Kṛṣṇa is often portrayed in this posture. (see fig 7 and 9 of ch V of this book)
\textsuperscript{105} see PHD. pp 40, 238
\textsuperscript{106} Rukminī, Jāmbavatī, Satyabhāmā, Kālindī, Satyā, Mitravindā, Bhadrā and Laksñānā.
\textsuperscript{107} see \textit{ibid}, p 238
\textsuperscript{108} Bansberia, Kristapur/Krisnapur/Kestapur, Basudevpur, Nityanandapur, Shibpur, Sambachora and Baladghati.
Bangladesh) had indeed better facilities for the navigation of trading ships, but the one that of Saptagram was quite huge and the town itself was one of the bests.109

Later, a few decades after Barros had published the map of Bengal (1550 AD110), Saptagram was ruled by two brothers – Hiranya Das and Gobardhan Das. In the year 1498, Raghunath, son of Gobardhan was born.111 (Later on Raghunath Das, the prince, left everything, became one of the chief associates of Mahâprabhu, and was blessed by Nityananda; but that is a different story.) It is said that, in order to celebrate the birth of his son, Gobardhan erected a temple for the wooden effigies of Kṛśṇa-Rādhā, their family deity.112 However, historically, it was not possible; since it was none other than Jāhānbābū Devī – second wife of Nityananda – who installed the image of Rādhā beside Kṛśṇa for the first time in late 16 cent.113 So, presumably, the 15 cent temple erected by Gobardhan was dedicated to the lord only; and hence the wooden divinity could also be assigned to the same date. Moreover, historically, it was the first-ever Bengali version of this iconography of Lord Kṛṣṇa (Gopinātha/ Gopīvalabha) – on wood – and that too in the round.

However, sometime in the mid-16 cent, when Raghunath was in Vrindavan, the temple was demolished by some of the Islamic invaders. Fortunately, the idols were shifted safely by the priests and kept under the soil of the bank of river Saraswati. On hearing this news, Raghunath immediately sent his disciple Kamal Lochan Goswami to retrieve the idols. Kamal did the same and re-installed the images and started worshipping them once again. Along with lord Kṛśṇa, he also installed a conjugate image of Naitai-Gaur, also made of Neem-wood. Now, presumably, it was he who added the image of Rādhā beside Kṛśṇa over here; since, in the mean time, Jāhānbābū Devī has already sent an image of the human-goddess – sculpted in Bengal – to be installed beside the Lord in Vrindavan.

Today, as we have already told, all those images mentioned above are installed together at the Śripāṭ of Raghunath Das, Goswami, Krisnapuri/Kestapur. This modern temple was built by the grandmother of Motilal Shil114, and later on repaired partially in 1919 by the ‘Bāṅgiya Kāyaśtha Sāmāy’.

Here, the wooden idol of lord Kṛśṇa, our main point of interest, is beautifully carved, following the 15-cent tradition of Bengal; though the quality of ‘āngaratī’ (repainting) today has deteriorated drastically. Moreover, the thick layer of paint has resulted in an uneven surface and hence making the image a bit distorted. Nevertheless, still the 2’ Kṛśṇa remind us about the past glory and grandeur of the woodcarvers of the bygone days. Especially the eyes, open and wide, and the eyeball touching both the lids have resulted into a very soft and tender look. Later on, this soft and tender look became one of the most significant characteristics of Bengal iconography.

\textbf{Śīrhābāhīnī of Nijabalia:}

Śīrhābāhīnī, means the goddess mounted on a lion, is one of the most popular forms of the supreme goddess Durgā, the earliest depiction of which is found in a coin of Saka-Pallav king Ajes or Aya. Usually the goddess is portrayed with four arms; but sometimes she could also be seen with two or even eight.

However, we know that throughout the passage of time, many folk-tribal deities have got mixed with the central icon of Mahādevi or Durgā or Umā or Pārvatī, and she has been named in various ways in various places. Some of the names are Sarbānī, Kālī Devī, Bhuvanēśvarī, Lālītā (not the associate of Rādhā), Aparājitā, Sarvamangalā, Rudrāṅgā-Durgā etc – and everywhere she is worshipped and prayed to protect us, her children, just like a mother.

But, her lion-mount has been distinctly identified in the 5-cent text, Mānāsara Ṣilpaśāstra (ch 63).115 According to the description, the lion is to be made in an erect, sitting or reclining posture. His tail is generally equal to his height and the four legs are like those of the tiger.

\begin{footnotes}

109 see Mitra, Sudhir Kumar. (undated). \textit{Raghunath Das Goswami}. Saptagram: Sripat of Raghunath Das. p 1

110 see Das, Soumitra. (5 July, 2009). River of Time. \textit{The Telegraph, Metro}


112 see \textit{Raghunath Das Goswami}. p 3


114 Motilal Shil (1792 - 1854) was a Bengali businessman and philanthropist; who began his life as a bottle and cork dealer, and then out-topped all his contemporaries.

115 ‘Śarba’ is another name of Lord Śiv.

116 See MS. Vol II, p 83

\end{footnotes}
His colour is white, but his mane should be red. The shape of his nails and teeth is composed to that of the bāl-candra or ardhā-candra ( crescent moon).

In this connection, we can refer to the ‘aṣṭadātu’ (made of octo-alloy) image of Sarbānī that was found from Deulbari of Comilla (Bangladesh), and has been assigned to c 7 cent AD. The goddess has eight arms and sitting in a ‘samapadasthānak’ posture on a lion, which is sitting on a double-petalled lotus. Her attributes are sankha, šar (arrow), kharga and oaka in the right hands and khetak, trisūl, ghanat (bell) and dhanu (bow) in the left. It is now kept in the Bangladesh National Museum;118 where there is also a unique piece of stone carving, depicting Rudrānātā-Durgā, assigned to c 7-8 cent AD.119

A stone depiction of Aparājitā was discovered from Niamatpur, near Rajsahi and currently with the Varendra Research Museum (VRM 1582). The c 9-cent specimen shows the goddess with four arms and sitting on a double-lotus; the lion is carved on the pedestal.120 Similar renderings (c 10-12 cent AD) could be found at the same museum, all of them in stone, where goddess Sīnhabāhīnī is either sitting or standing on a pedestal and the lion is carved below.121

There is another specimen (c 11-12 cent AD), depicting Kalyān Devī with two arms, which is kept at Rani Durgavati Museum of Jabalpur. A stone carving of Candra, dated c 1182-83 AD, was hailed from the Farasgunj area of Dhaka and is currently with BNM.122 Apart from those in VRM,123 a few specimens of Sarvamārga, all dated c 11-12 cent AD, are also in the museum of Bangiya Sahitya Parishat, Kolkata. However, Asur; the eternal demon, is not represented in any of these images mentioned above.

However, the earliest wooden depiction of goddess Sīnhabāhīnī Durgā (see pl 7) is being worshipped even today in a temple at Nijabalia, PS Jagatballavpur, Howrah; though the controversies with the exact dating have not yet been resolved. Some are of opinion that it’s a specimen of 17 cent124, whereas others consider it to be a replica of an older version that was installed in 1790125. In any case, the present-day temple, along with its porch, was built in the year 1790; but the image seems to belong to a date much earlier. It is said that Rana Singha Ray, a local Zamindar, who was contemporaneous to Sher Shah Suri (ruled 1532-1545), installed the goddess,126 This deity has also been referred by Kavikankan Mukundaram Chakraborty in his ‘Candtmarigaf’ written in the second half of the 16 cent. Moreover, historically, the descendants of Rana Singha were destroyed and killed by King Krisnaram Ray (ruled 1675-96) of Bardhaman, in the year 1683.127 Hence, it is believed that the guardian-deity (or ancestral-deity) of the abolished Zamindar-family was actually established in a time before 16 cent AD.

This idol, adored with eight hands, is a beautiful piece of carving in high-relief. It portrays the goddess seated on a highly stylized lion, which resembles (in many aspects) the description of Mānasara Śīlpaśāstra, mentioned above. Especially the white colour, length of the tail, shapes of teeth and nails etc reminds us of the 5 cent textual reference. On the other hand, the goddess – with her two main handscoming forward (forearms carved in the round) – is exhibiting ‘abhay’ (don’t worry) and ‘vara-mudrā’ ( boon giving gesture); while in the other hands, carved in high relief on the background, she is carrying sword, arrow, snare, shield, conch shell, bow and arrow.

The divine image is beautifully carved manifesting a fine blend between the folk-tribal and the hieratic tradition. Here, the crown, the bangles, the clothes (not visible) and the weapons are carved; but the other details have been depicted with paint. The body of the goddess is yellow and the lion is white; whereas the details have been portrayed mostly with red and black. Even the background is also elaborately carved and painted; along with a small relief of Śīv on the top. Above all, there is no doubt about the fact that it’s the first true specimen to represent the newly evolved school of Bengal sculpture that took its final shape in the next century.

117 It’s a posture, where someone stands with the two feet alike (see fig 7 of ch V of this book).
118 see IOBABSITDM. pp 203-205, pl LXX
119 see PHD. p 118
120 see Sculpture in the Varendra Research Museum. pp 206-207, pl 200
121 see ibid, pp 204-208, pl 196-202
122 see IOBABSITDM. pp 202-203, pl LXIX
123 VRM 32, 1549
124 see WCŒFI. p 54
127 see ibid, pp 182-183
Apart from the wooden idols mentioned above, there are at least three more specimens, which have confusions with their dating; since according to our findings, they could either be assigned to the end of 15 or the beginning of 16-cent AD.

| Jagannāth-triad | Mahesh, PS Srirampur, Hooghly |
| 'Dādhibāman'    | Śrīpāṭ of Jagadish Pandit, Jashora, PS Chakdaha, Nadia |
| Madanmohan      | Rudrani, PS Dhaniakhali, Hooghly |

Jagannāth-triad of Mahesh:

In terms of the pan-Indian context, as we have already come to know, the iconography of Viśnu-Vāsudeva as a central deity took its final shape in the Gupta period (c 300-600 AD). Later in c 600-1200 AD, various details have been added and altered to that central icon; which got reduced gradually, after c 13-14 cent.

In the mean time, some independent regional iconographies came into fore; like the Jagannāth-triad of Puri (Orissa), Venkaṭeś of Tirupati (Andhra Pradesh), Viṭṭhā-Viṭṭhoba Pāṇḍuranga, Dattātreya, Dhanvantari, Vyasdev and Annamūrti of Pandharpur (Maharashtra) etc. All of them were nothing but local interpretations of the central deity in their own folk-tribal idiom. Among them, the triad image of Balarām-Subhadrā-Jagannāth of Puri was actually introduced in c 11 cent, but gained its vitality and grace only in the next hundred years. And this triad-image, along with most of its similar renderings all over eastern India, is always made of Wood (usually Neem).

Historically, the concept of Balarām-Subhadrā-Jagannāth was a development from an earlier triad-iconography of Balarām-Ekanārīa-Krṣṇa. In Vṛhat Sārthiṣṭa (ch 58, śatra 37)129, it is specified that Ekanārīa should be placed in between Balarām and Krṣṇa; and together, they remind us of the Kushan sculptures (c 130 BC - 185 AD) of Viśūkh/Vāsūki-Devṣena-Skanda, where Devṣena is depicted as the wife of Skanda.130 However, the earliest specimen depicting Balarām-Ekanārīa-Krṣṇa has been assigned to c 2-3 cent AD and is kept in the Karachi Museum, Pakistan. There Balarām is standing with a Muṣaī131, Ekanārīa with two. Here, we should also mention about another specimen with a very similar depiction, discovered from Imadpur of North Bihar, which could be assigned to c 1025 AD. So it becomes clear that the preparation for the Jagannāth-iconography was started a long way back in the Kushan period that came into fore in Orissa only in the 11 cent. And from there on, this triad-deity has gradually spread through the other provinces of eastern India.

In Bengal, the famous Jagannāth-triad of Mahesh seems to be the oldest one; and there are many legends prevailing in the name of this deity (see pl 8). One says that the Lord of Puri came to this ancient village for taking bath in the holy Ganges; and hence, is worshipped over here.132 Another legend advocates that some time in the late 15 cent, Dhruvananda Brahmachari (died in 1553 AD) – founder of the 'Dhrūvananda Vaiṣṇav' Sect – was instructed in his dream to come to the village of Mahesh. There he discovered a wooden effigy of Lord Jagannāth at the bank of river Ganges and started worshipping him on that very spot.133 Moreover, it is also said that later...

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130 Devsena in some lists is referred as the wife of Skanda. [see Hopkins, Edward Washburn. (1969). Epic Mythology with Additions and Corrections. New York: Biblo and Tannen. pp 63, 70, 102]

131 A pestle for husking rice; a mallet or a hammer.

132 see Bhattacharya, Narendranath. HJP. p 117

133 see PPPOM. Vol II. p 615
in Śaka 1419 (1497 AD), on his way to Raghav Pandit’s residence at Khardah, Chaitanya Mahāprabhu has visited this place. Afterwards, he met Kamalakar Pipplai (1492-1562) – an extreme devotee of Lord Jagannāth – at Khalijuli region of the Sunderbans, South 24 Parganas, and asked him to go to Mahesh and see Dhruvananda. Kamalakar did the same and finally took the charge of the deities in the year 1532.

According to Hunter, the oldest temple of Mahesh was built beside the Ganges and was contemporaneous to that of the Rādhāvallabha’s in Vallabhpur. Later on, a new temple was built in early 18th, by Manohar Ray (died in 1743-44 AD), the king of Seoraphuli. With the passage of time, the temple was dilapidated due to the breaking of the Ganges and that’s when the present temple came to be erected in a new spot. In the year 1755, it was built in a distance from the river by Nayanchand Mullick of Kolkata, while another source advocates in favour of some Nimaicharan Mullick, whose family originated from Saptagram, Hooghly.

Today, we can find that these wooden effigies of Balarāma, Subhadra and Jagannāth – being worshipped in their full glory and grandeur – are really somewhat unique in character. The 4' Jagannāth looks quite gigantic in comparison to the 3' Balarāma and 1½' Subhadra. According to our observation – as the stark difference in mass and volume suggests – Dhruvananda found the lord alone; whereas the images of Balarāma and Subhadra have been added later on. And presumably, Kamalakar was the person, who initiated this very addition.

Stylistically, the Jagannāth-triad of Mahesh is quite significant in appearance. Apart from the carving itself, the painting technique also bears this special character. The leaf-shaped nose, the circular eyes and the thin stretched lips – the form and design as a whole – everything is so different that it seems to demand some special attention from the scholars and researchers. As a whole, this divine triad shows one of the distinct accomplishments of the art of making wooden idols in Bengal. The impact of these deities became so widespread that in c 1850 – when a new 'Ratī' was made at Vallabhpur, a place nearby, under the leadership of Sivakrisna Bandyopadhyay – they came with an exact replica, though not kept open for public, except a few festive days.

Dadhibāman of Jashora:

We have already come to know that the famous Jagannāth-triad of Puri, Orissa, was introduced in c 11 cent, while it gained vitality and grace only in the next century. Later on, gradually, it became extremely popular all over Orissa and the adjacent states. In this process, occasionally, the lord was also started to be worshipped alone – without any Balarāma or Subhadra – and was called as 'Dadhibāman'. Today, we can see many such specimens all around Orissa and Bengal.

In the temple of Puri, the ritual of 'Navakalevā' takes place when a double Āśāṭh month (June-July) happens to come in a local astronomical year. Generally, this age old tradition occurs on every 8th, 11th or 19th year; when the old idol of the triad use to be rejected and replaced by a new replica.

According to legends, some time in the early 16 cent, Jagadish Pandit – who later became one of the keen associates of Chaitanya Mahāprabhu – is said to have collected and brought one such rejected wooden effigy of Lord Jagannāth from Puri to Jashora (PS Chakdaha, Nadia) and started worshipping (see pl 9). So, we can assume that the idol was actually an older one, but was established in this place at the beginning of 16 cent AD.138

Even today, the 4' wooden idol of Lord 'Dadhibāman' is standing firm and alone, though, its visual appearance does not quite resemble with the Puri counterpart. Here, the eyes of the lord portray a prominent human character – not the usual round form that is typical of Orissa deities. As a whole, the nose and the lips of the Jashora specimen are also quite naturalistic in approach.

In this regard, besides all the visual dissimilarities, we must consider another valuable point of argument. Carrying such a huge piece of woodcarving from Puri, as the legend

134 see HJP, p 117
135 see PPPOM, Vol II, p 615; also see Mitra, A. (1959). West Bengal District Handbook. p 112
136 see HJP, pp 117-118
137 Previously, the ‘Rath’ of Mahesh used to go up to Vallabhpur. But there was a quarrel between the two groups and in c 1850, they got separated.
139 Some are of opinion that the temple was built in the 15 cent. See Mitra, Asok (ed). (1961). PPPOM, p 358
140 Photography is prohibited over there, even for the researchers; but, surprisingly, the same was available on the internet (gauḍiyaphotonews-gaurmandala.blogspot.com), as on 14.03.2011.
says, and that too with the help of a stick is something more than impossible. Hence, we believe that in reality, Jagadish Pandit – after coming back from Puri – ordered for a similar version here in Jashora by describing the form from his own memory of the original. As a result, the replica couldn’t be perfect in terms of appropriation. But, undoubtedly, it’s a very significant specimen of 15-16 cent Bengal Art.

**Madanmohan of Rudrani:**

Legend says that after Lord Kṛṣṇa’s departure from Vrindavan to Mathura, the famous ‘astasakhi’ became extremely sad and mournful. Hence, each of them made a wooden effigy of the lord and started worshipping. After several centuries – according to the same legend – it was during the invasion of Kalapahar that the worshippers became extremely worried about the possible humiliation of their god. So, in order to avoid any kind of disgrace, some of those images were kept in a secret shelter and the rest were sent to Rajasthan.

![Today’s Madanmohan Temple of Rudrani](image)

Among those wooden idols of Lord Kṛṣṇa, the one worshipped by Vṛnda (?) was discovered and brought to Rudrani (PS Dhaniakhali, Hooghly) by a hermit named Thakur Vairagya. It is also said that Bengal Sultan Dayud Khan (otherwise known as Dayud Shah Karrani, ruled 1572-76), after being driven away by the Mughals, has visited this Madanmohan Temple (see fig 6). He was extremely pleased with Thakur Vairagya and donated a lot of property to the temple. In this connection, one of the descendants of the ‘Sebait-family’, has reminded us repeatedly that all these are oral traditions passed through generations and hence there is no hardcore proof. Therefore, in spite of the advocacy of Sudhir Kumar Mitra in favour of this event to be of the pre-Chaitanya era, we face a lot of difficulty to accept this opinion.

8 female friends of Lord Kṛṣṇa: Lalitā, Viśākhā, Citrā, Indulekha, Campaklata, Rāngādevi, Tungavidyā and Sudevī.


142 The famous general of Bengal Sultan Suleiman Khan Karrani (ruled 1564-1572)

143 As told to me by Sailendu Bandopadhyay on 27.10.2010; though there is no such name in the available list of ‘astasakhi’.

144 Sebait: worshipper, manager of an endowed temple

If Madanmohan was really worshipped by Vṛndā then the image must have been extremely old, which seems to be quite impossible. Because, worshipping of a Kṛṣṇa-image was merely a phenomenon that started in the 12-13 cent AD. Moreover, the carving technique of the wooden image suggests it not to be dated before 15-16 cent AD (comparable with the wooden idol of the lord from Krisnapur/Kestapur, PS Magra, Hooghly).

