Since time immemorial, people of India have always adored wood as a suitable plastic medium in their daily life. The first indirect reference, as we have seen, goes to the Indus Valley (c 3500-2500 BC), whereas the first literary reference could be found in the *Rigveda* (sūtra 8.42.3, 9.95.1, 10.32.7 and 10.81.4). But, the earliest material specimen of any woodcarving of Indian origin comes much later; and it was the mother-and-child sculpture, dated c 3-2 cent BC, hailed from the Gulzarbag locality of Patna, Bihar.

Apart from these direct and indirect references, contemporary stone-carvings - with similar renderings and style of approach - and several textual sources also have provided us a clear picture about the great participation and contribution of woodcarving in the daily life of the Indians. And it was quite inevitable that the Bengalis would also have made an extensive and intensive use of this material from the very beginning. Though, unfortunately, the earliest material evidence couldn't be assigned before c 2 cent AD; but the refined approach and stylistic maturity of those specimens clearly indicates to push back the antiquity of this tradition much further.

THE ANTIQUITY

It's really difficult to say when exactly the wooden idols were started to be made in India. But, at least in the 6 cent BC, the concept was not unknown to the people of this subcontinent. In India greater, the divine images were classified on the basis of the material used in making them. And, surprisingly, each and every such classification - ranging from 2 to 16 cent AD - refers to wood as one of the most significant plastic medium.

In this connection, we have also seen that in 3 cent BC (if not earlier) Bengal was already well-connected with the rest of the country - both politically, as well as culturally. Thus, it was quite obvious that the Bengali people were well conversant with the pan-Indian tradition of making wooden idols; and presumably by this time, they were also very much into the practice. On the other hand, there were at least two more specific reasons that could have made wood popular in Bengal for this purpose:

- unavailability and hence the high cost of stone on one hand, and
- easy availability and the soft tactile quality of wood on the other.

THE HISTORY

Historically, the earliest epigraphic evidence advocating in favour of any wooden idol in India is assigned to c 278 AD; whereas, the first indirect reference to the Bengali version hardly goes back to c 8 cent AD. However, we must not forget that the earliest direct reference of this country (dated c 9-10 cent AD), along with the material specimen assigned to c 11 cent AD, is a contribution from Bengal origin.

Moreover, the aesthetic precision and stylistic maturity that we can see in this genre of divine images are tantamount to prove that the antiquity of this tradition in Bengal goes well
beyond the available dates. What we see in the Pal-Sen specimens is the outcome of an age old cultivation and practice by the artisans of this very soil—through generations.

THE MEDIUM

The literary references—dated c 6 cent AD—have provided us a list of 29 species of trees; which shows that all the wooden idols of India, including Bengal, were made by any of those trees. However, surprisingly, for some reason or the other, the Neem-wood (azadirachta indica) was not mentioned in the list; as it was not in use for the fashioning of divine images at least up to the late 15 cent.

On the other hand, from 16 cent onwards—except Vilva or Bel—none of the woods mentioned in the above list has been used for the purpose; and instead, almost all the specimens, executed in and after this period, are made of Neem-wood only.

However, it was Mahāprabhu himself, who—being inspired by the great Jagannāth of Puri, Orissa—proclaimed the phenomenon of making divine images in this wood; and from then on, it became a norm that all the wooden idols have to be made of Neem only.

THE ARTISTS

While inquiring about the skilled hands behind the manifestation of wooden idols, we have come to find that sometimes, amateur hands did these; while occasionally, the Karmakārs (blacksmiths) were also involved in this job. And once the deity is installed, then (in most of the cases) only the Brahmin-artists are allowed to do the job of angarac—a i.e., the repainting of idol.

However, traditionally, it was the Sutradhārs, who were mostly appointed to sculpt and paint these divine images in wood. At least up to the mid-20 cent they have always remained the main artist for this job.

THE AESTHETICS

The wooden idols of West Bengal admit three broad stylistic divisions: (i) hieratic, (ii) folk-tribal and (iii) 16 cent Bengal school (a mixture of the hieratic and the folk-tribal).

The hieratic tradition came into fore only in the Middle Ages (right from the Mauryan period, if not earlier), and flowered in full bloom during the Pal-Sen epoch. But, we must admit that this first group of wooden idols, assigned to c 9-13 cent AD, do not carry anything (so called) Bengali in them. Instead, we can see 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, we can merely call them as a group of pan-Indian sculptures, produced on this soil.

However, there is no denying the fact that the first signature of Bengal sculpture was visible only in the meticulous carving details that were prominent in these very specimens. And this very signature was equally manifested irrespective of any religion, gender and purpose of execution.

