In early April 2008, a wooden idol of Lord Viṣṇu was discovered from a pond at Goda, Bardhaman, and was shifted for the time being to the safe custody of Bardhaman Police Station.

The image, assignable to c 10-12 cent AD and presumably made of ‘Ṣarā’-timber, shows the lord sitting on his mount Garur in Bhogāsan. This kind of iconography is extremely rare in Bengal, as most of the Viṣṇu-images found here are depicted in the Vāsudev-form of the lord. Only a few sculptures of Viṣṇu-on-Garur — all in stone — are there in Asutosh Museum, Bangladesh National Museum and Varendra Research Museum. But, in comparison to them, this specimen from Goda is the only one made in wood and that too of a remarkably big size (the deity with his mount measures 83½" x 17" x 9", while the detached pedestal measures 21½" x 17"). And most importantly, this is the only specimen of woodcarving, representing the Pal-Sen school of sculpture, found in West Bengal.

The report came in the newspaper¹, which says that the Bardhaman University Museum has expressed their interest for taking this precious specimen to their own collection.

On 27 July, 2010, I went to Bardhaman in search of that wooden idol; and to my utter surprise, found it to be left in the Police Station only. Inevitably, these two years of negligence had already affected the decaying sculpture of Pal-Sen era.

¹ see (9 April, 2008). Ananda Bāzār Patrikā (Kolkata edition), p 8
However, I sent a detailed report on this to almost all the Museums of Kolkata, but to get any response from any of them. Afterwards, thanks to Sri Jawhar Sircar (then Chief Secretary, Ministry of Culture, Govt of India) and Sri Gautam Sengupta (Director General, Archaeological Survey of India) that on 28.08.2010, an inspection was arranged on behalf of ASI, Kolkata Circle and a copy of their report was forwarded to me.

In the mean time, The Directorate of Archaeology of Museums, West Bengal showed some interest in this matter, and finally on 13 November, 2010, the wooden idol was brought to the State Archaeological Museum, Kolkata. Though, unfortunately, here also (till date) it has been left in negligence without any work of restoration being conducted; but that’s a different story all together.

The Inspection Report on seized Wooden Idol of Vishnu, kept in Barddhaman Police Station, Dist. Barddhaman, West Bengal (dated 30.08.2010) says that:

- “The deity and its mount Garuda are carved out of single wooden log along with the pedestal which is now detached due to breakage.”
- “The art of carving, facial and physiognomical features of the deity and his mount Garuda indicate the entire composition to be a delineation of 10th-12th century AD and indeed a rare specimen in wood belonging to Pala-Sena School of Sculptures.”

However, even after that, some scholars have raised a question on whether this wooden deity is really of Viṣṇu or not.² The points of argument offered by them are as follows:

- two hands of the lord;
- absence of ‘Vana-māla’ (garland of flowers) and ‘Yajnopavīt’ (sacred thread);
- absence of any Śrīvatsa mark on his chest;
- the figure of Garur doesn’t have wings; and
- the facial features (i.e., nose, lips etc) of Garur looks more like a human than a bird.

Some have even referred it to be a part of any Rath and others as a Jaina-sculpture. However, let us see, whether we can satisfy their queries and establish our view, advocating in favour of this deity being Viṣṇu and nothing else.

► The use of mount – especially in a human form – to any divine image is a phenomenon that has been practiced in case of Brahmanic deities only. Hence, this wooden effigy, where we can see one figure sitting on the shoulder of another, can never be identified as a Jaina or Buddhist one.

► Making of ‘Rath’ for religious procession in Bengal is a tradition that was developed in late 15 or early 16 cent AD. By that time, the style of Bengal woodcarving had also evolved a lot – in comparison to the Pal-Sen school – towards a more simplistic approach.

On the other hand, imagining such a huge, elongated and intricately carved sculpture, accompanying a Rath is a bit absurd. And even if it is so, then there must have been a few more pieces, ornamenting the same Rath along with this one. But, unfortunately, we didn’t find any other specimen in favour of this opinion.