It is said that the image was hidden in a secret place due to the fear of Kalapahar. However, according to history, Kalapahar was the general of Suleiman Karrani, who was the ruler of Bengal during 1565-1572 AD; and hence it must be an event of the second half of 16 cent, which doesn't match with the rest of the story.

If Thakur Vairagya has brought Madanmohan before the birth of Chaitanya Mahāprabhu – as told by Sudhir Kumar Mitra – then it must be assigned to a date around late 15 cent. And once again it's not matching with the last part of the legend. Because, if Dayud Khan has really visited the temple and met Thakur Vairagya, then it must be an event around 1576 AD – since that was the year of his defeat to the Mughals.

However, the wooden effigy of Madanmohan has a close resemblance with the 15-16 cent Bengal-iconography of 'Tribhanga-murārī'; and we should also stick to a date like that. Though, the image seems to portray a somewhat unique character – especially in terms of its facial appearance – which doesn't exactly belong to this soil. On the other hand, presumably the effigies of Balarām, Rādhikā and Revati, that portray almost the same tradition of woodcarving, have been added afterwards. In any case, here also, we were not allowed to take any photograph of the deities.

Now, these 300 odd years between 13 and 15-cent AD have left enough visual evidences – through the divine images mentioned above – in order to document the development of a possible school of Bengal woodcarving. On the other hand, they have also shown us how different sects and beliefs have co-existed throughout the traditional life of Bengal. These sects and beliefs range from the Śakti-cult and Brahmanism to popular beliefs and folk-Buddhism (on their common Tantric-foundation). The influence of Tantric-Buddhism and the rise of Gauḍīya Vaisnavism marked a great departure in the religious outlook of the Bengali folk. Altogether, it became a period of constant revolt against the conventional restraints of socio-religious ideologies. Chandidas, the great exponent of Vaiṣṇav Padavali, declared in the 14 cent:

\[
\text{“Sunaha mānuṣ bhāī –}
\text{Sabār upare mānuṣ satya, tāpars kicchu nār”}^{150}
\]

(Listen, O brother man, the Truth of Man is the highest one; there is nothing above it.)

In the mean time, there was also some iconographic development visible in the field of folk-tribal divinities. Three major pieces of the Mangal-Kāvyā tradition (assignable to c 14-15 cent) – ‘Manasāmangaś’, ‘Candīmangaś’ and ‘Dharmamangaś’ – along with a lot more to follow, popularized many of the folk deities and established them on the hieratic level; though, most of those images were used to be made of clay and natural pigment. But, as a whole, this particular era

\[\text{146 It is said that even today, all the devotional songs sung over here in this temple are either written or sung by Vṛndā herself.}\]
\[\text{147 see HJP, p 122}\]
\[\text{148 see fig 7 and 9 of ch V of this book}\]
\[\text{149 Vaisnavism, typical of Bengal origin.}\]
\[\text{150 see Mookerjee, Ajit. (1946). Folk Art of Bengal: a study of an art for, and of, the people. Kolkata: University of Calcutta, p 4}\]
\[\text{151 Mangal-Kāvyā is a group of Bengali religious texts (in the form of verses), composed between 13 and 18 cent AD, notably consisting of narratives of indigenous deities of rural Bengal in the social scenario of the Middle Ages.}\]
became an archetype of synthesis between the pan-Indian and the popular folk culture of Bengal. And simultaneously, it was also a time when the gradual preparation of the soil, for the upcoming flourishing of Vaisnavism in Bengal, was taking shape.

Towards the end of 15 cent, the signs of a renewed interest towards Viśṇu-worship were evident; as ‘Gaūrya Vaisnavism’ – typical to Bengal – started to generate some contextual vitality. But this time, the earlier tradition of Viśṇu-worship (c 10-12 cent AD) was converted into – as we have already discussed – the adoration of Jagannāṭh and Kṛṣṇa. As a whole, this major shift of paradigm was inevitably a result of a series of social-economic-political-religious-philosophical aspects, which deserves a separate course of study. Hence, we would rather like to limit our concentration in and around the world of visual interpretation and aesthetic evolution.

ADVENT OF ŚRĪ CHAITANYA MAHĀPRABHU (c 1486-1434 AD)

The year 1486 was very significant in the political history of Bengal. That was the end of Jalaluddin Fateh Shah, along with the Ganesh dynasty; and it was replaced by the Habsi Sultan Sahabzada Barbak II. But, the most important incident of that year was the birth of Śrī Chaitanya Mahāprabhu – the great Vaiśnāv saint – in Nabadvip, Nadia.

It was a period of political turmoil, which got reflected in the society as a whole. On one hand Hinduism was almost at stake due to several loopholes and limitations of their own; and on the other there was the Islamic aggression with its full might and vigour. Though, later in 1494, Alauddin Hussain Shah brought some stability on the political front, but the condition of the society didn’t change much; rather each day was getting worse than the earlier one.

In these circumstances, Chaitanyadev grew up as a well-known scholar in Vaiśnāv philosophy and religion; though this accomplishment could not satisfy his conscience. In order to gain more vitality and influence, he took ‘sannyās’ (religious mendicancy or renunciation) in the year 1510 and started working on reviving the ‘bhakti-movement’ in Bengal, as well as in India. On his journey, he – along with his close compeer Nityananda (popularly known as Nitai) – simplified the path of religion for the masses and used to gather thousands of devotees for playing musical instruments and chanting the names of Kṛṣṇa or Hari. He traveled a lot and, by the strength of his arguments, defeated several scholars of other belief and brought them in his favour. In this way, after spending most of his working life in Puri, Orissa, finally he passed away (or said to be killed) there in the year 1534.

In terms of mere numerical, Chaitanyadev has left only eight verses, known as the ‘Śiksāṣṭak’ (eight lessons), which summarize his teachings. However, his major contribution was no more as a social reformer, rather than a mere religious preacher. To be more specific, the movement of ‘Gaūrya Vaisnavism’ lead by him and carried forward by Nityananda and other associates did bring a renaissance that resulted in multiple perspectives in the life and culture of the Bengali folk. And this very change was reflected in every nook and corner of Bengal – lifestyle, behavioural pattern, dress-code, food-habit, music, poetry, art – so on and so forth. There was not a single area left untouched by the glory of this great movement. Following this, the art of woodcarving as a whole – especially in West Bengal – started to grow in profusion. At the same time, availability of quite a number of specimens widely advocates the practice of making divine images also – mainly in wood and other mediums.

152 Journey through the path of love and affection.
Bengali literature of that period bears a lot of approval in favour of the uninterrupted tradition of making wooden idols. For example, 'Brahmavaivarta Purana'\(^{154}\) and 'Brhadhrarma Purana'\(^{155}\), both originated in Bengal, refer to 'Suta's\(^{156}\) as a caste of mixed origin, who used to earn their living by carpentry and woodcarving. And to be more specific, 'Manasasamanget' by Vamsidas Chakraborty (written in 1575-76)\(^{157}\) has clearly prescribed 'Neem'-wood (azadirachta indica) as the only appropriate material for fashioning images of Śrī Chaitanya (popularly known as Gauranga or Gaur) and Nityananda.

In the mean time, the Śakti-cult\(^{158}\) was already grounded here with a very strong root, especially in the 'Rāth'\(^{159}\) region of Birbhum, Bankura, Bardhaman, Hooghly, Howrah and Nadia. Later, it flourished – in the early 16 cent – with the introduction of the Kāli-image by Krisnananda Agambagis, who was said to be contemporaneous to Śrī Chaitanya and the author of 'Vrhat Tantrasār'. On the other hand, along side Śakti-ism, the Gaurīya Vaisnavism also came up in an equal force and vigour, which finally resulted in multiple perspectives in the life and culture of the Bengali folk. As a result, a continuous conflict and convergence between the Śākta's\(^{160}\) and the 'Vaiṣṇav's\(^{161}\) became a regular occurrence in Bengal. However, this religious, philosophical, political and social churning became extremely useful in producing numerous pieces of wooden idols all over this region (especially West Bengal). And from this very point of departure, the tradition of making divine images on wood (the art of woodcarving as a whole) went on a full swing that continued at least for the next three centuries.

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155 see Panchanan Tarkaratna (tr). (BS 1314). *Brhadharmapurāṇam. Uttarkhandā, ch 14, Sūtra 61*. Kolkata. p 346
156 Also known as 'Śūtradhara's.
157 see *WCOE*. p 50
158 The Śakti-cult or 'Sakti-ism' is a denomination of Hinduism that focuses worship upon 'Adi-parāshakti' or 'Sakti' or 'Devi' or 'Pārvatī' – the Hindu Divine Mother – as the absolute, ultimate Godhead. It is, along with Saivism and Vaisnavism, one of the three primary schools of devotion.
159 'Rāth' region of West Bengal is the piece of land that lies between the Western plateau and high lands (bordering Chotanāgpur plateau) and the Ganges Delta. Parts of the districts Murshidabad, Birbhum, Bankura, Bardhaman, Hooghly, Howrah, Medinipur and Nadia constitutes this region.
160 Śākta: a follower of the Śakti-cult
161 Vaiṣṇav: a follower of the Vaiṣṇav-cult
In the 16-cent Bengal, the art of making wooden idols was widely influenced by the Chaitanya phenomena and it took a major role in determining the future course of aesthetic progress. And this very legacy was quite successful in maintaining its vitality at least up to the first quarter of the last century. Besides the dual images of *Krśṇa-Rādā* and *Nitai-Gaur*, images of *Mahāprabhu* himself and his other associates like *Advaita Prabhu*, *Śrīvas Goswami*, *Gadadhar Goswami*, *Abhiram*, *Uddharan Dutta*, *Yaban Haridas* and *Nityananda’s son Veerbhadra* were started to be installed in different corners. Moreover, as we have already said, the *Jagannāth-triadv* (*Balarām-Subhadrā-Jagannāth*) also became extremely popular; whereas, the prevailing tradition of making various folk-tribal and other hieratic – mainly Brahmanic – wooden idols were still in a full flow.

In respect to this very tradition of making divine images in wood, the ‘*Gaufiya Vaiṣṇav*’ movement resulted in many specific and significant dynamics.

- Establishment of *Rādā* beside Lord *Krśṇa* (not only in Bengal, but in Vrindavan also);
- Popularization of *Jagannāth-triadv* in Bengal;
- Deifying the mortal humans, like *Nitai-Gaur* and other associates;
- Popularization of Neem-wood to be used in making divine-images;
- Simplicity of carving and use of paint for depicting the facial features and other ornamental details;
- In case of the painting of those divine images – a combination of yellow, red and black became a general visual signature;
- A brilliant synthesis between the hieratic and the folk-tribal iconographies that influenced the devotees of other sects like *Śākta*, *Saiva* etc; and
- The divine figures were started to be carved nude – and then draped with real clothes, ornaments and other accessories, which are changed according to various occasions;
- Emergence of common people as patrons.

Thus, the wooden idols of 16 cent have introduced a significant and uniform school of Bengal sculpture, devoid of any pan-Indian hegemony; and hence, marked the introduction of a purely Bengali-idiom with its own aesthetic vision. Later on, this simplistic school of art was also derived by reflected in the works of other media like stone, metal, clay, paint etc.

**Kṛṣṇa in Various Forms – Single, Dual and Triad:**

We have already come to know that the renewed interest in *Vaiṣṇav-worship* became clearly evident in late 15 cent Bengal with the new form of *Kṛṣṇa-Gopānlā* and the *Jagannāth-triadv*. In 16 cent also, these two remained one of the main source of inspiration for the craftsmen of Bengal, especially the woodcarvers. Along with these, the introduction of *Rādā* beside *Kṛśṇa* became another significant contribution of *Gaufya Vaisnavism* and hence we come to see many of their dual effigies being carved and painted on wood.

*Rādā* – also called *Rādhikā, Rādhārāṇī* and *Rādhikā Rāṇi* – is the childhood friend and lover of *Kṛśṇa*. Within the *Bhāgavat Purāṇ* (also known as *Śrīmad Bhāgavat*, written in c 6/7 or
9-10 cent AD), she has not been mentioned by name but is alluded to within the tenth chapter of the text as one of the gopīs with whom Kṛṣṇa used to play during his days in Gokul. It is only the later texts, like Git Govinda of Jaidev (written in c 12 cent AD), where we find the story of Rādhā given in detail.

Beside this, a somewhat contemporary text, the Skanda Purāṇ (written in c 11/12 cent AD), has described the importance of Rādhārāni like the following:-

Thousands of gopīs
   ↓
16000 prominent gopīs
   ↓
108 important gopīs
   ↓
8 principal gopīs
   ↓
Rādhārāni and Candrāvalī, the chiefs
   ↓
Śrīmati Rādhārāni, the superior.

In the Vaiśānava devotional or Bhakti-traditions that focus on Kṛṣṇa, Rādhā is the lord's friend and advisor. For some of the adherents of these traditions, her importance approaches or even exceeds that of Kṛṣṇa. She is considered his original Śakti, the supreme goddess in both the Nimārka Sampradāya and the post-Chaitanya Gaurīya Vaiṣṇava tradition. Nimārka, founder of the former tradition, declared that Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa together constitute the absolute truth. Moreover, advocates of both these schools of Vaisnavism consider the mysterious nature of Rādhā's relationship to Kṛṣṇa as the reason behind the omission of her story in the other Puranic texts.

However, the connection between these two divinities is given in further detail within texts like Brahmavaivarta Purāṇ, Garga Sarmhitā and Bhṛga Gautamiya Tantra, where she is considered to be an incarnation of Goddess Lakṣmī. According to these literary sources, her connection to Kṛṣṇa is of two types:

► svakti-yā-rasa (married relationship) and
► parakiya-rasa (a relationship signified with eternal mental ‘love’).

The Gaurīya tradition focuses upon parakiya-rasa as the highest form of love, wherein Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa share thoughts even through separation.

But, unfortunately, though Rādhā's iconography was already developed through various literary sources and oral descriptions, physically it couldn't be finalized to be placed beside Kṛṣṇa before the 16 cent. It was Gaurīya Vaisnavism once again, which initiated the same through Jahnaba Devi – wife of Nityananda; and for the first time, the consort got his awaited place beside her lord in Vrindavan. At the same time, Bengal also started to celebrate this grand event through several renderings of this dual effigy of Kṛṣṇa-Rādhā on both wood and stone. What was developed and preserved merely in imagination now became visible as well as touchable; for what the emotional Bengali folk seemed to be waiting so long.

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**Madangopal of Bhaïta:**

It is said that Syamadas Acharya, the famous Vaiṣṇav saint, was the son of Sree Devi, the younger wife of Advaita Acharya (1433-1558). But some are of opinion that he was her disciple, not son. However, sometime in the mid-16 cent, Syamadas came to Motisar (PS Kalna) and established a 'Āśram (religious hermitage) in the jungle of Bhaïta, beside river Bhalluka (now extinct). There he installed a 2½' image of Lord Kṛṣṇa, as a boy of eight years, made of Neem-wood. After the name of the lord, worshipped by his father, he named this one as 'Madangopal' (see pi 13).

Another source says that Achyutananda or Jagadananda, father of Syamadas, was a friend of Advaita Acharya and used to live in Sindarkon (Kalna II). In terms of religious belief, he was a 'Śaiva'. However, after his wife's death, he threw away the Katā-image in water and started traveling here and there; and before leaving, he handed over Mohanananda, his youngest son, to Advaita's wife Sīta Devi. On the other hand, Syamadas – the eldest son – was 'Saiva' (worshipper of Lord Śiva) in belief; and being defeated to Advaita in argument, took his discipleship and became a Vaiṣṇav devotee. After that, he went to Vrindavan and came back with Madangopal to establish in Palsit (JL 39, PS Memari, Bardhaman).

The same legend says that the third generations after Syamadas were two brothers. The villagers of neighbouring Bhaïta (PS Memari) continuously provoked the elder one, Madhusudan, and finally he was entrapped to take away Madangopal very secretly and install over there. The younger brother, Harivamsa, came back to find the deity not in place. He was extremely sad and upset; until the lord himself instructed in his dream to install a similar image in Palsit once again. Hence, he took initiative and installed an exact replica of Madangopal in Palsit once again.

Today, it's really interesting to find these two identical twins in two neighbouring temples; though we have come to know that the one in Bhaïta is the older version.

However, the wooden idol of Madangopal is an eight-year boy, standing in a 'tribhahga' posture and playing a flute. The iconography is very common, while the carving technique has varied a little in order to portray the boy-image of the lord. Especially the delicate details on the face, along with the large eyes and a soft chin, give the sculpture a divine look. The carver's skills have been well accompanied by an extraordinary 'āgarāg' – with minimal but appropriate linear and dotted works on the face and palms. This divine 'āgarāg' is done in every alternative year, by a Brahmin-artist from Baghnapara, who are doing the job through generations.

In this connection, we would like to mention that the number '960' is inscribed on the pedestal of Madangopal, presumably, which signifies the date of its making – i.e., BS 960 (1553-54 AD).

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**Gopināth of Gopaldaspur:**

Gopināth is a small wooden image of Lord Kṛṣṇa, who was the ancestral-deity of Ramkanu Goswami, originally a resident of the village Khotte or Khatunti (PS Katwa, Bardhaman). However, sometime in BS 981 (1574-75 AD), due to some family-quaerrel, he left his village along with Gopināth (see pl 17), and finally reached a jungle at Kalna, Bardhaman. So, we can assume that the wooden idol of the lord was a rendering of mid-16 cent AD, if not earlier.

Inside the jungle, Ramkanu set up a shelter and started to worship his lord. Eventually, the local Zamindar Gopal Das came to know about the glory of Gopināth and erected a 162 On 07.08.2010 and 14.08.2010, I found Rādhāmādhav at Gauranga-pāryā, Katwa. (see pl 21)
163 see B:IOS. Vol III. p 170
164 As told by Nisith Goswami, eleventh generation of Syamadas (Palsit lineage), on 25.10.2010.
165 As told by Radhaballav Goswami, descendant of Syamadas (Bhaïta lineage).
temple on the same spot. From his name, the place was named as Gopaldaspur; though some are of opinion that it was the name of the lord ‘Kṛṣṇa-Gopa’ that the place has derived its name. Whatever may be the case, today’s temple at Gopaldaspur is said to be the fifth one, erected in c 1775 AD.167

The wooden idol of Gopinātha is only 1½' in height; while standing in the well-known ‘Tribhanga’ posture and playing his divine flute. As usual, his hair is gathered and tied on the top of his head; while the eyes are painted large and wide. The eyeballs are touching both the eyelids and hence creating a calm and serene effect on his divine face. The simple designs on his face and arms – along with the thick layer of paint – have given the lord a much homely look. It seems that Gopinātha is considered to be a small boy next door. As a simplistic sculpture of the 16 cent Bengal school, it’s a perfect specimen of the straightforward and easy life style and philosophical outlook of the local folk.

