Decline of the Past Glory:
changing faces of history

The practice of the arts in Bengal, presumably, began from very early times, though it's really difficult to surmise when exactly the practice started to flourish. Prehistoric stone tools and implements dating back around 20000 years have been excavated in the districts of Medinipur, Bankura, Bardhaman, and also at Sagardighi of Murshidabad; but it's yet to determine, even approximately, the time when people using them first settled on this soil. Some are of opinion that it might have taken place more than ten thousand years ago.

Remnants of the Copper Age settlements in greater Bengal date back around 4000 years; whereas archaeological discoveries have furnished evidence of a degree of civilization in certain parts as far back as the beginning of 1000 BC, perhaps even earlier. The excavations at Pāṇḍu Rājār Dhibi in the valley of the Ajay River and in several other sites on the rivers like Kunur and Kopai have thrown fresh light on the early history of this region.

The Brāhmī inscription from Mahasthangarh, attributed to the Mauryan period, advocates in favour of a contemporary culture in Bengal. The cities of Pundravardhan and Tāmralipti (also known as Tāmralipta, today's Tamluk) appear in full glory even from the pre-Christian era. The Susunia rock inscription of Candravarman (c 4 cent AD), the copper-plate inscriptions from Dhanaldaha, Damodarpur, Baigram, and Paharpur (all from c 5 cent AD, except the last one of the five plates from Damodarpur dated to 6 cent), the Faridpur copper-plates of Dharmāditya, Gopacandra and Samacārdev (all about c 6 cent AD), the numerous references to various parts of Bengal in early pan-Indian literatures and the discovery of coins — all these bear adequate testimonies in favour of a well-ordered governance.

About the second half of 6-cent AD, a line of independent rulers — assuming imperial titles — are found in Bengal. 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.

There are several authentic evidences to suggest the existence of sculptural activities in Bengal, prior to the Pal period. According to Huen Tsang, there were more than 300 temples all over Bengal; which, inevitably, must have led to the creation of plastic symbol of the god or goddess, i.e., the idol. Hence, it indicates a fairly active period of making divine images — either in clay, wood, stone or metal. But, in terms of the wooden idols, there is no material specimen available to advocate in favour of; and it was only in the Pal period that we get any such references.

During this period — besides an overall excellence in every possible direction — Bengal also witnessed the rise of a new and significant school of sculpture, following the grace and grandeur of the pan-Indian legacy. And as a result we come to find a new visual language, uttered
through the divine images produced in this period – both on wood and stone. Actually, under the stable rule of the Pals and followed by the mighty Sens, the intrinsic passion of the Bengal-carvers succeeded to flower in a full bloom. The available specimen of wooden idols, assigned to c 9-12 cent AD, advocates strongly in favour of this achievement; though none of these carry anything Bengali in them. Instead, we can call them as a group of pan-Indian sculptures, merely produced on this soil.

In any case, Pal-rule provided the requisite platform for the sculptors of Bengal to cultivate their own skills in the art of carving. They got the opportunity to use quality time and material; whereas the iconographies, based on the pan-Indian models, were already set in front. So, it became easy for them to devote themselves in the very act of carving; and they started to depict every possible meticulous detail. Hence, all the carvings of that period show everything minutely and distinctly – the dress, the ornaments, and the accessories – 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.

: THE PAL-SEN SCHOOL :

The Pal kings – even after being Buddhists – were liberal enough to allow the other religious practices and beliefs to be exercised. As a result, we can see such a high tide in the field of making divine images – both from the Buddhist and Brahmanic pantheon. All the available specimens bear adequate testimony to exhibit the level of perfection reached by the woodcarvers of Bengal of the bygone days. And thus we can see how a favourable socio-cultural-political and economic condition can instigate the aesthetic zeal of the people at large.

But, things didn’t remain exactly the same for ever. The glory of the Pal-kings was followed by the Sens (c 1070-1230 AD), who were Brahmanic by faith; and unfortunately, didn’t take much interest in promoting any other idiom. So, the deities of the Buddhist pantheon – which were a very common phenomenon during the Pal-rule – were stopped from getting any royal patronization; though they continued to be produced, obviously in a much smaller scale and volume. On the other hand, the Brahmanic tradition kept on enjoying the promotion just like before, following the same carving technique and ideology set by the Pal era; which, as a whole, became a pronounced signature of the Pal-Sen school of Bengal sculpture.

So, we can see that the Pal-Sen school, which we were discussing about, was the first prominent identity – obviously at the hieratic level – of Bengal sculpture, uttered in a high pitch; and we have also seen how it was mostly patronized by the royal state. At the same time, obviously, the virile flow of folk-tribal genre was also there in a full swing, without caring for any promotion from the elite class; and hence limited itself mostly in cheaper and easily available mediums like clay and natural pigment. However, things got changed a lot – suddenly and with immediate effect – with the invasion of the Islamic power in the early 13 cent AD.