► In Brahmanic iconography, only three deities are designated with a ‘Sarpa-chatra’ or snake hood – Viṣṇu, Sāṅkāraṇā or Balarāma and Manasā. Among them Manasā is a female deity and has started to be depicted in wood much later (c 18 cent onwards), while Sāṅkāraṇa or Balarāma has never been manifested with a mount. So, there is every possible chance for this image to be of Viṣṇu only, nothing else.

The 'Kirīta-mukuta' is an unavoidable part of Viṣṇu-iconography as described by the ancient texts like Manāsara Śīpaśāstra (written in 5-cent AD, see ch 51). And here also, we can find the deity bedecked with a similar head-gear and hence should be identified as the same.

The Vṛhat Sarhītā of Varahamihir, an early 6 cent text, describes in ch 58 (sūtra 31) that Lord Viṣṇu may be represented either with eight, four or two arms. And on a more practical note, we have come to know at least about two specimens where the lord has been depicted with two arms only:

- The first one, assigned to c 3-4 cent AD, was hailed from Yellasvaram of Andhra Pradesh, now at the State Museum of Hyderabad. It shows, lord Viṣṇu, attributed with Gadā (mace) in his right hand and Sankha (conch shell) in his left hand, which in turn is kept on his waist. Moreover, just like the wooden effigy from Goda, here also the lord is adored with a minimal outfit.

- The second specimen, dated c 7 cent AD, was hailed from village Rupavas, near Fatehpur Sikri, Uttar Pradesh; where the lord is holding Sankha and Cakra (disc) in his two hands.

Now, in case of the specimen from Goda, both the hands of the wooden deity are broken from the elbow; and hence we don’t have any idea about its possible attributes. However, that doesn’t mean that chances of this one to be identified as Viṣṇu become less in any sense of the fact.

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4 see Unknown (tr.). (1875). The Brhat-Samhita or Complete system of natural astrology of Varahamihira. Vol II. London. p 47
6 see ibid
A black stone sculpture of Viṣṇu, dated c 8 cent AD, was hailed from Chaitanpur of Bardhaman; and is presently with the Indian Museum. Here, the four armed lord is standing in a ‘samabhanga’ posture, while the back hands are placed on the heads of the personified form of two of his attributes – ‘Cakra-purus’ (the god of disc) and ‘Gada-devī’ (the goddess of mace). However, the lord himself is wearing a very short dress; and instead of ‘Vana-mālā’, a strange amulet-necklace hanging briefly from his neck.

On the other hand, there is another specimen in the same Museum (see fig 2), where we can find the same lord, also without anything like ‘Vana-mālā’.

‘Yajnopavīt’ or the sacred thread is one of the main signs of Vedic culture. It is a cord of three threads, each of nine twisted strands – worn by Brahmin (made of cotton), Kṣatriya (made of hemp) and Vaiśya (made of wool).

In case of carving sculptures, especially like the one we are discussing about, this thread was manifested with an engraved line with the chisel. Unfortunately, after remaining under loam and water for so many years, the surface of the Viṣṇu-sculpture form Goda has been severely damaged; and hence, presumably the mark of thread has been removed. Though, even today, we can see a very faint indication of such a line across the chest of the lord (see fig 3).

In a ‘Bhogasan’ image of Viṣṇu, from Osian, Rajasthan – assigned to c 9 cent AD – Garur has been depicted without any wings. Appeared with a human face, the divine mount is carrying his lord in his back. Besides this, there are several other representations of this supernatural creature, manifested with a much human character than bird. Hence, it could be surmised that the wooden image from Goda is not alone – something absurd – in this regard.

The only valid point of argument raised by those learned scholars is that of the ‘Śrīvatsa’ mark that we cannot see here on the chest of the wooden lord. However, it could be presumed that a sculpture, which has already generated such wide cracks on its body, could have lost any other surface detail while remaining drowned under loam and water for so many years. Otherwise, the pan-Indian mode of iconography, along with the intricate carving-technique, leaves us no room for doubt that this is nothing else but a ‘Bhogasan’ image of Lord Viṣṇu; which can easily be pushed back to the glorious days of Pal-Sen era. And obviously, this valuable specimen of Bengal art needs a much serious attention from the scholars and researchers.

7 see Pratimāsilpe Hindu Devdevī. p 14, pl 1
8 see PSHTD. p 17-18
9 see ibid, pp 254-255