Śyamsundar of Hilora and Sarveśvar of Bajitpur:

More than 450 years ago, a beautiful wooden effigy of Lord Kṛṣṇa, named as Śyamsundar (see fig 8a and pl 18), was installed at Hilora, PS Suti, Murshidabad, by a Vaiṣṇav saint named Haridas Babaji. Legend says that a group of Rāmaṅta saints was carrying Śyamsundar towards Puri of Orissa. However, in the midway, the wooden idol seemed to be extremely heavy to them and they left it at Bajitpur, under the supervision of the Mohanta (chief priest) of Yadav Rāy (another image of Lord Kṛṣṇa made of metal).

Later on, some time in the late 16 or early 17 cent, Haridas Babaji was guided in his dream and he came to Bajitpur in order to take Śyamsundar. With his lord, Haridas started for Vrindavan; but when he reached Hilora, it was dawn and he loved the place immediately. Thus the wooden effigy of the lord was installed at that very place and started to be worshipped.168 So, we can presume that originally the wooden idol was made sometime in the late 16 cent; while it reached its present place on a later date.

According to another legend169, it was the wooden idol of ‘Sarveśvar’ (see fig 8b and pl 19), another form of Lord Kṛṣṇa, being worshipped at Bajitpur, PS Suti, Murshidabad – which was left by those Rāmaṅta saints. And the image of ‘Śyamsundar’ of Hilora – said to be one of the three brothers170 of Sarveśvar – is merely a replica of the same. It was due to some dispute with the

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166 see PPPOM. Vol V. p 70; also see Goswami, Ajit Kumar. (undated). Šrī Śrī Rākhāl Rājor Pāncālī. Gopaldaspur.
167 see Šrī Śrī Rākhāl Rājor Pāncālī. pp 28, 40
168 see PPPOM. Vol II. p 23
169 see De, Sunil Kumar & Das, Mohan Kumar (ed). (2012). Bajitpur Ṭhākurbarir Itikathā. Bajitpur. pp13, 14, 16, 17, 19, 22, 26, 38
170 The four brothers are named as Balarām, Sarveśvar, Śyamsundar and Madanmohan (see pl 18 & 19)
property, some time around BS 1168\textsuperscript{71} (1761 AD)\textsuperscript{72}, that Šyamsundar left Bajitpur and settled at Hilora.

However, both Šyamsundar and Sarvešvar are traveling deities, which have been described in the ancient texts as 'Calavera'\textsuperscript{73}. From mid-June to mid-November, Šyamsundar stays at Hilora; while the rest of the year he travels (see fig 9) in various places of Murshidabad, Birbhum and Maldah.\textsuperscript{74} On the other hand, Sarvešvar – along with his other two brothers Balarām and Madanmohari – use to travel throughout the year in the districts around. But none of their yearly traveling plan is fixed; it varies according to the applications submitted by the devotees.

![fig 9. The traveling-cart of Šyamsundar](image)

The divine images of Šyamsundar and Sarvešvar are very much identical in appearance. Both are around 4½' in height with a similar style of carving and colouring. The only difference one would find is in the minute details of ornamentations – especially the depiction of eyeballs and other designs on the face.

In this connection, we have come to know that the divine image of Šyamsundar has been carved on Bel wood\textsuperscript{75}, which is not used for this purpose very often. The other specimen we have encountered in this regard is the Kālī of Fartabad, PS Sonarpur, South 24 Parganas, which is also made of the same wood (see fig 21). It was indeed something exceptional, since in the post-Chaitanya era – as we have already come to know – Bengal had almost made it a rule for making all the divine images in Neem-wood only.

In any case, both Šyamsundar and Sarvešvar are standing in Tribhanga posture and playing their divine flute. Both of them have a well built physique, beautifully sculpted and painted in absolute black. Their eyes are large, with big eyeballs, depicting the inner strength and vigour of the lords. At the same time, the hint of a smile in the corner of their lips is exhibiting a soft and tender

\textsuperscript{71} as told by Sri Mathur Mondal, manager of Šyamsundar Temple at Hilora, on 22.01.2012
\textsuperscript{72} see Bajitpur Thākurbārīr Itikathā, p 17
\textsuperscript{73} The other kind of image is known as ‘Dhruvavera’, which remains in one place and be worshipped.
\textsuperscript{74} On 29.01.2012, we found him at the residence of Sri Sasthi Das at Rathitalā-pār (Parki-pār) of Sainthia, Birbhum.
\textsuperscript{75} see PPPOM. Vol II. p 90
expression. Hence, as a whole, both the wooden idols bear a unique combination of Vaishnav and Sakta outlook – at least in terms of visual interpretation.

Rāḍhāvallabhjī of Jainagar:

The famous Rāḍhāvallabhjī of Jainagar, South 24 Parganas, is installed in a temple near the market. The wooden idols of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā are placed on a wooden platform; accompanied by Lord Jagannātha, who is a later-inclusion by the local Mitra family.

Legend says that Rāḍhāvallabhjī (see pl 20) was originally worshipped by Basanta Ray, uncle of Pratapaditya of Jessore (Bangladesh). Towards the end of 16 cent, being scared by the Maratha invasion, Basanta Ray brought these deities from Jessore and installed in a village named Khari (PS Raidighi, South 24 Parganas), around 10 miles away from Jainagar.¹⁷⁶

fig 10. Remains of bricks of the old Rāḍhāvallabhjī Temple at Khari

Another source says that there was actually a very old temple in Khari, where Rāḍhāvallabhjī was being worshipped. Some are of opinion; it was originally established and worshipped in the 15 cent by Ramchandra Khan, the local tax collector of Bengal Nawab.¹⁷⁷ Such a temple has also been mentioned in the ‘List of Ancient Monuments in the Presidency Division’ (1896)¹⁷⁸, whose bricks are shown even today to the visitors at Khari (see fig 10). And it was quite possible; since after the visit of Śrī Chaitanya in 1510 AD, the cult of Kṛṣṇa-worship became a widespread phenomenon in that area, which could have resulted in such temple and idols.

In any case, Rāḍhāvallabhjī could not stay at Khari too long; as the place was deserted, full of jungle and a free zone for the tigers. And the concept of its migration to Jainagar, initiated by Pratapaditya, has been mentioned in the ‘List of Ancient Monuments in the Presidency Division’¹⁷⁹, as well as in an old text, named ‘Pratapaditya Jivan Carit’ by Satya Charan Sastri¹⁸⁰. Yet there are other opinions as well in this regard. Some say that Madhusudan Mitra (or Mukundaram Mitra?) of the Mitra-family, who came to Jainagar in the 17 cent, went to visit their land-property in Khari area and discovered the effigy of Rāḍhāvallabhjī. They brought the images and erected the temple at Jainagar,¹⁸¹ which seems to be more realistic in comparison to the previous

¹⁷⁶ see PPPOM. Vol III. p 179
¹⁷⁹ see Mitra, Asok. PPPOM. Vol III. p 255
¹⁸⁰ see 125BAJMP
¹⁸¹ see PBS. Vol III. p 255
legend. However, since any of these times, the wooden idols of Rādhāvallabh and Rādhārāṇī are being worshipped here, with their full glory and grandeur.

The 5’ Kṛṣṇa and 3½’ Rādhā are standing on double-petalled blossomed lotuses. The lord with dark complexion is standing in his usual Trībhanga-mūrti pose and playing the flute. Beside him, his consort is yellow; and she is holding one end of a scarf (placed around her head) with her right hand, while the left hand is kept down and holding the other end of the same cloth. Both of them are having the hair pulled together and tied high on top just like the traditional ‘bāul’s 182of Bengal.

This conjugate image of Kṛṣṇa-Rādhā is a rare specimen of Bengal art. Both the idols are beautifully carved and covered with thick layer of paint, resulting in odd undulations on the surface. In spite of that, the black complexion of the lord, along with the white eyebrows, large eyes and other ornamentations, has given it a terrible vitality and vigour. It seems that he is the supreme and the real protector. On the other hand, Rādhārāṇī, soft and tender - with her curved eyebrows and large dreamy eyes - has symbolized the eternal ‘prakṛti’. Both of them have small diamond-shaped Tilak on their noses, while Kṛṣṇa has the U-shaped one on his forehead as well. Hence, Viṣṇu himself (and his consort) has become Vaishnava - the supreme has become a devotee.

Rādhāmādhav:

Rādhāmādhav and Rādhārāṇī - this conjugal image is perhaps the most significant wooden effigy of undivided Bengal. Both in terms of history and aesthetics, these two are really something spectacular.

According to the most popular legend, it is said that Basanta Ray erected the actual temple of Rādhāmādhav, but his nephew Pratapaditya installed the wooden idols - along with the image of famous Yasoreśvarī183 - in the year 1559 AD (some say 1560 AD184). Afterwards, during 1575-80, Man Singha (general of Mughal emperor Akbar) defeated Pratapaditya and took away Rādhāmādhav - along with Yasoreśvarī - and installed in two different temples at Amber (today’s Jaipur).

Others are of opinion that Pratapaditya didn’t accept defeat against Man Singha, though he was finally overpowered by the Mughals. While going back, Man Singha has taken only the Goddess-image from Kedar Ray of Vikramapur, nothing else. Later on, sometime between 1678 and 1684 AD, while Mughal emperor Aurangzeb started to ransack the temples of Mathura, one of his own generals - King Jai Singha of Amber - took away some idols secretly from Vrindavan to his newly built capital. Presumably, Rādhāmādhav was also one of them.185

In any case, both the sources have agreed upon the bringing of Rādhāmādhav to Bengal by Pramananda or Premananda Goswami, who was the son of Nityananda’s daughter Ganga Devi. Towards the end of 17 cent AD, Premananda was traveling places and reached Amber/Jaipur. There he was instructed by the lord in his dream to take him back to Bengal. After that, how did he manage the king’s permission and get those wooden idols, have been well described in ‘Venu Gītā’.186

At first, Premananda took Rādhāmādhav to Vrindavan. But, on feeling insecure, he came to Prayag by boat; and then started for Bengal by the holy Ganges to reach Sankhesvari or Sankhai, north of Katwa, Bardhaman.187 There, he installed Rādhāmādhav and Rādhārāṇī in a Jagannāth Temple and started worshipping. (Still today, the Jagannāth or Dadhibānām of that temple accompanies Rādhāmādhav and Rādhārāṇī, see pl 21.) Gradually, the glory of this divinity was spread all over and on being requested by many devotees, Premananda (along with his family) started to travel various places of Rāth Bengal with all the three idols. From then on - just like Śyamsundar of Hilora - Rādhāmādhav also turned into a ‘Calavera’, i.e., traveling deity.188 Though

182 Bāul are a group of mystic minstrels from Bengal, constituting a secret religious sect with a great musical tradition.

183 Goddess Kāli, worshipped by Pratapaditya.


185 see ibid, p 365

186 see ibid

187 As told on 14.08.2010, by Vrindaban Chandra Bandyopadhyay, the priest of Rādhāmādhav since BS 1361. His ancestors have also been doing the same.

188 Till date, we have found three more specimens of traveling deities – (i) a pair of Nitai-Gaur, which gets worshipped in various places of Bolpur, Katwa, Ketugram, Nanur etc; (ii) Śyamsundar of Hilora, who also travels
unlike the former one, the latter has a fixed yearly traveling plan, which is described in annexure III of this book.

However, in the mean time, Premananda got married and had four sons. Eventually, the third one was separated from the family for some improper activity and the youngest one, named Anantahari, was not allowed to do anything directly related to the temple. The eldest Janarddan and second Madhusudan carried forward the responsibility of the deities and passed the same through their next generations. Today, their families are scattered in several places of Bardhman, Birbhum and Mursidabad; and Rādhāmādhav travels – along with Rādhārāṇī and Jagannāth – throughout the year and are worshipped in each of the places for a specific period of time (see Appendix III). On 07 and 14 August 2010, we found him at the residence of Goswami-family of Katwa, right in front of Gauranga Bāri.

In this connection, we would like to focus on another interesting aspect; i.e., the addition of a wooden idol of Dādhibāman along with Kṛṣṇa-Śrīdhā; for example – not only Rādhāmādhav – we can also see this in case of Rādhāvallabha of Jainagar (see pl 20), Śyamsundar of Durgapur (see pl 22) etc. Even we could find Dādhibāman accompanying some of the wooden idols of Mahāprabhu as well (see the one at Gauranga Bāri of Katwa, pl 11). Hence, this very matter seems to deserve a close attention from the scholars and researchers.

However, the 5’2 image of Rādhāmādhav and 3½’ image of Rādhārāṇī (see pl 21) are one of the most sophisticated and perceptual representation of Bengal woodcarving at its very best. In terms of iconography, it is the same old Kṛṣṇa-Śrīdhā; the former playing flute in a ‘tribhanga’ and the later standing in a ‘prem-dān’ posture. But, their form, the sense of mass and volume, the carving, and the composure – everything seems to be delicately handled, as well as sensitively manifested. And all these have been accompanied by some divine craftsmanship of the painter. Especially, the eyes, the lips, the designs on the forehead and the hands – everywhere we find a touch of minimal effort, with maximum effect. Undoubtedly, this perfect ‘āngarāg’ has added just the requisite dimension to this great piece of sculpture. Anyone – be a devotee or not – would be absolutely speechless in front of this divine accomplishment of the traditional artists of Bengal.

Śyamsundar of Durgapur:

According to ‘List of Ancient Monuments in the Presidency Division, 1896’, the wooden idol of Śyamsundar – presently being worshipped in a temple at Durgapur North (PS Baharu, South 24 Parganas) – was actually established in an ancient temple of Khari, a village in the Sunderbans, where Rādhāvallabha of Jainagar was also installed in another temple. But, as we know, in the mid-16 cent, the place became deserted and a free zone for the tigers. Hence, Pratapadipta of Jessore (at that time it was within his territory) rescued the wooden effigies of Śyamsundar and Rādhikā – just like Rādhāvallabha and Rādhārāṇī – and re-installed them in a temple at Durgapur.

Another legend says that some time in c 18-19 cent, the wooden idols of Śyamsundar and Rādhikā were retrieved from a pond nearby by the local anglers. They got these effigies, in their fishing net, and handed over to a local person named Tanu Ghosh. In any case, both the sources have agreed upon the antiquity of these wooden idols.

The present-day temple – not so old – is presumed to be built by Tanu Ghosh only, and today, his seventh generations are still living in Durgapur. But, the ownership of the temple has been handed over to the Sarkhel-family, who actually were the Sebālīts for a long period of time.

In this regard, there is another version, which says that the temple was actually erected by Rani Rasmoni of Janbazar (Kolkata), and handed over to the local Bose-family. From them, the ownership came to the Ghosh family and then finally – around 10 years back – to the Sarkhels.
However, the 314' wooden idol of Śyamsundar and 214' Rādhikā (see pl 22) are standing on a throne - along with a Jagannāth, which obviously is a later addition. The iconography of both the deities are as usual the same; with a bit of similarity with Rādhāvallabh of Jainagar. Especially the black complexion of the lord, along with the white ornamentations, and the yellow Rādhikā with her similitude in the hand positions - give us an idea that both the images represent the same school (Southern School?!) of Bengal sculpture.

In this regard, we must say that though these wooden images of Śyamsundar and Rādhikā have followed all the aspects of 16 cent Vaiṣṇav iconography, but still there seems to be a somewhat 'Śakti' influence into them. Especially the bulging eyes with the eyeball in the centre, along with the suppressed smile on both of their faces have given the deities a somewhat strange (if not cruel) look, which creates a terrific effect on the onlooker. It's really very difficult to look at them for a long period of time. Along with all these, the additional wigs have also added some extra and unwanted visual irritation and uneasiness.

However, historically, the southern part of Bengal is quite famous for its inclination towards 'Śakti-arādhana' - i.e., worship of mother goddess. Hence, it was quite obvious that their visual perception, especially on a collective level, would be guided or influenced by that age old phenomenon. On the other hand, the journey of Chaitanya Mahāprabhu following the route of Ādi Gangā has also created some ground for the cultivation of Vaiṣṇav philosophy and aesthetics in this region. Presumably, that's the reason why these two wooden idols of Śyamsundar and Rādhikā exhibit a unique and fine blend between the Śakta and the Vaiṣṇav School of visual expression.

**Gopāl, Rām (Balaram), Subhadra and Jagannāth of Bahiri:**

In the second half of 16 cent AD, Bibhisan Das Mahapatra – son of Padmanabha and born in the royal family of Kasidas – was presumably the general of king Mukunda Dev (r 1568-1600 AD) of Orissa. Local legend says that on being ordered by the king, Bibhisan came to win over the Muslim rulers of Hijli (on the eastern bank of Rasulpur River in the delta of Bay of Bengal) – said to be Masandar and Sekandar. But, somehow or other, he befriended with them and stayed back at a nearby place called Bahiri. Bibhisi (PS Mahisda, East Medinipur) – a cluster of three villages named Paikbar, Deulbar and Dihi Bahiri – was then a deserted place and Bibhisan started many developmental works there. He erected a temple (see fig 11) – quite similar to that of Puri (obviously not so big, and built with bricks) – and installed the wooden effigies of Gopāl, Rām (Balaram), Subhadra and Jagannāth in the sanctum. According to the temple-inscriptions, Dharanidhar Misra and his grandson Chakradhar, who unfortunately died a few days after that event, conducted this installation ceremony. Afterwards, on 7 Baisākh of 1506 Śaka era (1584 AD), Bibhisan handed over the charge of the temple to his Guru, Gadadhār Nanda.

Some say, that the temple was built earlier than the date of its' handing over to Gadadhār Nanda; while others are of opinion that the temple itself was built and handed over on the same date. However, the building of a lofty temple far away from Puri in honour of the Jagannāth-triad was really a significant incident. Because, at that time the sanctum of Puri was empty – after the invasion of Kalapahar in 1568 AD – as the re-installation of the ‘Dāru Brahma’ (the wooden lord) was not yet done.  

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196 This is a quite a common trend in many places of Bengal, where a Jagannāth-image is added with the dual images of Kṛṣṇa-Rādhā.  
197 see PPPOM. Vol III. p 355  
199 see Padya, Anukul. (2003). Sodhabhāti Bāhirī, p 2; but we couldn’t find any other reference in support of this.  
200 The capital of Hijli was in Bahiri up to 1628 and afterwards was shifted to Hijli.  
201 According to the first stone inscription, inlaid on the wall of the temple (see PBS. Vol II. pp 145-146; also see Sodhabhāti Bāhirī, p 19).  
202 According to the second stone inscription inlaid on the wall (see SB, p 19).  
203 see Behari, K S. (June, 2004). Gloom and Bloom: The Case of Jagannath Temples in Midnapure District. *Orissa Review*, p 63  
204 According to the third stone inscription (see SB, pp 12, 19-20; also see PBPPOM, p 355).  
205 "According to the researches of Herman Kalki the renewal of the cult at Puri could have been possible after Man Singh’s treaty in 1590." – Prof K S Behari [see (June, 2004). *Orissa Review, June 2004*, p 63]. Some are of opinion that the renewal was done during the reign of Ram Chandra Dev; on 17 July, 1575. (see *Sacred Geography of Puri: Structure and Organization and Cultural Role of a Pilgrim Centre*, p 32).
fig 11. The empty Jagannāth Temple of Bahiri

From then on, the descendants Gadadhar Nanda were looking after the temple and the idols. But, later on – after 200 years or so (c 18 cent AD) – king Durgadas and queen Harimati of Basudevpur (PS Balighai, East Medinipur) suddenly plundered the temple and took away the wooden effigies to their own. There, they kept the deities along with their own idols (they placed their ones above that of Bahiri) and tied them with iron-shackles. Since then, throughout the following centuries, they are said to be kept like that, unattended. And unfortunately, a few years back, those wooden effigies of Gopāl-Balaram-Subhadra-Jagannāth – bearing enormous historical importance – have been buried under the soil.206

: GAURANGA – THE FIRST DEIFIED HUMAN OF BENGAL:

Once there was a time when the Vaiśnava devotee of Bengal used to sing – “Je janā Govinda bhaje, se hay āmār prān” (s/he, who worships Govinda, another name of Lord Kṛṣṇa, is my life). However, later on, it became like – “Je janā Gauranga bhaje, se hay āmār prān” (s/he, who worships Gauranga, is my life). Hence, this journey from Govinda to Gauranga was one of the greatest contributions of Gaurīya Vaisnavism to the life and culture of the Bengali folk.