: THE INVASION OF ISLAMIC POWER :

Historically, as we know, the Muslims have been in India since the 7 cent AD; but, it was only at the end of 12th that they came to the eastern provinces. Later on, they reached Bengal in the year 1203-04; while they defeated King Laksman Sen at his capital Nabadvip. And thus Bengal came under the Islamic rule that continued for the next five and a half centuries.

In these circumstances, the Hindu political power of Bengal became limited to mere Chieftainships and Baron-ships under the Islamic rule. Their former kingdom became known as the '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 socio-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. Really, there were a lot of inseparable factors – as we have already highlighted earlier - that have worked together and resulted towards the same direction; and we came to see the inevitable outcome as well.

- The state power was transferred and the Royal religion was changed.
- The new rulers were against all sorts of image-worship.
- The earlier royal patronization for making divine images was stopped suddenly and immediately.
- The new state capital preferred designal motifs and patterns as the subject of carving. So, the artists of the atelier now devoted themselves in making the royal furniture and accessories.
- The Islamic invaders looted several temples and destroyed their deities. As a result, there was a mass-panic spread among the local Hindus for drowning their idols into various water bodies, in order to save them from being humiliated.
- Worshipping of idols became almost a secret activity.
- No more large capitals were left elsewhere to commission quality works of a sizable scale. So, expensive materials like stone were stopped to be imported. Instead, quick use of clay and natural pigment became the best possible alternative.

: THE FIRST BENGAli-IDIOM :

We can see how the invasion of Islamic power resulted in a lot of transformations that came as a sudden and huge blow to the life and culture of Bengal. 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 assignable to this era.

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

- There was still a demand for the divine images – if not in stone, then in clay or wood.
- Even the local chieftains and Zamindars 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.
- The common people took collective initiatives in order to install images of their gods or goddesses – and that too in wood; which, obviously, was a new shift of paradigm in Bengal art.
- For the first time, the folk-tribal craftsmen were invited to try their hands in the art of carving wooden idols. Hence, they got an opportunity to work and

\[ We \text{ have already said earlier that for India, as a whole, it was a period of renewed scientific and technological contact with the outside world.} \]
explore their own aesthetic perception – which they have developed through various collective practices – on a semi-permanent material like wood.

► Paint was introduced for depicting the facial features and other details on the very surface of simplistic carving. The basic dress-materials and the ornaments (along with the crown) were still being carved on the surface, but the carving details were replaced by the painted ones.

However, the most important change that took place in this epoch was something else; which was at a time religious, social, political as well as cultural. So far, the divine images made of wood (or any other medium) during the Pal-Sen period used to have large half-closed eyes (matsyākṛt), depicting a gesture of self-meditation. But now, the deities started to look up and straight towards the devotee; and for the first time, we came to see the full eye-ball of the supreme. Though quite common in the folk-tribal idiom of making divine images, but it was really something exclusive in the hieratic level. Thus, what was once private and restricted – far and away from the common people – now became open and public. And undoubtedly, it was a major step towards the democratization of Hindu 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. Thus for the first time, we come to discover and recognize the elements of a possible school of sculpture purely of Bengal origin.

"Different sects and beliefs have co-existed throughout Bengali traditional life. These range from the Sākta cult, the Puranic Hinduism down to popular beliefs and folk-Buddhism on their common Tantric foundation. The influence of folk-Buddhism and the rise of Vaisnavism in Bengal marked a great departure in the religious outlook of the Bengali people. This is a period of constant revolt against the conventional fetters of social and religious ideas. Canditās, the greatest popular exponent of Vaišrāv Padāvallis songs, declared in the 14th century:

'Sunaha manuś bhāi
Sabār upare maṇuś satya tārpar kīchu nāī'

(Listen O brother man, the Truth of Man is the highest of truths; there is no other truth above it.)

The idea of glorifying humanity exercised a powerful influence over the popular mind. Gods tremble before men and even a woman like Maynamati compels the gods to obey her. The vast folk literature – Maynāmatī Gān, Gopīcandrā Gān, Mānicandra Rājgar Gān, and later even Kavikaritān Canḍi and Manasāmaṅgal – lavishly describes the spirit of living humanity, its joys and sorrows, hatred and quarrels. The Vaiśrāv Padāvallis, the Bāul songs, the Eastern Bengal Ballads openly affirm the freedom from social restraints and free self-expression."