The folk-tribal genre for making divine images in Bengal was always active, but in cheaper mediums like clay and natural pigment. It was only after the Islamic invasion in c 13 cent AD
that they got an opportunity to try their hands in wood. Though, in this regard, they had to follow the guidelines of hieratic iconography – which they were not quite used to with.

Naturally, the intrinsic and meticulous details of the Pal-Sen era became absent in the newer efforts; while paint was introduced for depicting the facial features and other details on the very surface of a somewhat simplistic carving. The basic dress materials, along with the crown and other ornaments, were still being carved on wood, but the minute details were replaced by the painted ones.

In this way, though very few in numbers, but the existing wooden idols assignable between 13 and 15 cent exhibit a fine blend between the hieratic and the folk-tribal, general and local; and thus, for the first time, Bengal sculpture freed itself from the shackles of the pan-Indian idiom.

The wooden idols of 16 cent – following the Gaurīya Vaiṣṇav movement, lead by Śrī Chaitanya and Nityananda – introduced a new school of Bengal sculpture, devoid of any pan-Indian hegemony; and thus for the first time, we come to experience the third stylistic group mentioned above. From now on, simplicity of carving and use of paint for depicting the facial features and other ornaments became a very common practice all over the region. The divine figures were started to be carved nude; and then draped with real clothes, ornaments and other accessories. And regarding the painting of those images, a combination of Yellow, Red and Black became a dominant visual signature.

However, by involving the plain-simple-ordinary carving – depicting the mass and volume – and the applied intensity and strength of limited colour and line, a strange and unique physicality seems to glow from these wooden idols; which have freed these primarily divine images out of the margin of any religious syndrome. And as a result, this brilliant synthesis between the iconographies of hieratic and the folk-tribal genre didn’t have much problem in influencing even the devotees of other sects like Sākta, Saiva etc.

The physicality that we are discussing here was not at all a mere diffused phenomenon. Because, we can find the spontaneous manifestation of the same emotion in many of the traditional branches of Bengal art. In spite of certain differences and variety, almost the same resemblance seems to be found in the Mummy-putul or Nitai-Gaur of Bardhaman, Sāḍhu-putul and Laksñi-sarś of Faridpur (now in Bangladesh), recently extinct clay-dolls of Jainagar-Majilpur1, the painted Sōla-craft of the Sājjangīś, Jarāno-pat of Birbhum, Eyon-ghat of Barishal (Bangladesh) so on and so forth. Moreover, besides the Bou-putul – another extinct tradition of Bengal art – the same visual character is clearly visible in the famous Pata-paintings of Kalighat as well.

In this way, this new series of wooden idols have marked the introduction of a purely Bengali-idiom with its own significant aesthetic vision. And we have seen how this simplistic school of art was also reflected in the works of other media like stone, metal, clay, paint etc. So, we must say that even as an independent content also, this new language of sculpture should be considered as a real discovery by the Bengali intelligentsia. Still today, it’s more or less the norms set by those 16 cent visionaries2 only that are being followed by the traditional artists and craftsmen of West Bengal.

THE COMPARISON

As a whole, the wooden idols of West Bengal are very much localized and folk in character, which is typical to this very soil. One can easily recognize them in comparison to the divine images of Orissa (both from their folk and hieratic tradition), which have always maintained a close proximity with that of Bengal. The difference could be identified either in terms of iconography or style, or even both; but in any case, Bengal has always shown its dynamism, as well as distinctiveness.

1 Panchu Gopal Das, the last maestro of this tradition, died a few years back.
2 In 16-cent AD, Roop Goswami, the famous philosopher of Gaurīya Vaisnavism, introduced Bhakti Rasa as Ujjvala Rasa. It was, undoubtedly, one of the major contributions of Bengal to Indian aesthetics.
In terms of history, we can see that the Orissan specimens are nowhere at par with the scale and variety of the wooden idols produced in Bengal. In brief, except the Jagannath-triad of Puri (originated in c 11 cent AD) and its various derivations, Orissa does not have much specimens of antiquity to be compared with. Most of the available pieces could hardly be pushed back to the late-18 or early-19 cent and they also lack the variation and vitality – both in terms of content and style.

Now, if we concentrate on the form and colour, the Orissan figures appear to be more voluminous and brightly coloured, with round bulging eyes; whereas its Bengali counterparts mostly have a soft and tender look. And this soft and tender look has always remained a special character of Bengal aesthetics that has been equally generated in the other folk forms of visual expression. As a whole, the Bengali tradition of wooden idols is more lively, rich and varied in comparison to the somewhat stiff and repetitive depictions of Orissa.