There are many controversies regarding the introduction of Gauranga-worship in Bengal. Some assign it to Duhkhinī Mā (wife of Jagadish Pandit), some to Visnupriya and others to Narahari Sarkar of Srikhanda. However, deifying of a human being – as it was the case of Gauranga – has been a significant accomplishment of 16-cent Bengal, which was inevitably reflected in the tradition of making wooden idols.

206 As told by Harihar Nanda of Bahiri (12 generation of Gadadhar) on 06.03.2010
In this connection, we must say that the very idea of glorifying humanity was emerged back in late 14th century and started to exercise a powerful influence over the mass psyche. It seemed that Gods are afraid of humans; and even a common woman like Maynāmatī compels the divinities to obey her.207 The vast folk literature – including ‘Gopīcandrā Gān’, ‘Mānilakandra Rājār Gān’, and later verses like ‘Kavikankān Candi’ and ‘Manasāmangal’ – lavishly describes the spirit of humanity, its pleasures and sorrows, love and hatred. In addition to this, the Vaiśnava Padavallis, Bāuli songs, the Purva Banga Gītikās (eastern Bengal-ballads) etc openly affirm the freedom from social restraints and free self-expression. Hence, deifying of Gauranga was not a sudden occurrence in Bengali intelligentsia; rather it was a matter of time to come.

After taking his religious mendicancy at Katwa, Gauranga shaved off his head and went bald with a thin tuft of hair at the back. Along with the saffron outfit, he took the name Śrī Kṛṣṇā Chaitanya Pūrī. For the rest of his life, he maintained and remained with that appearance only; which, quite surprisingly – though manifested in paintings – has never been depicted in any of his wooden sculptures of Bengal. Presumably, the Bengali folk were more associated with his pre-mendicancy look – especially the curly hair gathered and tied on top of the head – since after that, he spent the rest of his life outside Bengal. Hence – the known has prevailed over the unknown – the ‘Cāncār-cikūr’ (curly hair) has become more popular and has been widely explored and manifested all around Bengal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gaurgopāl</th>
<th>Śrīpāṭ of Jagadish Pandit, Jashora, PS Chakdaha, Nadia</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gauranga</td>
<td>Mahāprabhu Bāḍī, PS Nabadvip, Nadia</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Gauranga Bāḍī, PS Katwa, Bardhaman</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Nātai Bāḍī, Ekchakra, PS Mayuresvar/Moudesvar, Birbhum</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Śrīpāṭ Srikhanda, PS Katwa, Bardhaman</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mahāprabhu Temple, near Tamluk PS, East Medinipur</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gaurgopāl of Jashora:

Jagadish Pandit, one of the close associates of Mahāprabhu and Nityananda, was born in late 15th century AD – of Kamalaksha Bandyopadhyay and Bhagyavati Devi – at Gaughati or Srihatta, now in Bangladesh.208 Later on, they shifted to Jashora, PS Chakdaha, Nadia.

It is said that both Mahāprabhu and Nityananda came to Jashora (presumably in 1510 AD)209 from Santipur and stayed for two nights.210 When they were leaving for Nilachal, Jagadish’s wife – known as ‘Duḥkhinī Mā’ – became extremely sad and depressed; and kept on insisting them to stay back. Mahāprabhu consoled her by saying that after a few days, while opening the temple door in the morning, she would find a wooden log. Again, after a few more days, a ‘Bhāskar’ (sculptor) would come from the northern region (presumably Bardhaman)211 and introduce himself to her; hence, she should offer him food and get a boy-image of the lord sculpted out of that wood.212

According to the legend, it really happened and Duḥkhinī Mā installed the wooden effigy of Gaurgopāl (see fig 12a) beside that of lord Jagannāth, installed by Jagadish. Moreover, later on, the legend continues, Mahāprabhu came back to Jashora once and saw his own image by himself.213 However, unfortunately, history does not admit any of the Gauranga-images to be made...

207 ‘Maynāmatī Gān’ – see Folk Art of Bengal: a study of an art for, and of, the people, p 4
209 It is said that the event took place immediately after the ‘Sannyās’ of Mahāprabhu.
210 see MMKOSPP. p13
211 The style of carving suggests the same.
212 see PBS. Vol III. p 120
213 see PPPOM. Vol II. pp 359-360
in his own lifetime. Hence, it could be presumed that this very image of Gaurgopāl was installed sometime in the mid-16 cent.

fig 12. Details of – (a) Gaurgopāl (above), (taken from gaudiyaphotonews-gaurmandala.blogspot.com); and (b) the Śrīpāṭ of Jagadish Pandit (below), Jashora

However, the wooden image is one feet in height and shows Gauranga in his boyhood look – standing in an insignificant posture, with his right hand forward (check the Gaurgopāl image of Dvipa, PS Haripal, Hooghly). The image is almost covered with the dresses, creating difficulty to study and/or appreciate the carving skills; though, the overall approach is simplistic with the usual serenity of Bengal folk art. The eyes are soft and tender, but the use of wig – which is a recent addition – was not needed at all. Unfortunately, we were not allowed to take any photographic evidences (see fig 12b), whereas (surprisingly!) the images are available on the internet (gaudiyaphotonews-gaurmandala.blogspot.com)\(^{215}\)

\(^{214}\) see B:IOS. Vol III. pp 122-123

\(^{215}\) As on 14.03.2011
Gaurgopal of Dvipa:

According to the local legends, after the death of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, one of his associates – Srí Krisnananda Puri – came to Dvipa, PS Haripal, Hooghly. At that time, around mid-16 cent. Dvipa was full of jungle. Nevertheless, Krisnananda decided to stay here and himself carved out an effigy of Gaurgopal on wood, for worshipping (see pl 14).216

But, after his demise, there was no one to take care and the wooden idol was left deserted in the jungle. Later on, Visnudev Siddhanta – said to be a disciple of Madhu Pandit (who was again a disciple of Krisnadas Kaviraj Goswami) – got instructed in his dream and hence came to Dvipa from his own village named Jyot-sindhu (some say, he came from Vrindavan). Here, he came to discover the image in the jungle; and erected a Srīpāṭ in the name of Krisnananda Puri in order to start worship of Gaurgopal once again. This time, the lord became associated with two more wooden idols – one of Nityananda and the other one of Rādhāvinod (Kršṇā). The Zamindar family (Singha Ray) of Dvar-hata also contributed in this event; though the present-day temple of this Srīpāṭ was erected much later on BS 1292 (1885-86 AD).

Actually, this very wooden effigy portrays the boy-image of Srī Chaitanya, standing on a blossomed double-petalled lotus. The figure is balancing on the left leg, while the right one is bent to suggest a hint of dancing. His torso is bent a little towards left with an outstretched right hand asking for something. The left hand is hanging wide on the side. Over all, the posture and gesture of the wooden effigy suggest him to be engrossed in dancing and chanting the name of Lord Kršṇa.

Though said to be carved in the unskilled hands of a Vaishnav saint (Krisnananda), this woodcarving does not express much amateurism in its approach. Instead, the carving is quite simplistic and seems to be pretty close to the prevailing tradition of Bengal. Especially the asymmetrical eyes, the flat ears, the rounded nose etc give us an impression of nothing but the contemporary folk-tribal genre of Bengal sculpture. However, this significant specimen of wooden idol is repainted in every 2/3 years.

Gauranga of Nabadvip:

The wooden effigy of Gauranga at the Mahāprabhu Bārī, also known as Dhameśvar Mahāprabhu Temple, at Nabadvip, Nadia, is said to be originally worshipped by Visnupriya, his wife.217 The ‘Murārī Gupter Kārcā’218, written in c 1536-40, is one of the main advocates in favour of this belief. It’s also said that when the lord took ‘Sannyās’ and left Nabadvip, Visnupriya was broken apart in extreme sadness and grief. Being helpless, she started to worship a pair of his ‘khārami’ (wooden sandals) and tried to find consolation for herself.

One day, she dreamt of his lord instructing her to get his image made out of the Neem-tree, beneath which his mother had fed him with her breast. The same dream was also shown to Lochan Das219 – a Vaishnav devotee close to the Chaitanya-disciples. Next day, Lochan came to Visnupriya and together they called Navinananda Bhaskar of Dainhat (PS Katwa, Bardhaman) and got an effigy sculpted by using that very tree (see pl 10).220

But, we all know that there are no historical evidences in support to the worship of Gauranga in his lifetime and hence it must be an event of the mid-16 cent. In this connection, according to some researchers, the existing specimen today has been modeled after the statue – presumably of clay – installed by Visnupriya. They say that it was done in the late 16 or early 17-cent AD, when Veer Hambir of Visnupur erected the temple over there. But, all the scholars do not agree about the factuality of this very opinion.

However, today, we can find the 5’ image of the lord inside an apparently new temple, on an illustrious throne. About 100-150 years ago, the Kundus of Bhagyakul (now a town in
today’s Bangladesh) built this temple just beside that of Veer Hambir. Here, Gauranga is standing straight, with a bit fleshy physique that is typical to Bengal aesthetics. Both of his hands are bent from the elbow and stretched forward, depicting the ‘prem-dâri’ (offering love) posture. His hair is gathered and tied on the top of his head; the most common style that has been used widely in almost all the wooden idols of the lord. Today, his head remains covered with an artificial wig – which gives quite an odd look to this comprehensive specimen of Bengal sculpture. Not only here, in many of the Vaishnâv temples, we have found this lack of aesthetic sense that has almost become, not only a disease, but an infectious epidemic.

The eyes of Lord Gauranga, here, are wide and bright – glittering with intellect and compassion. There is a typical Vaishnâv ‘Tilak’221, with two vertical lines expanding from the nose to the forehead and resembling the letter ‘U’. This pattern signifies – according to their tradition – the divine foot of Viṣṇû.

Moreover, there is another speciality in this image that is worthy of mention. It is believed that Visnupriya has merged herself into this effigy and hence it is worshipped in the form of dual-deity – Gauranga and Visnupriya. That is why; this idol is always adored with a nose-ring and sometimes draped in a sâr222 as well. In any case, this wooden idol – worth mentioning for its smooth simplicity – is a fine example of the 16 cent school of Bengal woodcarving.

Gauranga of Katwa:

Narahari Sarkar (1478 – 1540) was born in a rich Vaidya-family223 of Srikhanda (PS Katwa, Bardhaman) and his ancestors attained the title ‘Sarkâr’224 from the ruler of Gaur. Later, Narahari became one of the closest associates of Mahâprabhu and accompanied him at Nilîcal (Puri). Besides being a leading preacher of ‘Gaumàgârîsm’ (the theory or philosophical outlook that acclaims Gauranga as the supreme), he was very famous in the Vaishnâv society as a pioneer in writing poems on ‘Gaur-tîlak’.225 However, his greatest contribution is introducing the worship of Gauranga and making his effigy for the first time; though according to ‘Murâri Gupler Karcâ’226 Visnupriya also used to do the same.

Legend says that some time in the early 16 cent, there were two brothers living in Kulai namely Dâyiari Ghosh and Kangsari Ghosh. According to ‘Rasakalpavalli’ – a 17 cent Bengali anthology of Vaishnâv lyrics, compiled by Ramgopal Das – they were the disciples of Narahari Sarkar. And it was Narahari, who visualized the form of the divine image of Gauranga and got three wooden effigies made by these disciples.227

On the other hand, ‘Śrî Narahari Śâkhânamay’ – the 18-cent Vaishnâv text written by Gopal Das – says that once Jadav Kaviraj of Kulai talked to Mahâprabhu himself and expressed his wish to adore and worship him. On hearing this, Mahâprabhu asked him to make his image in Neem-wood and start worshipping. So Jadav made three effigies of different sizes (small-big-medium) and donated to his ‘Guru’ (religious and spiritual teacher) Narahari Sarkar.228 However, these three are known as the ‘Nadia Nâgar’ (the gallant of Nadia) image of Gauranga.

Narahari was glad to receive all the three wooden effigies and sent the biggest one to Gadadhur Goswami (also known as Das Gadadhur or Gadadhur Pandit, 1486 – 1535 AD) of Katwa, Bardhaman (see pl 11).229 But, another source tells us that the image was actually sent to Vidyananda Pandit, a disciple of Gadadhur, who installed it in the Śrîpât of Gadadhur Pandit at

221 The Vaishnavas use to mark their foreheads – either as a daily ritual or on special occasions – with different styles of ‘Tilak’. This ‘Tilak’ denotes which particular lineage, or sampradâya the devotee belongs to. Each sampradâya has its own distinctive style, based on the rule of their particular lineage. The general ‘Tilak’ pattern is of two or more vertical lines resembling the letter U, which commonly represents the foot of Viṣṇu.

222 A ‘sâr’ or ‘sârî’ is a strip of unstitched cloth, ranging from 4 to 9 metres in length that is draped over the body in various styles. It is a popular dress for the ladies in India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Burma, and Malaysia.

223 Vaidya is a caste, whose profession was medicine. But from the Sen-era, they began to adopt other pursuits as well.

224 Sarkâr was a title, used to refer to anyone who was to represent government during the Mughal period; later on it crept into general speech and used to address a person with some political authority.

225 see PPPOM. Vol V. p 20

226 Also known as ‘Śriśrâvacitanyacaritântya’ (written in c 1536-1540), it is more a chronicle than an epic. Along with the other Sanskrit works on Chaitanya, it attempts to deify him.

227 see B:IOS. Vol III. p 136

228 see BKK. p 39

229 see PBS. Vol I. p 166; also see B:IOS (vol III), p 114
Katwa (also known as ‘Gauranga Bārī’). Though Gadadhar was a frequent visitor to this temple, but due to his old age he invited another disciple Jadunandan Thakur of Edia in order to help Vidyananda in the day-to-day works. From then on, the wooden idol of Gauranga Mahāprabhu is being duly adored and worshipped over here by the descendants of Vidyananda.

Whatever the legends say, scholars are of opinion that presumably the image was installed at Katwa in the third quarter of 16 cent. Some have opted for a more specific time between 1564-65 and 1574-75 AD, while Srinivas Ācārya was living in Vrindavan. Because, it was only after coming back from Vrindavan, Srinivas attended the one-year funeral of Gadadhar Das.

Today, we can see the 5½' wooden idol of the Lord is standing in a ‘samabhāṅga’ posture with his right hand upraised and the left one hanging downwards; while both the palms are showing the same gesture but in opposite directions. Actually, he seems to be completely engrossed in dancing and chanting the name of Hari (Krṣṇā). The image is beautifully carved with fleshly warmth and painted brilliantly with the typical combination of yellow, red and black. The eyes are stretched wide and the lips are showing a gentle smile on his face. Only the ‘Tilak’ here is of a different style – two diamond shapes, one on the nose and the other on the forehead.

However, keeping in parity with the religious mendicancy of the lord, this image should have ideally been portrayed with a shaved head. But, instead, we can see once again the hair gathered together and tied on top of the head, almost in the form of a temple top – the most common style ever visible. Because, to the followers of Gaumāgārīsm, this appearance of Gauranga was more acceptable, than the bald one. And fortunately, at least here, the usage of artificial wig was not visible.

Throughout the year, the wooden image is draped and decorated with various dresses and ornaments in different occasions; while the ‘artgārāg’ (the act of repainting) is done in every three years or so.

Gauranga of Ekchakra:

In the 15-16 cent, the Srikhanda-school of Vaiṣṇav thought had a great influence in the district of Bogra (locally known as Bagūra), now in Bangladesh; and Narahari Sarkar had several rich disciples over there. We have already come to know that he received three wooden effigies of Mahāprabhu from Kūlaī – in three different sizes. Among them, it was the medium one that he sent to Ganganagar (Bhagkola) in Bogra and got it installed by his disciple Dhanesvar Krod.

After being worshipped at Bhagkola for 400 odd years, in BS 1350 (1943-44 AD), immediately before the partition of India, the wooden idol was brought to Kolkata and then was taken to Srīpat Srikhanda (PS Katwa, Bardhaman). There, it was installed in the Sutikāgrha (the lying-in-room) of Raghunandan, one of the son-in-laws of Narahari Sarkar. Later on, only a few years back, the image was transferred once again; and this time to Nitai Bārī in Ekchakra (Veerchandrapur), PS Mayuresvar (or Moudesvar), Birbhum (see fig 13). From then on, it is being worshipped here with its full glory and respect.

The 3' wooden idol of Mahāprabhu is unique of its kind. In some of the other places also, we could find the lord in a dancing posture, but here it is much more expressive and extrovert. Especially the outstretched left arm, along with the raised right hand and folded legs – gives us a feeling of sheer restlessness. It seems that Mahāprabhu has gone a bit wildish; and completely lost in chanting, singing, and dancing. Though, surprisingly, even in a condition like this, he didn’t loose his charm. Such a dynamic manifestation of rhythm and liveliness is not very common in the 16 cent wooden idols of Bengal. Otherwise, the hairstyle, the face, the eyes, nose, lips, the ‘Tilak’ (‘U’ shape) and all the other details are very much similar with the other contemporary specimens of the same iconography.

We have been informed that the ‘artgārāg’ of any of the images at Nitai Bārī has not been done for the last 5-6 years; whereas the colouring of the Gauranga-image looks afresh and is very much different from that of the others. Especially the use of flesh-tint (instead of yellow) on the body, the overly rounded eye brows, the naturalistic eyes, pinkish tone on the palms along with

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230 see PBS. Vol I. p 184
231 see Ghosh, Bankim Chandra. (2009). RVTP. KM. p 73
232 ‘Samabhāṅga’ is the equal distribution of the body limbs on a central line (see fig 7 of ch V of this book).
233 see RVTP: KM. p 170
234 see PBS. Vol I. p 184
235 Raghunandan (born in 1510 AD) was the son of Mukunda Das, who was the cousin/nephew of Narahari.
236 As told by the staff-on-duty, on 13.03.2011
the linear details — everything was found to be more similar to its counterpart at Srikhanda (see pl 12). Therefore, we can assume that the image was coloured at Srikhanda for the last time and then brought to be installed at Nitai Bari.

Gauranga of Śrīpāṭ Srikhanda:

Among the three wooden idols of ‘Nadia-nāgar Mahāprabhu received from Kulai, Narahari Sarkar kept the smallest one for him and installed in his own village Srikhanda (PS Katwa, Bardhaman). From then on, the idol is being worshipped over there, by his descendants.