: CHAITANYA MAHĀPRABHU AND GAURĪYA VAISNAVISM :

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 Habshi Sultan Sahabzada Barbak II. But, the most important incident of that year was the birth of Śrī Chaitanya Mahāprabhu – the great Vaiśrāv saint – in Nabadvip, Nadia.

It was a period of political-economic-religious turmoil, which got reflected in the society as a whole. On one hand, Hinduism was almost at stake due to several loopholes and

9 The folk-tribal artisans were always habituated to use paint (natural pigment) on their clay-sculptures. Hence, they were more comfortable with the use of paint rather than chisel and mallet.
10 see Maynāmatī Gān, i.e., song of Maynāmatī
11 see Mookerjee, Ajit. Folk Art of Bengal: a study of an art for, and of, the people. p 4
limitations of their own; and on the other there was the aggression of Islamic power with its full might and vigour. Though, later in 1494, Alauddin Hussein 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, the advent of Chaitanyadev brought a renaissance in the life and culture of the Bengali people at large. His major contribution was more as a social reformer, rather than a mere religious preacher. The movement of ‘Gaurîya Vaisnavism’ lead by him and carried forward by Nityananda and other associates resulted in multiple perspectives in the works and thoughts of the Bengali folk. And this very change was reflected in their lifestyle, behavioural pattern, dress-code, food-habit, music, poetry and art. 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. Availability of quite a number of specimens widely advocates the practice of making divine images in wood and other mediums.

During this era, it also became a rule that any divine figure should be made of Neem-wood only, nothing else; while the Bengali literature of that period also bears approval in favour of this widespread phenomenon. For example, ‘Manas Smaghaf’ by Vamsidas Chakraborty (written in 1575-76) has clearly prescribed ‘Neem’-wood as the only appropriate material for fashioning the images of Nitai and Gaur. And from then on, apart from a few exceptions, all the wooden idols of West Bengal have been fashioned with this Neem only, nothing else.

: ŚĀKTA AND VAIŚṆĀV :

In the mean time, the Śakti-cult was already grounded on this soil with a very strong root, especially in the ‘Rādhā’ region of Bengal; and it flourished – in the early 16 cent – with the introduction of the Kāśī-image by Krisnananda Agambagis. Along with Śakti-ism, the Gaurîya Vaisnavism also came up in an almost equal force and vigour; and as a result, a continuous conflict and convergence between the Śākta’s and the ‘Vaiśṅav’s became a regular occurrence. 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 went on a full swing that continued at least for the next three centuries.

: THE BENGAL SCHOOL OF SCULPTURE :

Historically, the Śakti-ism and the Gaurîya Vaisnavism evolved as parallels within the same time span; and that too, as we have already said, with equal force and vigour. But, comparatively, the art of making wooden idols in the 16 cent AD was more influenced by the Chaitanya-phenomena; which took a major role in determining the future course of aesthetic progress in Bengal. At the same time, this very legacy was quite successful in maintaining its vitality also at least up to the first quarter of the last century.

Besides the dual images of Kṛṣṇa-Rādhā and Nitai-Gaur, images of Mahāprabhu himself and his other associates were started to be installed in different corners; while the Jagannāth-triad also became extremely popular. On the other hand, the prevailing tradition of making various folk-tribal and other hieratic deities in wood were still in a full flow.

And in this way, the wooden idols of 16 cent have introduced a new school of Bengal sculpture, devoid of any pan-Indian hegemony. Hence, it marked the introduction of a purely Bengali-idiom with its own and unique aesthetic vision. Later on, this simplistic school of visual art also got reflected in the works of other media like stone, metal, clay, paint etc.

As a whole, the contribution of the ‘Gaurîya Vaiśṅav’ movement – in terms of these wooden idols – has resulted in many specific and significant dynamics in the Bengali society and the people.

► Establishment of Rādhā beside Lord Kṛisna;
► Popularization of Jagannāth-triad;
► Deifying of the mortal humans, like Nitai-Gaur and other associates; and
► A brilliant synthesis between the hieratic and the folk-tribal iconographies that also influenced the devotees of other sects like Śākta, Śaiva etc.

: THE CHAITANYA LEGACY AND BEYOND :

After the demise of Mahāprabhu and then Nityananda, the Gaurīya Vaisrāv movement was carried forward by the ‘Sara Gosvāmi’ of Vrindavan and ‘Dvādaś Gopāl’ of Bengal. Moreover, there were successors like Srinivas Acharya, Narottam Das and Syamananda Prabhu — who took training in Vrindavan and came back to Bengal to spread the message of Mahāprabhu.