THE LAST FEW WORDS, BUT NOT THE LEAST

In the history of India, and thus in Bengal, art has always been closely connected with and worked as an illuminator of religion; while the religious practices have always reflected the collective sense of aesthetics of the common folk. That's the reason, why it becomes difficult to separate the history of Bengal art from that of the religion; and at the same time religion in Bengal can hardly be isolated from the folk or mass culture of this soil.

But, even after that, the prevailing descriptions related to the art and culture of Bengal as a whole lacks the dynamism of thought and clarity of vision to some extent. As a result, all the discussions about Bengal art, especially sculpture, remain confined within some abrupt mention of specimens scattered here and there. It starts with the terracotta figurines assignable to the Mauryan period, and then followed by the stone-sculptures of the Pal-Sen epoch. And most of them are identified as religious depictions altogether. But, surprisingly, there is hardly any visionary, who moves around and take a look at the rich corpus of wooden sculptures (dated c 9-13 cent AD) in this connection. Whereas, there is no doubt about the fact that the Sthircakra Manjusri or the Bodhisattva Loknath is easily comparable – all in terms of content, form and stylistic excellence – with any of their stone counterparts of the same epoch.

However, after the Pal-Sen era, the history of Bengal sculpture observes a long gap of silence unless and until we find the small-scale stone sculptures, assignable to c 17-18 cent AD; which hardly bears any similarity or parity with their predecessors of the 10-12 cent. Within these 500 years, the meticulous carving details, along with the thin and lean figures of the Pal-Sen era, became much flat and simple; while the figures became flabby and softer. But, it remains a mystery that how and why did it happen at all; and hence, once again we would require turning around towards the wooden idols, assignable between 13 and 17 cent AD.

In this connection, the sculptural marvels like Balar ātma of Boro or the Sirhabāhinī of Nijabalia could be of immense help for us. Along with them, we can also look at the varied and dynamic body of works, all in wood that could be dated to c 16 and 17 cent AD. Especially the sheer spark of life – that is present in the effigies of Gauranga at Nabadvip and Katwa, Nitai-Gaur of Atisara and Pal-pāṛā, Rādhāvatābhijnu of Jainagar, the ever-traveling Rādhāmādhav of Rāih-Bengal, Kālī of Sardar-pāṛā, Bāṅkā Rāy of Ekchakra and Dhanvantari Kālī of Majilpur – is really something to cherish for. And this is the phenomenon that has guided the future courses of Bengal art for the next few centuries. Apart from the other forms of visual expression, it has put a significant influence on the stone sculptures of 17-18 cent that we have already mentioned earlier.

Finally, after going through all the historical and aesthetic details, there should be no doubt about the fact that the tradition of making wooden idols has several qualities that have to be considered and cultivated for getting a fuller view of the history of sculpture in Bengal. And while doing so, we would be able to fill up the gaps – both in terms of content and concept – and come up with a much enriched notion about the entire scenario of Bengal art.

- It's a tradition with antique ancestry;
- It has a distinct history of evolution – as an art form – throughout the ages;
► It has always remained in close proximity with the other contemporary art practices;
► It has democratized the portraying of divine images in Bengal;
► It has introduced the first ever uniform school of Bengal sculpture, independent of any pan-Indian hegemony;
► It has developed an aesthetic identity, irrespective of any religious bias;
► It has produced innumerable pieces of artistic excellence;
► It has influenced the other mediums of visual expression;
► It has introduced an unique group of artisans to the world; and
► In comparison to the other parts of India and even the world outside, this very tradition has provided a distinct identity to the Bengali intelligentsia.

So, we can see that this age old tradition of making wooden idols, in West Bengal, is qualified enough to be considered as a collective gesture of visual emotion, expressed by a particular caste/lineage or a dialectical clan. And that particular caste/lineage or dialectical clan – the Bengali folk – has proven their capacity to inscribe their own history of art and aesthetics.

It is true that today the Sūtradhars have left their ancestral-profession and merely engaged themselves in making household accessories. It is also true that today only a few wooden deities are occasionally made and that too by the artisans of some other caste. It’s true that there is hardly anybody who knows the traditional procedure of carving today; and it’s true that today’s Bengali has lost interest in this form of wooden sculpture. Even it is true that the making of wooden idols is already a dead art – but, even after that, the immense contribution of this age-old tradition to Bengal and thus Indian art can never be ignored. Otherwise, once again our art history would remain – as proclaimed by A K Coomarswamy – chiefly a matter of finding out the names of the artists and considering their relation to one another.