However, the 1½" effigy is portraying the boy-image of Gauranga (see pl 12). He is standing in a dancing posture (śamabhanga), with the right hand raised beside the forehead and the left one kept on the waist. It seems that the boy is completely engrossed in chanting the name of Hari. Here, the entire carving approach is a bit raw, but simplistic; as it lacks the sophistication of its counterparts at Katwa and Ekchakra. But, one must say that the painting (āṅgarāg) — which is said to be done every year — seems to be a little modern. Especially the use of flesh-tint (just like the one at Ekchakra) on the body, the overly rounded eye brows, naturalistic shape of the eyes, pinkish tone on the palms along with the linear details — none of these resemble the age old Bengali idiom for the same. Actually, the artists who used to do the job previously, Jeevan Bhaskar and Kali Charan Bhaskar, have become very busy and quite expensive too. Hence, now a days, a local artist named Brajagopal Sengupta is doing the same.

Here also, the use of artificial wig — together with the modern colouring — is disturbing the aesthetics of simplicity that has always remained the primary concern of the Bengali intelligentsia. But, in any case, this wooden idol of Mahāprabhu has to be marked as a significant specimen of Bengali art.

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237 Now-a-days done by Brajagopal Sengupta of Srikhanda.
238 As told by Madan Ray Thakur — descendant of Raghunandan (son-in-law of Narahari Sarkar) — as on 14.08.2010.
Gauranga of Tamluk:

Basudeb Ghosh (c 1480 - 1540 AD), a very close associate of Mahaprabhu and Nityananda, was born in a family of ‘Uttar-rāṭhīya Kāyaśṭha’s from Kulai. Dailyari Ghosh and Kangsari Ghosh – the famous disciples of Narahari Sarkar – were his step-brothers.

Basudeb was a bachelor. In the 16th-century Vaisnava circle, he was very famous as a poet and an expert singer. Along with his brothers Madhav and Govinda, he used to compose songs describing the tilas (divine activities) of Gauranga and Śrī Kṛṣṇa – by following the ‘Gaur-nāgar’ philosophy of Srikhanda. Even Nityananda would dance as the three brothers used to sing. Especially, Basudeb was highly praised and considered to be the singer of Vrindaban.

On his way to Puri, when Mahaprabhu reached the Prayāg-ghāṭ – a landing-place on the River Ganges – at Tamluk (East Medinipur), Basudeb was present over there. Afterwards, Madhav and he used to visit Puri every year in order to see the lord and perform kirttan during the Rath-yātra festival; while Govinda used to stay with Mahaprabhu over there.

After that, for some time, Basudeb went to Vrindavan; and on coming back; erected a Śrīpat at Tamluk, where he met Mahaprabhu for the first time. His brothers also took up their own residences at different places – Govinda in Agradwip (PS Katwa, Bardhaman) and Madhav in Dainhat (PS Katwa).

On 14 June, 1534, Mahaprabhu passed away at Nilācai (Puri). When Basudeb received the news at Tamluk – legend says – he decided to commit suicide by ‘Jivanta Samādhī’.

So, he dug a grave for himself and sat inside down to wait for the final breath. In the mean time, Mahaprabhu appeared to express his disapproval of this plan and asked Basudeb to make a boy-image of him and worship. Another version says that after the death of the lord, Basudeb was extremely upset and was traveling here and there. Finally, he reached Tamluk and found a boy-image of Gauranga made of Neem-wood. He installed it over there and started worshipping. Nevertheless, after taking care of the wooden idol – known as ‘Gaurgopāl’ – for some time, he submitted the responsibility to his disciple Madhav Das (or Madhv Das) and started to travel around the places of pilgrimage.

According to the legends, a Tāntrik (one who practices Tantra) came to Tamluk and started to create a horrifying atmosphere everywhere. In order to save the wooden effigy of Gaursagā from any kind of possible humiliation, the priest took it 4-5 km away in a place named Mirzapur and kept it secretly over there. This time, legend continues, Mahaprabhu instructed Syamananda Prabhu (born 1534 AD) in his dream and described the condition of his image. Along with his disciple Rasikananda (1530-1652), Syamananda came to Tamluk and re-installed the lord at the Śrīpat of Basudeb Ghosh.

However, this 2' wooden effigy of Gauranga is standing – presumably in a dancing posture. His face is round and his hands are a bit stiff and uneasy, depicting a typical ‘Mudrā’ (gesture) different from the other images of Mahaprabhu. Actually, this is said to be the form, how he appeared in front of Basudeb in his dream. It seems that with one hand he is offering his blessings and with the other he is asking Basudeb (or any other devotee in general) to get up out of the grave (of ignorance). And once again a big artificial wig has kept the head covered, hence distracting the natural look of the image.

As a whole, this wooden idol has not been carved with the professional skill and maturity that we use to find in the other contemporary specimens. Especially the heavy cheeks and the bulging chin and the disproportionate physique are really something that disturbs our habitual outlook. But, if we take a deeper insight, we would be able to discover that in actuality, this image has an amateurish simplicity that is typical to the folk art tradition of Bengal. Presumably, till then, the artisans of that region were not much acquainted with the 16 cent school of Bengal sculpture. In the later executions – dated c 18-19 cent AD – they gained much more vitality and impact, as far as the artistic sophistication and professional excellence is concerned.

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239 A mixed caste from the northern part of the Rārh Bengal.
240 Bengali devotional song in the name of Hari.
242 see RTVP-KM. pp 232-234, 236
243 Going to grave alive.
245 Syamananda was the disciple of Hirdaychaitanya, who was once again the disciple of Gauridas Pandit of Kalna.
246 as told by Syamundarananda Dev Goswami on 29.10.2010
Gauriśya Vaisnavism — in spite of several philosophical controversies — observed Gauranga himself as Lord Kṛṣṇa and Nītai or Nityananda as the incarnation of Balarām. Hence, just like the dual icon of Kṛṣṇa and Balarām, they introduced the dual-effigy of Nītai-Gaur and started to worship. This combination between the spiritual submission of Gaur and the love and compassion of Nītai became widely accepted by the Bengali folk; and the next few centuries experienced a significant number of wooden idols coming up with the depiction of this new concept of duality.

Apparently, the images of Nītai and Gaur of a particular pair look like identical twins; though they bear some marks of iconographic specifications as well. Firstly, the former should be on the right of the later and vice-versa. Secondly, Nītai should be standing on a blue lotus, while his partner should be on a red or pink one. Finally, Gaur is supposed to be taller than the other is — whereas in many occasions we find it otherwise. The reason behind this is not very clear to us as none of the resources could come up with any specific answer.

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Nītai-Gaur of Śrīpāt Atisara:

According to ‘Chaitanya Bhāgavat’ of Vṛindavan Das (last episode, ch 2)¹, Mahāprabhu — on his way to Puri — halted for a night (16 Phālguṇ, BS 916) at the residence of Ananta Pandit, a Vaiśāṇa hermit, at Atisara, on the bank of the holy Ganges². Together they spent the entire night in singing, dancing and chanting the name of Harī³; and hence, the place came to be known as ‘Kīrttan-khola’⁴. It is said that after the departure of the lord, Ananta Pandit himself installed a conjugate image of Nītai-Gaur and started worshipping. Later on, after the death of the hermit, the place became deserted and the wooden effigies were shifted somewhere else.

In this regard, we have already come to know that the image of Gauranga was never made before his death in 1534 AD, and the addition of Nityananda was a much later phenomenon. So, we can presume that these images were actually erected, sometime in the second half of the 16th century, by any of the disciples of Ananta Pandit.

Now, what was known as Atisara in the early 16th century, is today’s Atghara, PS Baruipur, South 24 Parganas. From a house nearby, the images of Nītai-Gaur (see pl 16) were discovered in the first half of the 20th century. It was only then that the Mannahāprabhu Temple, also known as Śrīpāt Atisara, was erected on the same place, where Ananta Pandit’s house (though there was no sign left) was said to be. Inside the temple, the dual-effigy was re-established and started to be worshipped once again.

Here, both the wooden idols are around 4½’ in height, whereas Nītai seems to be a bit taller⁵. Each of them are standing straight on a double petalled lotus, with their hands along side the body; only the palms are turned towards the viewer and showing a specific ‘mudrā’. Their hair is tied on the head and fortunately devoid of any additional wig this time.

² Today, the ancient canal of river Ganges — known as Adi Ganga — has dried and almost become extinct.
³ Another name of Lord Kṛṣṇa.
⁵ According to the legends, it was Gauranga, who was taller.
As a whole, both the effigies are beautifully carved following the 16 cent tradition of Bengal sculpture; and accordingly painted as well. It seems that the Brahmin-artist – who has done the ‘Angarāg’ – did a true justice to the sculptural art of the Sūtradhar. The eyes, the lips, even the 'Tilak' on the forehead – everything is skillfully executed in order to create a calm and serene expression. Probably, there is only one technical fault – the left hand of Gauranga is awkwardly long and somewhat disproportional. Other than that, the entire execution reminds us of the uniform school of Bengal woodcarving, typical to the 16-cent AD.

Nitai-Gaur of Simurali:

According to the legends, it is said that before taking ‘Sannyās’, Mahāprabhu used to teach in the ‘Tor’ of Purusottam Sanjay at Nabadvip, and Sanjay was very fond of him – both as a person and a teacher.

In 1510, when the lord left home, Purusottam Sanjay became extremely upset and broken-hearted. Afterwards, presumably after the death of Mahāprabhu, he received instructions in his dream to install a dual-image of Nitai-Gaur (see fig 14) at Nabadvip. According to the legend, he did the same and kept on worshipping the deities. But, we have already come to know that the worship of Nitai-Gaur can’t be an incident before the second half of the 16 cent. So, presumably, it was any of his students or disciples, who installed the images at the Śrīpāṭ of Sanjay at Nabadvip.

Later on, following several eventualities, these wooden effigies of Nitai-Gaur went to Santipur (Nadia) and then Habibpur (headquarters of Ranaghat, Nadia). There, they were being worshipped with due respect and honour. But, once again Mahāprabhu instructed the ‘Sebāl’ of Habibpur in his dream to hand over the idols to Sachinandan Das Babaji Maharaj of Simurali Nityananda Math (PS Chakdaha, Nadia). The ‘Sebāl’ did the same; and from then on, these two wooden idols are being worshipped here and the temple was renamed as ‘Śrī Śrī Purusottam Sanjay Śrīpāṭ Simurali Śrī Śrī Nityananda Math’.

Here the 4' image of Gauranga and the 3½' Nityananda are standing straight on their individual double-petalled lotuses – though we found them as wrongly placed. Because, according to the Vaiṣṇav legends, Mahāprabhu was comparatively taller and he should be placed on the left of Nitai. However, both of them have raised their right hand, showing ‘Abhay-mudrā’, and

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6 A caste of mixed origin, who used to make the wooden idols of Bengal.
7 Also called “Catuspāṭhā”; means school for teaching Sanskrit grammar, poetry, laws and philosophy.
8 according to the field note taken on 07.11.2010
the lefts are hanging down beside their bodies. Usually, this posture resembles the ‘Nṛtya-bhārī’ (dancing posture) of Vaiṣṇav iconography, while chanting the name of Hari.

These wooden idols — originally from Nabadvip — have been professionally handled and are nicely carved with some special characteristics. Especially the flat and elongated faces are quite similar to the Gauranga-image of Dhāmeśvar Temple, Nabadvip, which eventually was carved by Navinananda Bhaskar of Dainhat (Katwa, Bardhaman). Therefore, we can assume that during the mid-16 cent, there was a very positive interaction going on among various folk-tribal traditions of Bengal sculpture.

However, this conjugate-image of Simurali have beautiful large eyes, nicely chiseled nose and lips and appropriate painted details (like ‘Tilak’ etc) to prove the high degree of accomplishment of the sculptors of bygone days. But, unfortunately, here also we can find that the beautifully carved depictions of their hair, tied tight on the head, are covered with artificial wigs. Though, in spite of that, we can still discover the high quality emotional impact — an embodiment of compassion and empathy — that is reflected in these divine manifestations. Even a spectator, who is otherwise indifferent, may feel like crying in love and amazement.

Nitai-Gaur of Madanpur:

Thakur Kavichandra, one of the sixty-four associates of Mahāprabhu, was born in late 15 cent in Kalna, Bardhaman. Legend says that after the death of Mahāprabhu in 1534, he became extremely grief-stricken and remained very upset for the next two years. His son Madhav Thakur was worried with his father’s condition; and in order to help him to overcome, he decided to make a conjugate image of Nitai-Gaur in a dancing mood (see fig 15 and pl 23). Hence, presumably in the year 1535, he got those wooden effigies made by a renowned and skilled artist, and installed them at Kalna. Thus, Kavichandra was relieved and spent the rest of his life in worshipping them. But, we know very well that in reality, those conjugate images were never installed before mid-16 cent.

However, after the death of Kavichandra, Madhav continued to worship the images and later handed over the responsibility to his son Laksmikanta. But, after Laksmi died, his three sons — Haridas, Krisnadas and Vrindavandas — left Kalna, due to the Islamic aggression and torture; and took the idols to a place near Rajsahi (Bangladesh). But the place was very isolated and hence

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they shifted once again to a village named Tapsibari, near Jamrita (Pabna, Bangladesh). Later on, when there was peace once again in Kalna, they decided to come back. But, surprisingly, the effigy of Gauranga seemed to be extremely heavy and hence Krishna Das remained over there with the responsibility of the images; while the other two left for Kalna. Some are of opinion that they took Nityananda along with them and it was replaced immediately with a similar version (more than 350 years ago).10

The great grandson of Krísnadas was Syamdas, after whose death his sons Visnubari and VIPradas took up the responsibility of Tapsibari. Later on, through several events, the effigies were again shifted to Gohainbari of the same district, and both the brothers received the title ‘Adhikār.’11 But, once again, after the partition in 1947, the idols were brought to West Bengal – first at Beleghata-area of Kolkata and then at Srīpāṭ Madanpur of Nadia (PS Kaliyān). Here, in 1960, the effigies were installed in a temple, erected by late Hirenralal Adhikary;12 and continued to be worshipped with their full glory and grandeur.

Both the effigies, measuring around 3\% of their height, are portraying the lords in a unique posture of dancing on a lotus and singing; Nitai on a blue lotus and Gaur on a red one. Both the figures are perfectly balanced on their left legs, while the right ones are bent and the foot-tips touching the floor. Both of them are leaning towards each other. Nitai is raising the right hand, showing a mudrā with the pointer and thumb together, while the left hand is bent from the elbow, and showing another mudrā with the corner finger stretched.13 On the other hand, Gaur is lifting his left hand in a gesture of asking something, while his right hand is bent from the elbow and showing a mudrā with the middle finger and the thumb together. Their hair is tied tightly high up on the head; and this time they are devoid of any artificial wig. Their broad and wide eyes, along with the elongated Tilak and happy lips have given them an expression of being engrossed in performing Kṛttan – singing and dancing to admire Hari or Kṛṣṇa.

As a whole, the meticulous carving of 16-cent Bardhaman-school, along with the recent ‘argārg’ appropriated by Dulal Chakraborty of Nabadvip (in every 3-4 years)14 has resulted in manifesting the heydays of Bengal woodcarving.

Nitai-Gaur of Pal-pāṛā:

Mahesh Pandit, brother of Jagadish Pandit of Jashora, was born in Gaughati or Srihatta of Bangladesh. He was a very close associate of Mahāprabhu and was considered as ‘Mahābāhu’ – one of the twelve cowherd boys – in Kṛṣṇa-līlā. Once he went to Puri with his brother, but both came back to Bengal with Nityananda15 and continued preaching for several years. Afterwards, he decided to worship in privacy and hence started to live in Masipur – very close to Jashora – across the river from Jirat on the eastern bank of the Ganges. Later on, he installed a conjugate wooden effigy of Nitai-Gaur over there and started worshipping. Afterwards, when Masipur fell into the Ganges, his house – known as the Srīpāṭ of Mahesh Pandit – was moved to Beledanga near Sukhsagar.16 Here only, the divine soul left his last breath on earth.

After the death of Mahesh Pandit, once again, the banks of the Ganges fell into the river causing destruction of the Srīpāṭ at Sukhsagar. Therefore, his disciples moved it once again, in BS 1257 (1850-51 AD), to Pal-pāṛā near Chakdaha. The local Zamindar Nabakumar Chattopadhyay initiated this shifting.17 And finally, in BS 1334 (1927 AD) for the last time the Srīpāṭ was shifted; and this time to its present location (see fig 16) – in Pal-pāṛā only – on the land donated by Late Visnupada Bhattacharya.18 From then on, the images of Nitai-Gaur are being worshipped in the same temple.

Here, the dual-effigy is around 4\% tall and placed on a wooden throne. As usual, both the images are standing erect on their individual lotuses. Nitai is raising his right hand, with the pointer upwards; and seems to be in a preaching mood. On the other hand, both the hands of Gaur...
are folded forward from the elbow, depicting the posture of 'prem-dān' (offering love and compassion). Both of them have a flat and elongated face, the usual broad forehead, wide but calm eyes, sensitively sculpted nose and lips – and above all, an appropriate colouring. But, once again, the artificial wigs, covering their heads are really looking like something incorrigible.

These two wooden idols are, undoubtedly, fine examples of the traditional Nadia School of sculpture that is evident in the other specimens from the same district. For example, one can have a look at the wooden effigy of Vrndāvacandra (see pl 26), which was brought from Santipur – hence representing the same schooling – to Guptipara. Unfortunately, in Pal-pāra also, we were not allowed to take any snap of the deities and hence couldn’t produce any pictorial document of the same.

Nītai-Gaur of Krisnapur:

Raghunath Das (1498 – 1578 AD)19 – as we have already come to know – was the Prince of Saptagram. Later on, he became one of the close associates of Mahāprabhu and was lovingly blessed by Nityananda. He is the one, who sponsored the famous ‘Cīṇā-dādhi Mahotsav’ or ‘Danda Mahotsav’20, organized by Nityananda at Panihati, North 24 Parganas. In the later part of his life, along with the other Vaiṣṇavas, he went to Vrindavan. There, he came to know that the Kṛṣṇa-temple at Saptagram, erected by his father Gobardhan Das (mentioned earlier in this chapter), was destroyed by the Islamic invaders. On hearing this, he immediately sent his disciple Kamal Lochan Goswami, to Saptagram in order to rescue all the divine images.

Kamal Lochan came here at Saptagram and discovered all the divine effigies under the soil of the bank of river Saraswati. Actually, the priest had hidden them, in advance, to prevent from any possible humiliation in the hands of the invaders. Kamal Lochan re-established them in a temple, almost on the same spot and started worshipping. Along with the earlier images, he also

19 see Raghunath Das Goswami (a booklet published by the Śrīpāṭ)
20 The Cīṇā-dādhi Mahotsav (Chipped Rice Festival) or Danda Mahotsav (Punishment Festival) was the first pastime of Raghunath Das and Lord Nityananda. This astonishing event took place on the banks of the Ganges at Panihati. This Mahotsav remembers how Chaitanya Mahāprabhu mercifully reciprocated with his devotees by arranging, through Nityananda Prabhu and Raghunath, to provide a grand feast of yoghurt and chipped rice, along with various other nectar foodstuffs.
added a conjugate wooden idol of Nitai-Gaur (see fig 17) over there.\textsuperscript{21} Today, all these images are being worshipped together in the Śrīpāṭ of Raghunath Das Goswami at Krisnapur, PS Magra, Hooghly.