Afterwards, the grand festival — organized in Śaka 1504/1505 (1582/1583 AD) at Kheturi in Bangladesh — was an extraordinary effort and a very important step towards developing a unified concept of Gaurīya Vaisnavism. And inevitably, it resulted indeed in the revitalization of the very legacy of making wooden idols.

Thus, 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 in this religious, as well as aesthetic venture of the Bengali folk. Hence, the making of the wooden effigies of Jagannāth-triad, Kṛṣṇa-Rādhā, Nitai-Gaur and the other Vaisrāv associates were continued in a full swing.

The 16-cent Śākta-movement also produced some significant result in the form of goddess Kāli. Moreover, the age-old phenomena of various folk-tribal and other hieratic traditions were also continuing in various degrees. Even the ancient deities like Candī and Manasā — which were being fashioned so far in other mediums like clay, stone etc — started to be manifested on wood. And hence, the available wooden idols assignable to this century have become quantitatively large, though aesthetically repetitive.

The plastic representations of gods and goddesses in wood — datable to 18 and 19 cent — are numerous; both in terms of quantity as well as variety. We must say that the variety of icons that we can see in these two centuries were something like a never before phenomenon. As usual, many of these deities represent the hieratic tradition and are considered to belong to the higher order; while even minor deities and semi-divine beings also have found enough depiction. At the same time, folk-tribal gods and goddesses — lately absorbed in the Brahmanical pantheon, through the process of Sanskritisation — are by no means rare.

But, stylistically, these two centuries also continued the same legacy that was developed in the preceding ones. Just like the 17 cent, these two were also to celebrate the multiple dynamics of Bengal school of sculpture — especially in terms of the wooden idols — the paradigms of which were well-set in the sixteenth. 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 Vaisrāv, Śākta, Śaiva or any other folk-tribal idiom — and carry them forward towards a sort of cultural unification.

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 from the devotees.

However, the most significant contribution of this era is presumably an influence that came from the contact of European aesthetics — the added dynamism in fixing the limbs angularly with the body. Especially, the three dimensional deities, sitting on the floor with folded legs — is really something rare and remarkable in the 18 cent woodcarving tradition of Bengal. It needed a special technical knowledge that somehow or other the local craftsmen didn’t felt or tried so far. But, it was only from this epoch, that we came to see certain depictions manifesting this new posture of divine figures on wood.
Like every perishable being on earth, the age-old tradition of making wooden idols also started to decline in a natural curve. Several factors worked together and resulted in a gradual disinterest of the Bengali folk, as a whole, towards this art form. And it was the end of 19 cent that things started to change all together in a different direction.

► The Permanent Settlement Act, introduced in 1793, started to show its marvels. The Zamindars lost their property and authority – up to a large extent – and hence couldn’t patronize this tradition like before.

► In the renewed circumstances, the village landlords started to spend most of their time and money in Kolkata and thus reduced or cut off their connection with the rural life and culture.

► The newly English-educated ‘advanced’ class of the society started to deviate from their traditional rituals and religious beliefs and practices.

► The new generation of artisans was not willing to take up this profession; and many of the trade-secrets, which were supposed to be passed through generations, were lost for ever.

► People from other castes and clans, though little in number, started to join; but they lacked the traditional heredity and skills.

► Restrictions on cutting of trees and lack of good quality wood also affected the production.

► The comparatively inferior and slack productions of wooden idols generated a sort of disinterest among the patrons.

► Easily available, cheaper and more handy mediums – like plaster (and today fibre) – were introduced and people started to prefer them on wood.

► The modern Bengalis those who are rich and religious – especially living in Kolkata – started to be influenced more by the Europeans, as well as the elite classes of North and Western India. In this process, they changed their taste and – in order to get their desired idol made – started to prefer stone
(especially marble) or metal on wood – and that too in a highly glossy and decorative style.

In this way, this very tradition of making wooden idols started to die down – gradually but surely – yet kept itself alive till the first 2-3 decades of 20th cent. The next one hundred odd years tell us a story of the gradual degeneration only; though, obviously, glimpses of the age old legacy were still visible here and there. Even today, we get occasional news of the installation of wooden idols; but that's not enough, at least in numbers, to call it a life.

At present, there is hardly any demand for such wooden images and hardly any artists are surviving on this form of artistic expression. As a result, most interestingly, now the Sūtradhārs of Natungram do not make the traditional divinities any more; whereas those who are into the business in Ekchakra or Nabadvip are not Sūtradhārs at all. Most of the fresh orders for making wooden idols that they get today are from a handful of Vaiṣṇav devotees – local, national and international. Thus there are only a handful of sources that are still contributing a somewhat major favour to the few artisans surviving even today. But, as a whole, this very tradition of Bengal and thus Indian art could be considered as a dead one.