Both the images are standing on double-petalled lotus, whose upper row is narrower than the lower one. Here Nitai is around 3\textsuperscript{3/4} and Gaur around 4\textsuperscript{1/2} in height. The former one is depicting a Prem-dān posture, by folding his both the hands from the elbow; whereas, Gauranga is preaching by raising his right hand and the pointing-finger, while his left hand is hanging down.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fig_17.jpg}
\caption{Details of Nitai-Gaur of Krisnapur}
\end{figure}

However, the images are beautifully carved with their flat and elongated face, wide eyes, sharp nose and broad forehead; while they have also been painted with precise appropriation.\textsuperscript{22} Together they remind us of the similar renderings from Simurali and Pal-pāḍā; and hence advocates in favour of the Nadia School of Bengal sculpture.

\textit{Nitai-Gaur of Jajigram:}

Srinivas Acharya (c 1519-1593 AD)\textsuperscript{23} – one of the most important Vaiśnāv saints in the generation following Chaitanya Mahāprabhu – had a very significant contribution in 16-17 cent Bengal art and culture. His greatest accomplishments include the following:

- Along with Narottam Das and Syamananda Prabhu, he brought back the original manuscripts written by the ‘Ṣara Gosvāmī’ (the Six Goswamis)\textsuperscript{24} – including Chaitanya Bhāgavat of Vrindavan Das and Chaitanya Caritāmṛta of Krisnadas Kaviraj – all the way from Vrindavan. This was the very first book distribution party in the history of Gaurīya Vaisnavism.

\textsuperscript{21} see \textit{HJP.} p 50
\textsuperscript{22} We must say that the epidemic of using artificial wigs on such beautiful pieces of wooden sculptures is something ridiculous. The Sebāls must understand and accept this at the earliest.
\textsuperscript{23} see Das, Sri Krisna Chaitanya. (BS 1396). \textit{Srinivas Caritāmṛta. Jajigram: Śrīpāṭ of Srinivas Acharya. p 10 and \textquoteleft Ithās Prasānga\textquoteright}
\textsuperscript{24} They were the devotional teachers from the Gaurīya Vaiśnava tradition, who lived during the 15-16 cent AD and spent much time at Vrindavan in service of Chaitanya Mahāprabhu. They are highly regarded for their practice of Bhakti Yoga, and the philosophical presentations. Besides producing a prolific amount of writings on Vaiśnava philosophy and practices, they also uncovered many ancient and sacred areas in Vrindavan associated with Rādhā, Kṛṣṇa and the Gopīs. They also inspired the building of a number of temples on or around these sites dedicated to the worship of Kṛṣṇa-Rādhā. The members of the group were: Roop, Sanatan, Raghunath Bhatta, Jeev (nephew of Roop and Sanatan), Gopal Bhatta and Raghunath Das.
He converted Veer Hambir, the ‘Śākta’ king of Vana Visnupur and his entire kingdom to the Vaiśāṇav religion; which resulted in a series of terracotta temples embodied with the heydays of Bengal art and architecture.

He was the pioneer, who originated the ‘Manohar Śoy’ or ‘Manohar Śāh’ style of kīrttan25.

After coming back from Vrindavan, in the year 1581, Srinivas resided for some time in Jajigram (PS Katwa, Bardhaman) serving his mother; and presumably that was the time, when he installed the conjugate image of Nitai-Gaur and started worshipping. It is said that Veer Hambir built the original temple and dug a pond nearby named ‘Jaldhāla’. Afterwards, the temple was perished and a new one was erected by the king of Cossimbazar (Murshidabad) in BS 1324 (1817-18 AD). Later, it was repaired in BS 1410 (2003-04 AD), but once again the condition has become extremely poor today.26

However, the dual images of Nitai-Gaur (see fig 18) are small, but simplistic in appearance. The 3' Nitai and 2½ Gaur (presumably, their position has been interchanged by mistake) are standing on double-petalled lotus and raising their right arm upwards. It seems that Gaur is preaching something with the raised pointer-finger; while Nityananda is showing a simple ‘Abhay mudra’. Both their left hands are hanging down along side their bodies and the palms are held flat, parallel to the ground.

As a whole, the wooden idols have a childish (almost baby-like) appearance, which is not very common in case of Nitai-Gaur images of Bengal. Especially the stiff neck and shoulders, angular narrow eyes, the prominently carved upper eye-lids, bow-like eyebrows, the naturalistic nose and lips, short fingers of the left arms etc – altogether has given them a somewhat unusual look. At the same time, we must admit that together, they portray the calm and serene nature of the Bengali folk.

25 Vaiśāṇav devotional song.
26 see B:IOS. Vol III. p 309
27 As on 14.08.2010
Nitai-Gaur of Ambika-Kalna:

Towards the end of 15 cent AD, two brothers, Suryadas and Gauridas Sarkhel, came from Saligram of Nadia to the old town of Ambua, now known as Ambika-Kalna, Bardhaman. Here, Gauridas devoted himself in the proclamation of Vaisnav religion and gradually earned a very significant position – almost parallel to Advaita Acharya of Santipur.

It is said that some time before 1510 AD (according to Rabindranath Goswami of Kalna, said to be the fourteenth generation of Gauridas, it was in the year 1508 AD), Gauranga was going back to Nabadvip from Santipur; and on his way, he came from the village Harinadi to Ambua, in order to meet Gauridas. He offered Gauridas two gifts – an oar and a manuscript of Gitä, which are kept in the temple even today. Gauranga also asked him – according to Bhaktiratnakar of Narahari Chakraborty – to bring Neem-wood from Nabadvip and get a conjugate image of Nitai-Gaur made, for worship.

But, historically speaking, ‘Bhaktiratnakar’ was written in c 17-18 cent and none of the earlier authorities – like Murari Gupta, Vrindavandas or Krisnadas Kaviraj – have mentioned about Mahaprabhu instructing Gauridas to make his wooden image. There is no specific evidence – as we have already come to know – in favour of the installation of any Gauranga-image in his lifetime. Moreover, the addition of Nitai with Gaur was a later accomplishment of Bengal-iconography and it was never possible before the death of Nityananda himself. Presumably, as Jajnesvar Chowdhury is of opinion, it was an overstatement by Narahari in order to glorify Gauridas. In reality, Gauridas must have been inspired by Visnupriya Devi and Narahari Sarkar, and hence installed the conjugate image of Nitai-Gaur at Kalna (today’s Svaspur Mouja, Bardhaman). Later on, it was his disciple Hridaychaitanya, who has erected the Śrīpāṭ in the name of his Guru (teacher) at the same place.

However, these wooden idols of Nitai-Gaur are 5¼‘ in height and standing straight and erect, while both of them have flat and broad shoulders. Among them, Nitai is portraying a ‘Prem-dān’ posture with his arms folded forward from the elbow. On the other hand, Gaur is

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28 Later on, his daughters – Basudha and Jahnaba – were married to Nityananda Prabhu.
29 as told by him (said to be the fourteenth generation of Gauridas) on 03.04.2011
30 Presumably, Nityananda died after 8-10 years of Mahaprabhu’s demise. [see Sen, Sukumar. (1940/1999). Bāṅglā Sāḥityer Itihās. Vol I. p 236]
31 see B:IOS. Vol III. p 123
standing with his right hand folded and the other one straight down his side. However, presumably due to the recent faulty ‘ariharg’, their eyes and facial features portray an unusual non-Bengali feature. A critical study on these effigies would have made the point much clearer.

Unfortunately, we faced a major problem in studying these conjugate wooden idols of Nitai-Gaur; which has been named as ‘Jhānki-darśan’. It’s a typical ritual, where the doors of the sanctum are opened in regular intervals and that too for merely half a minute or so. Moreover, here also, photography (see fig 19) is strictly prohibited, even for the researchers.

: THE ŚĀKTA PHENOMENON :

The Śākta-cult – i.e., worship of the mother goddess – is one of the ancient religious practices of Bengal, mostly exercised in the folk-level; whereas the hieratic tradition took it up much later. Primarily, most of the images of divine mother were used to be made of clay and paint; and hence available depictions on permanent material are not very large in number. In certain cases, stone images are found, but wood as being a perishable material couldn’t sustain the ravages of nature.

However, in 15-16 cent, the renewed interest in Vaisnavism also indulged in the revitalization of the Śākta phenomenon that resulted in quite a number of specimens depicting the various forms of the mother goddess Durgā. And this time, wood was also being used as one of the most preferred mediums.

| Citteśvari | Cossipore (near Gun and Shell Factory), Kolkata |
| Kālī | Sardar-pārā, Fartabad (Garia), South 24 Parganas |

Citteśvari of Cossipore:

The temple of goddess Citteśvari or Citreśvari, named after a famous dacoit Chite or Chittesvar, is located beside Cossipore Gun and Shell Factory, Kolkata. Legend says that this goddess was the guardian-deity of a 16 cent village named Chitrapur. It is also suggested that Chittesvar himself carved the idol out of a Neem-wood and started worshipping in the same village. But, after his sudden absconding or death, the goddess was left deserted under the ruins for a long period of time.

After many years, probably in early 17 cent, a hermit named Nrisimha Brahmacharī discovered the wooden effigy under the debris and reinstalled to start worshipping once again.33 Outside the temple today, it is written –

‘Ādi Citteśvari Mandir
Citrapur,
Sthāpita 1610 Saṅ’

(Ancient Citteśvari Temple, Citrapur, Estd 1610 AD)

Obviously, the present brick temple (see fig 20) is not so old; and previously, there must have been any temporary shelter assigned for the goddess. Later on, at around mid-18 cent, the modern temple was erected by Prince Ram Chandra, son of Manohar Ray, the king of Seoraphuli (Hooghly).34

32 The ritual of ‘Jhānki-darśan’ is also said to be practiced at the temple of Bānkebihārī or Bankubihārī cf Vrindavan.
33 see PBS. Vol III. pp 171-172
34 see PBS. Vol II. pp 365-366
This four-handed wooden image of *Cittēśvarī* — considered to be another form of *Durgā* — is around 5' in height. The orange-bodied goddess has three eyes — the one on the forehead is smaller and the usual ones are large and wide, though not disturbing the serenity of the divine mother. She is holding *Kharga* and an unidentifiable object (coloured with yellow and red) in her left hands and showing *'Vara'* and *'Abhay' mudrā* with her rights. She is also adored with a high crown, similar to what we know as *'kirtī-mukuta'*, along with many ornaments like bangles, necklaces etc. Here, the goddess is sitting on a white lion-mount (*Hayavyāl*) — very similar to that of *Simhabāhīni* of Nijabalia (see pl 7), which has a face of a horse with a black humane moustache. The only difference is with the back legs that are somewhat over-stretched towards the back and balancing the body on the front pair; while the tail is pointing towards up.

Just like *Simhabāhīni*, goddess *Cittēśvarī* is also not accompanied by any *Kārtīk-Ganesā-Lakṣmī-Sarasvatī*. However, there is another image placed beside the goddess that happens to be *Dakṣīṇ Rāy* — the lord of the tigers, and the governing deity, worshipped in many parts of the Sunderbans. According to the tradition here, the image of *Dakṣīṇ Rāy* is worshipped at first, even before the goddess herself.

However, we were not allowed to take any photograph or to draw sketches of the idol — and even to stand for a long time — in front of the deity. But, in any case, we must admit it to be one of the most significant specimens of Bengal woodcarving.

**Kālī of Fartabad:**

In Barhans-Fartabad Mouza of South 24 Parganas, a 5’ effigy of Goddess *Kālī*, probably made of *Bel-wood*, was discovered from *'Pailān-pukur'*, a pond at Dhalipara. Around 200 years ago, it was retrieved in a very poor condition — as the left leg of the goddess was broken and separated, the image of Lord *Siv* was almost destroyed and the pedestal was vanished. However, this rare specimen of Bengal woodcarving has been managed to be re-installed, inside a temple at Sardar-

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35 Two gestures those are typical of Indian gods and goddesses. *Vara* means the gesture of offering boons and *Abhay* means the gesture of fearlessness and the granting of protection. (for details see ch V of this book)
36 It is a conical headgear covered by an ornamental top. The front side of it has a jewel or a central motif and the rest is covered with small designs.
37 As told by Jiban Krisna Mukherjee (descendant of the *Sebait*-family) on 23.10.2010
Even today, the goddess is being worshipped there with her full glory and grandeur; under the supervision of the local Mukherjee-family, who are looking after the deity for several generations.

Now, some scholars have suggested that this wooden effigy (see fig 21 and pl 24) might be assigned to the 16 cent AD, while the carving technique that has been applied on the same, tells us a different story altogether. Because, we have three specific observations in this regard:

- The presence of 'KṚṭa-mukuta' – carved out on the same wood as a continuation of the head of the goddess – is not a common feature of 16 cent Bengal woodcarving.

- The bangles (with beads) and other ornaments, along with the other detailing like hairline and all – even the third eye on the forehead – have been chiseled out meticulously on the body of both the god and the goddess; and that too remind us of an early date.

- We have been told that even the 'munda-mālā' (necklace of skulls) of the goddess is carved – and not added – on her own wooden body (unfortunately, it was covered by a sārī that was wrapped around the body).

We have already come to know that simplicity of carving and use of paint for depicting the facial features and other ornamental details was the main aspects of the 15-16 school of Bengal sculpture. Now, the characteristic features of the Kālī-image mentioned above are not matching with any of them; and hence the wooden idol does not resemble with the common carving technique of the 16 cent. On the contrary, the special characteristics that are visible here remind us of much older legacy that was practiced and excelled by the Pal-Sen school.

However, historically, the very credit of imagining the Kālī-image has been ascribed to Krisnananda Agambagis, the 16-cent author of 'Vṛhat Tantrasār'. So, it's quite difficult to assign a similar iconography to an earlier age. Hence, we believe that this wooden idol of Kālī needs a special attention from the scholars and researchers; as an in-depth investigation only could open up a new vista in this regard.

38 Jiban Krisna Mukherjee is the seventh generation after Nilkamal Mukherjee (the first priest of the goddess).
39 see Brhattara Garjār Itibṛtta. p 82
There are a few more specimen of wooden idols that could be assigned either to the end of 16 or
the beginning of 17 cent AD. In terms of content, technique and style all of them carry the same
legacy of the post-Chaitanya era. Each of them bears adequate testimony in favour of the newly
introduced school of Bengal sculpture.

<table>
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</table>

From the list mentioned above, we would like to discuss only about those that are both historically
important and aesthetically significant. According to our observation, these are some of the best
accomplishments of the new school of sculpture, uniformly spread across Bengal.

**Bankim / Bānkā Rāy of Veerchandrapur:**

There are several prevailing legends regarding the installation of the wooden idol of lord Kṛṣṇa —
known as ‘Bankim Rāy’ or ‘Bānkā Rāy’ — at Veerchandrapur, PS Mayuresvar/ Moudesvar, Birbhum.
Some say that it was Nityananda himself, who initiated the worship of this deity ⁴⁰; whereas there are
others advocating in favour of his son Veerbhadra or Veerchandra ⁴¹. However, today we can find
Bānkā Rāy being worshipped in an 18-cent ‘afcala’ temple that must have been erected afterwards.

In Bengali, the word ‘Bankim’ or ‘Bānkā’ means someone or something that is bent; and it
becomes evident why this image of Kṛṣṇa has been named so. The 2½ wooden idol is almost
bent like a bow and yet perfectly balanced in his ‘Tribhanga-mūrta’ posture (see pl 25). The
elongated eyes and other facial features have been painted in such a way — on his black complexion
— that it reminds us the excellence of Śyāmsundar of Durgapur (PS Baharu, South 24 Parganas;
see pl 22). Especially, the naturalistic eyes — with the big eyeball in the centre — along with the
suppressed smile on the lips have given Bānkā Rāy a somewhat strange (if not cruel) look, which
creates a terrific effect on the onlooker. It’s really very difficult to stare at the deity for a long period
of time.

However, the divine image is lavishly decorated with various homely ornaments and
dress materials. Though, once again, an artificial wig covering the actual hairstyle of the lord has
added a pinch of irritation to this visual splendour. Yet after that, we have to accept that in the entire
scenario of Bengal woodcarving, Bānkā Rāy is undoubtedly a remarkable achievement.

Here, the lord is accompanied by images of Basudha (Veerbhadra’s mother) and
Jahnaba (stepmother) — being worshipped as Rādhikā and Lalitā — that have been added later on.
Among them, the 2’ image of Basudha is made out of wood, whereas Jahnaba is made of
‘Aṣṭadhātu’.

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⁴⁰ as told by Sandip Goswami (said to be one of the 15th generations of Nityananda-lineage) of Veerchandrapur, as
on 13.03.2011
Venugopal of Asutosh Museum:

The wooden effigy of Venugopal, presently at the disposal of Asutosh Museum, Kolkata (AM 2005/1), was actually discovered from Kansat, Maldah. There, it was found floating on the Mahananda river and hence it's difficult to know where exactly it was actually installed.\textsuperscript{42}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{fig22.jpg}
\caption{Venugopal from Kansat}
\end{figure}

There is an apparent confusion with the dating of this valuable specimen. Some say that it should be dated to the 16 cent\textsuperscript{43}; whereas others assign it to the 17. One of the sources has suggested it – though not correctly, we suppose – to be a contribution of the 15 cent\textsuperscript{44}; while the Museum display-card advocates for 18\textsuperscript{45}. In this regard, we are of opinion that a safer assumption for this specimen would be either late 16 or early 17 cent AD.

However, the sculpture in-the-round (see fig 22), measuring 139.70 x 35.56 cm, is made of Neem-wood, showing Lord Krsna, standing in the usual 'Tribhanga'-posture playing a flute. Unfortunately, today, his right hand is broken away and the flute is also missing.

\textsuperscript{42} see BKK. p 39
\textsuperscript{43} see Santra, Tarapada. (27.10.1972) Bāṅglār Sanskriti Cinā O Bāṅglār Samgrahasālā. Paścimbanga. p 231; also see BKK. p 37
\textsuperscript{44} see the description of pl 69 – Mode, Heinze (ed). (1973). Great Centres of Art: Calcutta. Bombay: Taraporevala.
\textsuperscript{45} As on 17.06.2010
This life-size image of young *Krṣṇā* is presently unadorned and naked; hence providing us a better view of the late medieval technique of Bengal woodcarving. We can see that by juxtaposing the various planes with forward movements of angular limbs, the sculptor has created a real masterpiece. The mass and volume, along with the softness of the carving details— together have characterized it by a sensuous blend and gliding linearism. The way, the rural craftsman of Bengal has utilized the grain and texture of the wood, is really something to be proud of.

Naturally, this precious possession of Asutosh Museum has already gained an international repute. In the year 1948, it went to an exhibition at Barlington House in London, where it has been highly praised by sculptors like Epstein and Dobson. In this regard, Heinze Mode has rightly said: "We find here significant evidence of India having anticipated, five hundred years ago, the contemporary sculptural technique of Epstein and Henry Moore." \(^{46}\)

**Jagannāṭh-triad of Guptipara:**

During the second half of Akbar's reign (r 1556-1605 AD); Satyadev Saraswati—a saint of the *Daśanāmī Saiva* sect\(^{48}\)—came to Guptipara from the southern region of India.\(^{49}\) On being instructed in his dream, he went to Santipur; and from a house there, he brought *Vṛnda vacandra* (see pl 28)—a wooden idol of Lord *Krṣṇā*—across the river and started worshipping in the *Krṣṇābāṭī* forest, near Guptipara (JL 9, PS Balagarh, Hooghly).

In the mean time, Bisweswar Ray—one of the disciples of Satyadev—erected a shrine of Chaitanyadev in a place near *Krṣṇābāṭī*. Later on, *Vṛnda vacandra* was also shifted to the same place under a temporary shelter; and thus, the 'Guptipara Math'—also known as *Vṛnda vacandra Math*—was founded. In this process, Bisweswar donated all his property for the cause. Later on, presumably in the late 16 or early 17 cent, Satyadev installed another remarkable piece of woodcarving, depicting the *Jagannāṭh-triad* (see pl 27), in the same shrine of *Vṛnda vacandra*.

Historically, the permanent temple of *Vṛnda vacandra*—as well as the *Jagannāṭh-triad*—came up much later, and there are differences regarding the date of its construction. Some say, King Hariserendra Ray of Seoraphuli (Hooghly) built it towards the end of the 18 cent.\(^{50}\) Contrarily, others insist on its erection to be dated on 1810 AD, by Ganganarayan Sarkar of Bagbazar, Kolkata.\(^{51}\) And still there are some, who are of opinion that Ganganarayn built this temple, but in 1838 AD.\(^{52}\)

However, today the triad-image of *Balarām-Subhadrā-Jagannāṭh* has been placed right behind *Vṛnda vacandra*, on a high niche. And there are quite a few remarkable aspects in this unique specimen of wooden trinity:

- Usually, *Balarām* and *Jagannāṭh* use to have short stump-like arms projecting forward horizontally from their ears, while Subhadra is deprived of them. But here, both the brothers have prominent fingers in their hands, showing a specific *mudrā*.

- The organic shape of the faces, along with reference of ears and flowers on the top of their heads is not something similar to the source of Orissa.

- In the depiction of almost circular eyes with a naturalistic outline, there seems to be a fine blend between the Orissa and Bengal school of sculpture.

- The naturalistic outline of the nose and the lips are also not something very common in appearance.

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\(^{46}\) see (27.10.1972). *Paścimbanga*. p 231

\(^{47}\) see the description of pl 69 – Mode, Heinze (ed). (1973). *GCOAC*

\(^{48}\) It's a religious sect found by Sankaracharya.

\(^{49}\) In ‘*Candimangal*’ of Mukundaram Chakraborty (written in c 1600 AD), we get the name of Guptipara village, situated on the western bank of Bhagirathi river.

\(^{50}\) see *PPPOM*. Vol II. p 566

\(^{51}\) see *PBS*. Vol II. p 272

\(^{52}\) see *HJOBS*. Vol II. pp 945-947
Hence, we must say that these wooden idols of 2½ Balaram, 2 Subhadrā and the 3½ Jagannāth are exceptional and locale in character. The beautiful carving has been aptly accompanied by the *ANGERD* done in recent times, following the traditional style of execution. As a whole, it should be considered as a great accomplishment of an age old tradition.

**Jaycandr of Jainagar:**

Legend says that during the 16–17 cent — though others put the date as mid-17 cent — Gunananda Motilal, founder of the Motilal-family came to Jainagar, South 24 Parganas. Actually, he started from his residence of Vikrampur of Jessore, Bangladesh, and traveling by boat with the family, heading towards Gaṅgā Sāgar. In the mid-way, they stopped at a place named 'Rajār Gaṅgā' in Jainagar. At night, Gunananda received instruction in his dream and the next morning discovered — beneath a 'Baku' tree, inside the jungle nearby — a small stone image of Jaycandr. He installed the goddess over there and accompanied the image with a big wooden version of the same goddess, carved out of that very Baku tree (see pl 28).

In this regard, there is another version that tells us a different story. According to the information collected by Brajagopal Motilal (descendant of the Motilal-family) — more than 100 years before Gunananda’s visit, his ancestors already came to this place (Rainagar) and Jaycandr was their family-deity. In the great flood of 1594, the Sunderbans became waterlogged and Rainagar turned into a deserted place. Hence, it was that family-goddess of the Motilal-family only that was retrieved later on (during the 16–17 cent) by Gunananda and re-installed for worshipping.

However, both the images of Jaycandr — stone and wood — installed by Gunananda were kept in a thatched-hut. Afterwards, someone from the famous Srimani-family of Kolkata erected the present day temple, which has been repaired and renovated several times.

Today, we can find that in the central one of the three-roomed temple, Goddess Jaycandr is placed on a wooden throne above a high platform. She is 3½ in height and is standing straight on a double-petalled lotus. The two armed goddess, with her golden glow, has three eyes — the one on the forehead is smaller, while the normal pair is big and wide. She is wearing illustrious ornaments on her wrists and arms, while showing the ‘Vara’ and ‘Abhay mudrās. It’s really surprising how such an image with enormous vitality can still carry a soft, tender and serene look.

Thus, by comparing with the other similar renderings of the same area — like Viśalakṣī of Baruipur (see pl 43) and Mahāmāyā of Sonarpur PS (see pl 42) — presumably we would consider this wooden effigy to be a perfect representation of what we may identify as the Southern School of Bengal woodcarving.

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**SEVENTEENTH CENTURY: THE VAIŚNĀV LEGACY AND BEYOND**

The Gaurīya Vaiśnāv movement, led by Śrī Chaitanya Mahāprabhu, was carried forward by the ‘Śaṭa Gosvāmī’ of Vrindavan and ‘Dvādaś Gopa’ of Bengal. Moreover, there were successors like

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53 see PBS. Vol III. p 255
54 see PPPOM. Vol III. p 177
55 Sagar Island (also known as Gaṅgā Sāgar) lies on the continental shelf of Bay of Bengal and is a famous Hindu pilgrim place. Every year, on the day of ‘Makar Samkranti’ (mid of January), thousands of devotees gather here to take a holy dip in the confluence of Gaṅgā and offer pujā in the Kapil Muni Temple.
56 Baku (Spanish Cherry) is a large and handsome tree well known for its fragrant flowers.
57 A form of the mother goddess Candi.
58 ‘Dvādaś Gopa’ — according to Vaiśnāv philosophy — is the twelve cowherd boys who came down with Balaram, when he descended as Nityananda. There names are Šrīdām > Abhiram Thakur; Śudām > Sundarananda Thakur;
Srinivas Acharya, Narottam Das and Syamananda Prabhu — who took training in Vrindavan and came back to Bengal to spread the message of Mahāprabhu. Srinivas took the charge of Rāth Bengal, while Narottam went to the east and Syamananda looked after the Medinipur region.

Afterwards, the grand festival — organized in Śaka 1504/1505 (1582/1583 AD) at the Residence of King Santosh Datta of Kheturi (Garerghat) in Rajshahi, Bangladesh — was an extraordinary effort and a very important step towards developing a unified concept of Gaūḍyā Vaisnavism. Naturally, it resulted indeed in the revitalization of the very legacy of making wooden idols in Bengal. Narottam himself established six deities at Kheturi: Gauranga and Visnupriya, Vallabhiṅkānta, Brajamohan, Śrī Kṛṣṇā, Rādhākānta and Rādhāmohan; though we do not have any specific information whether any or all of them were made of wood or not. In addition to that, at present (see fig 23), no sign of antiquity — both in terms of architecture and sculpture — could be found over there at Kheturi. Only a few wooden idols, besides the metal and stone ones, are there that could hardly be pushed back to late 19 cent AD.

However, 17 cent witnessed a never-before overflow of making divine images in wood. Even the Islamic rulers of Bengal couldn’t, or didn’t, intervene to stop or somehow reduce this religious, as well as aesthetic venture of the Bengali folk. Hence, the making of the wooden effigies of Jagannāth-triad, Kṛṣṇā-Rādhā, Nīlīnī-Gaur and the other Vaiṣṇav associates were continued in a full swing.

On the other hand, the 16-cent Śākta-movement, initiated by Krisnananda Agambagis, also produced some significant result in the form of goddess Kālī. And beside this, the age-old phenomena of various folk-tribal and other hieratic traditions were, as usual, continuing in various degrees. Even the ancient deities like Caṇḍī and Maṇḍārā were started to be manifested on

fig 23. The temple complex at Kheturi: as it is today

Vasudāmā > Dhananjay Pandit; Subal > Gauridas Pandit; Mahābal > Kamalakar Pipplai; Subāhu > Uddhanar Dutta; Mahābhānu > Mahesh Pandit; Stokakerśīna > Purusottam Das; Dāma > Nagar Purusottam; Arjun > Paramesvar Das; Lavanga > Kaliya Krishna Das; and Keśumōṣava > Srīdhar.
59 The wooden idol of Gauranga of Tamluk (installed by Basudeb Ghosh) was re-installed by Syamananda only.
60 see Śrī Śrī Srinivas Carīṭāṁra. p 10 and Ithās Prasanga
61 see Śrī Śrī Nityananda Janmasthān: Ekchakra Paricay. p 6
62 locally known as ‘Khetur’
64 see ibid
65 There is a Viṣṇu-image in stone, assignable to the Pal-Sen era.
Rākhāl Rāj of Gopaldaspur:

We have already come to know that sometime in BS 981 (1574-75 AD) Ramkanu Goswami, originally a resident of Khotte or Khatunti (PS Katwa, Bardhaman), left his village along with their family-deity Gopināth, and after traveling places finally reached Gopaldaspur, PS Kalna, Bardhaman. There, he set up a shelter and started to worship his lord. Afterwards, the first temple was erected by the local Zamindar Gopal Das and today's temple at Gopaldaspur is said to be the fifth one, erected in c 1775 AD.

However, Ramkanu was living a happy life with his family; while suddenly his youngest son died. He became extremely sad and kept on praying in front of Gopināth and finally, decided to give up this place and go to Vrindavan. However, Lord Gopināth instructed him in his dream—as legend says—and asked him to stay back. It was also said by the lord that a piece of 'Neem' wood would come floating by the canal beside named Yamuna (a branch of the river Gangur), now converted to a mere pond, and a boy-artisan of Baghnapara (PS Kalna) would carve an idol similar to Radhā-Kantra of Vrindavan.\textsuperscript{66}

The next day, the same thing happened and Ramkanu discovered the log of Neem-wood floating on the water. He went to Baghnapara and brought the five-year-old Mahadev, who carved out the beautiful image of Rakhal Raj (see pi 17). Though the story is apparently difficult to believe, but—in any case—the wooden idol that we see today is really something praiseworthy.

The 4½' wooden image of Rākhāl Rāj—depicted in the form of a cowherd—is standing straight and erect. His right hand is hanging down—in the posture of holding a 'Pāncān or 'Pāncnī (stick used for driving the cows)—while the left arm is folded upwards from the elbow as if asking for something. The rest is very common: the tied-up hair, wide eyes with filled in eyeballs, a Vaiśravaṇ Tilak and the smiling lips—everything is very much familiar to us. The only uncommon thing lies in Lord Krishna being depicted in this very form, which is not often seen.

In this regard, we must admit that the iconographic uniqueness of Rākhāl Rāj did not lead to a formal excellence, and its form is nowhere different from the contemporary executions of Gauranga or Nityananda. If only the complexion of the body is changed to yellow, the entire look would change very easily. But, even after that, we must say that it's a fine example of 17 cent accomplishment in terms of the wooden idol tradition of Bengal.

Śarabhuj Nītai-Gaur from Tejpal:

The wooden effigies of Nītai-Gaur—both manifested in the 'Śarabhuj'\textsuperscript{67} form—were originally installed in a stone built temple at Tejpal, near Visnupur, Bankura. In the year 1672 AD (978 Malla-

\textsuperscript{66} see PPPOM. Vol 5. pp 70-71

\textsuperscript{67} One, who has six hands.
era), the shrine was erected by King Veer Singha. Later on, sometime in the early 20th century, the temple became deserted and Virendra Nath Singha of the royal family donated both the images to Jogesh Chandra Purakriti Bhavan, Visnupur. But, after his death, his descendants have taken them back from the Museum and kept at the family-residence of late Virendra Nath, inside the Rājbarī premises. Today also, the wooden idols are being worshipped over there in a homely atmosphere (see pl. 29).

The ‘Sarabhuj’ or the six-handed form of Gauranga – comprising Mahāprabhū (Yellow or Flesh Tint), Rām (Green) and Kṛṣṇa (Blue) embodied together – is described in his biographies like ‘Chaitanya Bhāgavat’ (Madhya Khanda, ch 6 and 8) by Vrindaban Das and ‘Chaitanya Caritāmṛta’ (Ādi Līlā, ch 17) by Krisnadasa Kaviraj (completed in c 1616 AD). In this form, Gauranga plays a flute in the normal pair of hands (Blue), and carries a bow and arrow in the upper hands (Green) and a stick and a kamandalu (holy water pot) in the lower (Yellow or Flesh Tint).

On the other hand, the Śarabhuj of Nityananda – the embodiment of Nitai (Yellow or Flesh Tint), Laksman (Green) and Balaram (White) is really something not very common. However, none of these images here at the Rājdarbār (residence of the royal family) – neither the 5’ Nitai nor the 4½’ Gaur – are carrying any of the attributes that they were supposed to. Moreover, the deities here – probably – have been wrongly placed; since Nitai should be on the right hand side of Gaur and Gaur should have been, as we all know, taller than Nitai.

Historically, before Srinivas Acharya stepped in Visnupur (c 1580 AD), the Mallabhum (now Visnupur) was a place of the ‘Sakta’ s; while their neighbour, the kingdom of Panchakot, used to worship Ram Candra. So, presumably, in order to gain greater vitality and impact, a very dynamic but new form was needed to be established. Hence, the Śarabhuj – already described by Vrindaban Das, but not portrayed – was chosen to be sculpted on wood for the first time. Most probably, it was in early 17th century, during the rule of Veer Hambir (r 1565 – 1620 AD), that this very new iconography was introduced, while the temple was built at Tejpal, in the year 1672. Thus, it seems to be correctly said – as Siddhartha Pratim Singha Ray, one of the descendants of the royal family, told us – that these Śarabhuj images are much older than the temple.

However, a kind of raw amateurism is evident in both the specimens, presumably because it was completely a new experience for the local woodcarvers. Especially the crude faces and the erratic limbs look quite odd and weak in construction. Along with these, the poorly executed aṅgaraṅg – obviously a recent fault – has added to the vacant look of the deities. In comparison to the other similar renderings that were executed later on, these two should be considered as a primary effort to deal with a newly evolved iconography. Moreover, it becomes evident, when we come to look at the matured and quality effort of the similar iconographies (see pl 35) in the ‘Śarabhuj Temple’ of Kadakuli, Visnupur, executed later in c 17-18th century.

Nityananda, Śarabhuj and Gadadhar Das of Saptagram:

In the 16th century AD, Saptagram was very famous as a pilgrimage of the Vaiṣṇavas. There lived Uddharan Dutta (1481 – 1552 AD), considered as one of the ‘Dvādaś Gopāl’s of Vrindavan, and a very close associate of Nityananda. Once, it is said that, even Nityananda himself had visited this place and stayed at the residence of Uddharan for around 90 days at a stretch.

Today, we can see three wooden effigies of Nityananda, Śarabhuj Gauranga and Gadadhar Pandit are being worshipped in the Śrīpāṭ of Uddharan Dutta at Saptagram (PS Magra, Hooghly). The Suvama Vaniks (gold merchants) of Hooghly district, the caste from which Uddharan hailed, built the present-day temple, in early 19th century. However, surprisingly, ‘Bāṅgītāy Bhramaṇ’

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68 see WCOE1, p 55; also see BKK, p 37
69 see ibid
70 As told by Sri Chittaranjan Dasgupta, Secretary, Jogesh Chandra Purakriti Bhavan, on 03.11.2010
72 see the Preface of ibid, p 19
73 see Mukhopadhyay, Upendra Nath (ed). Śrī Śrī Chaitanya Caritāmṛta. pp 80-81
74 see ibid, the Editorial
75 As on 03.11.2010
76 ‘Devi Mrñmayī’ is still being worshipped in the royal family.
77 As on 03.11.2011
78 As seen on 03.11.2010
79 In Kṛṣṇa-llā, he was said to be Subāhu.
(first published in 1940 AD) did not mention about the effigy of Gadadhar; though it cannot be a later addition, since all the three sculptures (see pl 30) are stylistically similar and tends to represent the same school of woodcarving.

Legend says that until the arrival of Nityananda, Uddharan used to worship an ‘aṣṭadhatu’ image of ‘Gopāl’ (Kṛṣṇa-Rādha). Later on – presumably after the death of Gadadhar in 1535 – he installed these three wooden idols, and continued worshipping, along with his ‘Gopāl’. But, it seems to be quite unlikely for certain reasons:

- The earliest proclamation of ‘Ṣarabhuj’ form was done by Vrindaban Das, in c 1545-48 (‘Chaitanya Bhagavat’); whereas Uddharan died in 1552.
- A close observation – on the carving technique and other stylistic details – would tell us that all the three images have been manifested during the same time-span. Now, even if Uddharan has installed the effigies of Nityananda and Ṣarabhuj, then why should he include Gadadhar, who was much younger to him?
- We have already come to know that the iconography of ‘Ṣarabhuj’ image was manifested for the first time in Visnupur, in early 17 cent AD. Then how could the ‘Ṣarabhuj’ of Saṭlagram be assigned to an earlier date?

Above all, the vitality of form, maturity of artistic skill and the exclusive style of execution of these three wooden idols – even in such a small scale – advocate in favour of a date around mid 17 cent AD.

However, the image of Ṣarabhuj is the biggest one here at the Śripāṭ of Uddharan Dutta with a height of around 3’. He is standing in the middle, on a blossomed lotus, along with all his attributes signifying the conglomeration of Rām, Kṛṣṇa and Gauranga (bow and arrow, flute and kamanḍalu). On his right, we have Nityananda (around 2½) and on his left, Gadadhar (2’). Both of them are standing in a posture of ‘prem-dān’ – offering love – by folding both the hands forward from the elbow. The delicate carving, along with the minimal work with the aṅgadvāra has created a sensitive and self-content look to these deities. To be more specific, we must talk about the eyes, the tilak on the forehead and the designs on their hands that have been perfectly associated with the overall splendour of the visual.

In spite of being apparently small in scale, each of these images are marvelously carved and brilliantly painted in order to provide us with a glimpse of the heydays of Bengal woodcarving. Though, here also, the unjustified use of artificial wig is suppressing the glory to some extent; though, even after that, these are among the best specimens of 17 cent Bengal art.

**Dhanvantarī Kāli of Majilpur:**

Some time in the mid-17 cent AD, there happened to be a crematorium beside the dried canal of Ādi Ganga at Majilpur, South 24 Parganas. During that period, Tāntrik Bhairavananda Swami – also known as Dhanvantarī – came from Nyatra (an unidentified place) and started to stay in that crematorium and do meditation. On being guided in his dream, he discovered a stone-image of goddess Kāli (Yantra) from the ‘Padmapukur’, a pond nearby, and started worshipping. From his own name, the goddess also became famous as ‘Dhanvantarī Kāli’.

Later on, Rajendranath Chakraborty, a religious person from Najra of Vikrampur, Jessore (Bangladesh) was travelling places, while he met Bhairavananda at Majilpur. But there are

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80 According to Vaishānav philosophy, Mahāprabhu was the incarnation of Lord Kṛṣṇa, while Gadadhar was the combination of Rādhikā and Lalitā.
81 see Chaitanya Carcar Pancar āt Bādhār, p 33
82 One who follows the doctrine of Tāntrik.
83 Dhanvantarī is an incarnation of Lord Viṣṇu, known as the divine physician and the god of Ayurvedic medicine. In Hinduism, worshipers pray to him for a sound health and recovery from diseases.
84 see Daksina Cabbī Parganā Jélār Purākārī, p 223
85 ‘Yantra’ is the Sanskrit word for instrument or machine. It can stand for symbols or anything else that has structure and organization, depending on the context. Traditionally such symbols are used in Eastern mysticism to balance the mind or focus it on spiritual concepts. The act of wearing, depicting, enacting and/or concentrating on a ‘Yantra’ is held to have spiritual or astrological or magical benefits in the ‘Tāntrik’ traditions of the Indian religions.
86 see 125BAJMP
a bit of controversies with the actual living place of Rajendranath. Some are of opinion that he was from a village named Najra near Diamond Harbour\(87\), some say from Barishal (Bangladesh)\(88\); while others opine that he was from Majilpur only\(89\).

However, Rajendranath became a disciple of Bhairavananda, who — afterwards — handed over the responsibility of the goddess to him. And it was Rajendranath, who installed a wooden effigy of ‘Dhanvantari Kālī’ (see pl 31) — sometime in late 17 cent — in the same place, and continued worshipping.\(90\) Later on, a flat-roofed temple was erected that has now gone through several repairing and renovations.

Today, the 4½' goddess is installed on an illustrious wooden throne, which is placed on a raised platform. She is standing on a very small figure of lord Śiv, who is lying on a double-petalled lotus. The goddess is beautifully carved and illustriously painted to portray all the glory and grandeur of the divine mother. The large eyes and other details on the face, along with the ornamentation on all the four arms have created a mesmerizing effect for the onlooker. Especially, the combination of Red and White, on a surface of zed Black is really terrible yet irresistible to look at. On the other hand, the small figure of Śiv or Mahādev is minimal in approach — both in terms of carving and painting — and looking almost like a doll. But, that also have been perfectly harmonized with the entire appearance of the deity.

As a whole, this wooden idol of Dhanvantari Kālī is one of the best specimens representing the Southern school of Bengal sculpture. And finally, to keep it on record, we must remember that this beautiful piece of woodcarving is lavishly painted every year by the famous ‘āṅgārāg’ artist Bablu Chatterjee of Durgapur North (PS Baharu, South 24 Parganas).

### THE EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURIES

In terms of antiquity, as we all know, majority of the Bengal woodcarvings of appreciable workmanship rarely go beyond 17 cent AD. So, it’s quite natural to find that plastic representation of gods and goddesses in wood — datable to 18 and 19 cent are numerous; both in terms of quantity as well as variety. Everywhere, these divinities — mostly carved in-the-round or occasionally in high-relief — are installed either independently or in a group. And the variety of icons that we can see is something like a never before phenomenon in the history of wooden idols in Bengal.

Many of these deities represent the hieratic tradition and are considered to belong to the higher order; though, even minor deities and semi-divine beings, like Garuṛ and Hanumān, have found enough depiction. At the same time, folk-tribal gods and goddesses also — lately absorbed in the Brahmanic pantheon, through the process of Sanskritisation — are not rare.

But, stylistically, 18 and 19 cent continued the same legacy that was developed in the preceding ones. Just like the 17\(85\), these two centuries were also to celebrate the multiple dynamics of the Bengal school of sculpture — in terms of wooden idols — the paradigms of which were well-set in the 16 cent only. The brilliant synthesis between the hieratic and the folk tribal iconographies was extremely successful in influencing the devotees of all the religious sects; be it Vaiṣṇav, Śākta, Śāiva or any other folk-tribal idiom.

As a result, almost everywhere, the basic form and structure — along with the carving techniques — remained the same. The only work left for the artisans were to produce as much as they can, in order to meet up with the high demand both from the devotees and the patrons.

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\(87\) see PBS. Vol III. pp 253-254

\(88\) As told by Biro Chakraborty of Majilpur, on 01.09.2010

\(89\) see PPOM. Vol III. p 182

\(90\) see 125BAJMP
However, in terms of these wooden idols, we have some very specific observations on the highest accomplishments of 18 and 19-cent AD.

► The age-old phenomenon of making of the Buddhist divinities on wood have continued its legacy – though in a much smaller scale and volume – even in these two centuries. For example, we can refer to the 18 cent Buddhist Goddess (Tārā?) at the State Archaeological Museum (Kolkata)\textsuperscript{91}, Khodā-Khusdi (or Pyakom-Pyakim) from Achhipur (South 24 Parganas)\textsuperscript{92} and the 19 cent Buddha-image at Ananda Niketan Keertishala, Nabasan (Howrah)\textsuperscript{93}.

► Around 6 cent AD, making of an idol or emblem of Lord Śīv in wood was quite a common phenomena.\textsuperscript{94} But surprisingly, such a major deity – except as a part of the Kālī-image (see pi 38) or accompanied by Pārvati (see pi 51) – has not been depicted individually, in the 18-19 cent tradition of making wooden idols.

► Following the Gaṇḍyā Vaiśṇāv movement in the 15-16 cent, the common man’s lord Kṛṣṇa did already replace the high brow Viṣṇu in Bengal. In continuation to this – under different names like Kānālī, Madangopal, Śyamsundar, Venugopal etc – he, along with his consort Rādhā (see pi 45), occupied the place of the most popular divine motif during these days. And obviously, we also have other icons like the Jagannāth-triad (see pi 40), Śī Ṭaṭa Chaitanya alone and the conjugate image of Nitai-Gaur (see pi 53) and other Vaiśṇāv associates.

► Beside the Vaiśṇāv icons, deities from other religious sects also continued to be made in a wide number. Especially, Kālī and Viśālākṣī – two forms of goddess Durgā (along with Mahiśamarddīnī) became extremely popular.

► Several folk-tribal deities, which were earlier used to be made of clay and paint, were started to be depicted in wood. Among them Pancānanda, Śituśā (see pi 52) and Daksīṇī Ṭay (see pi 58) are the most prominent iconographies.

► The phenomenon of making wooden idols became so overwhelming that even the ancient deities – those who were used to be made in other mediums (even stone) – also started to be depicted on wood. For example, we can mention Candī, Manasā (see pi 50), Ṭara-Pārvati’, Jagadṛtthā, Mahāmāyā, Rāmacandra-triad with Hanumān (see pi 47), so on and so forth.

But the most significant contribution of this era is – presumably an influence that came from European connection – a new dynamism in adding the limbs with the body. Especially, three-dimensional deities, sitting on the floor with folded legs – is really something exceptional and remarkable in the woodcarving tradition of Bengal. It needed a special technical knowledge that somehow the local craftsmen didn’t felt for so long. But, it was during these two centuries only, that we came to see certain depictions manifesting this new posture of divine figures on wood.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Raghunāth</th>
<th>Raghunāth Temple, Raghunāth-talā, Pāṭhmahal (Middāngā), Guptipara, Hooghly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rādhākānta</td>
<td>Rādhākānta Bāṇī (or Dui-Sattner Bāṇī), near Gauranga Bāṇī, PS Katwa, Bardhaman</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{91} see DCPJIP, pl 62
\textsuperscript{92} see DCPJIP, pp 50-51
\textsuperscript{93} Presumably, it was imported from South East Asia.
\textsuperscript{94} There are many such references in Vṛhat Samhitā of Varāhamihir (sūtra 19-20 of ch XLIII, sūtra 122-123 of ch LIII, sūtra 1-7 and 9-14 of ch LIX, sūtra 4-5 of ch LX).
\textsuperscript{95} ‘Ḥara’ is another name of Lord Śīv.
**Raghunāth Jiu of Guptipara:**

Legend says\(^{96}\) that *Raghunāth Jiu* was actually a ‘Śālgrām Śīlā’\(^{97}\) – an iconic representation of Lord Viṣṇu – that was brought from Jessore by Ramananda Saraswati, eighth generation of the Adhikary-family, during the reign of Akbar (c 1600 AD). At first, it was installed in a temple at Guptipara (near today’s Segun-talā football ground or *Pankaj Udyān*), PS Balagarh, Hooghly. It is said that in those days, both *Vṛmādavānu* and *Raghunāth Jiu* had their individual *Raths*.

Later on presumably in mid-18 cent AD, as the Ganges changed its track, that old temple of *Raghunāth* along with the *Rath* was drowned in the river. Hence, the new temple at *Pāṭhmahāl* area was erected by Durgadas Adhikary (seventh generation of Ramananda) and completed by his cousin-sister Brajesvari Devi. Towards the end of 18 cent, it took its complete shape. Moreover, perhaps, this was the time, when the wooden idol of *Raghunāth Jiu* was made and installed in the temple (see pl 41).

Here, the lord is sitting in a typical Bengali-posture, with both the legs folded across. This horizontal and complicated adjustment of limbs was really something remarkable in the context of late 18 cent. As we have already told, it must have been the influence of British school of aesthetics, from where the local artisans came to derive this technical knowledge and skill.

However, this fine piece of Bengal sculpture is around 3½’ in height and sitting straight with both the hands kept on the knees. The right hand is holding some arrows, while the left was supposed to have the bow (now absent). Just like the other *Vaiṣṇav*-images, the hair of the lord is gathered together and tied high on the top of his head. Apart from the large and wide eyes with filled-up eye balls; he also has a prominent moustache that identifies him as of a Bengali origin. A somewhat similar character could be seen in the wooden idol of Rāmacandra of Guptipara *Maṭh*. Both of them manifest equally a typical folk appearance of this very soil.

The most striking feature of this image is that even *Raghunāth* has been adored here with a U-shaped *Vaiṣṇav Tilak* on the forehead. It seems, ironically speaking, that there was a time when the Bengali folk wanted to convert everyone into *Vaishnavism*. However, a similar rendering of sitting Rāmacandra in wood (surprisingly, Śīlā is standing here) could be found at the Śīpāl of Gauridas at Ambika-Kalna (Bardhaman). From this, we can assume that during 18-19 cent AD, for some reason or the other, there was a renewed interest in *Rām*-worship in this region; which has been reflected through these wooden idols.

**Rādhākānta of Katwa:**

The wooden idol of Rādhākānta – another name of Lord Kṛṣṇa – is said to be hailed from a pond named ‘Thākur-pukur’ at Katwa, Bardhaman, and installed at the residence of Thakur-family at Gauranga-pāṭh.\(^{48}\) The actual date of installation is difficult to specify, but the ‘Nāṭ-mandir’ (prayer hall) was built in BS 1301 (1894-95 AD).\(^{49}\) According to the family-legends, even Chaitanyadev has also seen this deity when he came to Katwa for his religious mendicancy; which does not seem to be true. Because, none of the other sources bear any sort of evidences in favour of this incident. According to our observation, this dynamic figure of Rādhākānta (see pl 48) can’t be a manifestation of a date before late 18 or early 19 cent. As we have already told, this technical skill of executing sitting figure on wood was not known to the traditional carvers of Bengal. Somehow or other the contact or acquaintance with the British aesthetics has educated them in this regard.

However, this wooden idol is depicting lord Kṛṣṇa, while he got tired of ‘Rās-īllā’ and taking rest. Two more wooden idols of Lalitā and Rādhikā (some say Satyabhāmā and Rukminī) – around 4½’ each – are standing on his sides and fanning him. The 3’ figure of the lord is regaining his breath, while playing a flute with both the hands.

Apart from the posture, the rest of Rādhākānta’s appearance is quite common like any other Kṛṣṇa-image. Only the flute playing fingers and the feet are somewhat naturalistic in approach and hence different. Otherwise, the hair tied up on top, large and wide eyes, delicate lips, pointed nose, large years with earrings – and all these accompanied by some beautiful designs all over his body – have given the deity a divine look. Beside him, both Lalitā (or Satyabhāmā) and

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\(^{96}\) As told by Ramnarayan Banerjee (Adhikary), 84 years (ninth generation of Ramananda Adhikary), on 19.12.2010

\(^{97}\) Śīlā refers to a spherical, usually black-coloured stone found in the sacred river Gandaki. They are often referred to as Śālgrām or Śālgrām Śīlā. The word Śīlā translates simply to ‘stone’ and Śālgrām is a less-known name of Viṣṇu, the origin of which is traced to a remote village in Nepal, where the lord is known as Śāligrāman.

\(^{48}\) see B.IOS. p 115

\(^{49}\) see RVTP.KM. p 294
Rādhikā (or Rukmini) are standing with their raised right hand and the left one hanging beside their bodies. Here, they have also been depicted in the prevailing style of Bengal woodcarving.

As a whole, for a keen observer of Bengal sculpture and art, the wooden idol of Rādhākānta is undoubtedly a unique experience.

: SUMMING UP :

The preceding pages have provided us with an in-depth study on the antiquity and gradual evolution of the wooden idols of West Bengal. Now, in order to brush ourselves up, we would like to take a bird’s eye view on the entire scenario of traditional excellence.

The wooden idols of West Bengal admit three broad stylistic divisions: (a) hieratic, (b) folk-tribal and (c) 16 cent Bengal school (a conglomeration of hieratic and the folk-tribal). The hieratic tradition came into fore during the Middle Ages, by following the pan-Indian dynamics; whereas, the folk-tribal genre was always active, but in cheaper mediums like clay and natural pigment.

The earliest indirect reference to the wooden idols of Bengal is Yaṣo MādHAV of Dhamrai, said to be installed in c 724-725 AD; where, the existing wooden image is a replica of the original one. On the other hand, the Buddhist Tārā from Kanheri, dated c 9-10 centuries AD, is the earliest direct reference; but, unfortunately, its present location is unknown.

However, the earliest material specimen of a wooden idol of Bengal origin is the ‘Sthirakra Maṇjaśri’ – assigned to c 11 cent AD – kept in Bangladesh National Museum.

In 8-12 cent Bengal, as we have already discussed, the two major socio-religious forces were Buddhism and Bhāgavat-Vaisnavism. Therefore, even after being Buddhist themselves, the Palkings could not ignore the vitality and context of the Bhāgavat-cult of the Brahmanic idiom. And as a result, we can see icons from both the cults being widely manifested in both wood and stone.

During this time, the art of carving – as a whole – developed and flourished like anything. The carvers got the opportunity to use quality time and material; while the iconographies, based on the pan-Indian models, were set in front of them. So, they happily concentrated in the very act of carving out every possible meticulous detail.

The Sen-kings, on the contrary, were Hindu and didn’t take much interest in promoting Buddhism; hence such images were stopped from getting any kind of royal patronization, though it was not their end at all. On the other hand, the Brahmanic tradition continued just like before, following the same carving technique set by the Pal-school. Thus, carving of such meticulous details – based on the pan-Indian iconography – became a signature of the Pal-Sen school of Bengal sculpture.

The Islamic invasion in early-13 cent AD resulted in a lot of differences – both positive and negative – that came as a sudden and huge blow to the life and culture of the Bengali folk. As a result, a new era started here in the history of wooden idols. For the first time, the local people took a collective initiative to install an image of their god or goddess – and that too in wood. And in certain cases, the local Zamindars came up as new patrons for the art of making wooden idols.

Now, for the first time, folk-tribal craftsmen of the rural origin were invited to try their hands in the art of carving the wooden idols, for two specific reasons: unavailability of the royal artists and the low cost of employing the locales. Inevitably, the intrinsic and meticulous details of the Pal-Sen era became absent in these new manifestation of the wooden deities. Instead, paint was introduced for depicting the facial features and other details on the surface of those simplistic carvings. The ornaments, ‘kriṇa-mukuta’ and basic dress materials were still being carved grossly – but the details were replaced by the painted ones.
So far (following the pan-Indian tradition), the divine images used to have half-closed eyes, depicting a gesture of self-meditation. But now – for the first time – they started to look up and straight towards the devotee. What was private and restricted thus became open and public. And in this way, Bengal sculpture freed itself from the shackles of pan-Indian hegemony – which appeared to be considered as a significant transformation in Bengal art.

During 14-15 cent AD, the rich tradition of Bengali Maṅgal Kāvya has popularized many of the folk divinities and established them on the hieratic level; though, there was a blended synthesis between the pan-Indian and the popular idiom. At the same time, the Śakti-cult was grounded in Bengal with a strong root, which flourished – in the early 16-cent AD.

On the other hand, though 'Git Govinda' of Jaidev was written back in the 12-cent AD, but 'Vaisnavism' flourished in Bengal (under the leadership of Gauranga Mahāprabhu) only in the sixteenth. Along with the Śakti-ism, this newly coined 'Gauḍiya Vaisnavism' came up in an almost equal force and vigour, which finally resulted in multiple perspectives in the life and culture of the Bengali folk. This very change was reflected everywhere – lifestyle, behavioural pattern, dress-code, food-habit, music, poetry and art. Following this, the art of woodcarving also started to grow in profusion and ended in producing many significant dynamics.

In this connection, the wooden idols of the 16 cent gave birth to a new school of Bengal sculpture, devoid of any pan-Indian hegemony. Hence, it marked the introduction of a purely Bengali idiom – uniformly spread all over the region – with its own aesthetic vision and knowledge. Later on, this simplistic school of art was also reflected in the works of other media like stone, metal, clay, paint, etc.

The 17, 18 and 19 cent were just to celebrate the newly accomplished Bengal school, especially in terms of the wooden idols; and the ancient deities were also started to be manifested on wood. Even the 1757 war of Plassey, followed by the mighty British rule couldn’t make much difference into it. The Permanent Settlement Act\textsuperscript{100}, issued in the year 1790 and made permanent in 1800, reduced the power and authority of the local Zamindars; but that also could not stop the patronization behind the making of wooden effigies to follow. Along with all the hieratic and folk-tribal deities, even Islamic icons like Bārkān Gājī has also been portrayed on this medium (see pl 59), which is obviously one of the most exceptional occurrences.

In the mean time, the mighty British – as well as the other Europeans in India – succeeded to influence the other mediums of aesthetic expression, but the wooden idols continued to follow the guidelines set by the previous centuries. Even today, the traditional and folk-artists of West Bengal use to work on their occasional orders by following the norms that have been set by the 16 cent visionaries; though, qualitatively, the art has lost its vigour and vitality.

Like every perishable being on earth, this age old tradition also has started to decline long ago. Several factors have worked together and resulted in a gradual disinterest of the Bengali folk, as a whole, in this art-form. And thus, it started to die down towards the end of 19 cent, but yet kept itself alive till the first 2-3 decades of the 20\textsuperscript{th}. Even today, we can get occasional news of the installation of wooden idols here and there; but that’s not enough to call it a life. To be honest, it seems to be almost a dead art now – as there is hardly any demand for and rarely any artist surviving on this form of artistic expression.

\textsuperscript{100} The Permanent Settlement of Bengal (\textit{Cirasthāyī Vandobasta}) — was an agreement between the East India Company and the Bengali landlords to fix revenues to be raised from land, with far-reaching consequences for both the Empire and the Indian countryside.