Preface

"Even in India, an understanding of the art of India has to be rewon; and for this... a veritable intellectual rectification is required...... it is not to enlarge our own collection of bric-a-brac that we ought to study ancient or foreign arts, but to enlarge our own consciousness of being.”

-- A K Coomarswamy

It was on my several visits to the remote corners of rural West Bengal – in order to have a first hand experience of our aesthetic tradition and heritage – that a very distinct form of visual expression was revealed before my eyes. That’s how I came to know about the wooden idols, kept in various private or public temples, which have never been mentioned, notably enough, in our prevailing texts of art history. Hence, it appeared as a sacred duty to explore extensively, as well as intensively, through this neglected episode of Bengal art.

On this journey, I came to know that the tradition of making wooden idols – or woodcarving as a whole – in India and thus Bengal is extremely old. From time immemorial, wood has widely been used by the artists and artisans of both the sides of Bhagirathi, the river; and since then, according to available references and specimens, this art was quite a living one at least up to the 2nd - 3rd decade of the 20 cent. Within this long time span, by improvising on this particular medium, the aesthetic impulse of Bengali folk has explored a wide range of visual expressions, out of which the wooden idol is one of the most comprehensive one.

From the very beginning of our aesthetic journey, the major research questions were very specific; and in spite of minor deviations, I have always tried to stick to them as much as possible. Because, the span of the proposed project was extremely vast and mostly uncultivated – awaiting an exhaustive workout in the libraries, museums and the field. Therefore, restrictions were needed in order to maintain discipline and to do justice with the subject chosen; and hence, all the possible curiosities were summed up and the brief list, given below, was framed out:

► How much do we know about the history of woodcarving in India, thus in Bengal?
► How much do we know about the history of making wooden idols in West Bengal?
► Why the idols were/are made of wood?
  Why was wood chosen as an important medium?
  Was/Is there any special kind of wood for making these idols?
  Was there any historical, theological or aesthetic justification/s behind the choice?
► Who were the artists or craftsmen? How did they use to work?
► Where can we find the existing specimens of wooden idols in West / Bengal?
► What is the aesthetic significance of these idols – in terms of form and colour?
► How can we distinguish them from the nearest tradition of Indian origin – i.e., the divine images from Orissa?
► Is it a living art tradition, even today?

From the list above, one can easily understand the area, as well as the limits, and basic outlook of the course of study. The search in the following pages is not only focused to find the answers of all the queries, but also to evoke certain issues for further investigation and research.
Several existing available literatures have been surveyed in order to nourish and develop a basic idea and concept on the subject. In this process, it has been discovered that some of them have dealt grossly or partially — with the ancient art of woodcarving in eastern India and Bengal — while the others are either compartmental or regional; but, apparently, none has given emphasis on the wooden idols in particular.

However, this survey has been essential in adjusting the focus on the subject and frame out the future course of action.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the book</th>
<th>Issues of investigation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **ICONOGRAPHY OF BUDDHIST AND BRAHMANICAL SCULPTURES IN THE DACCA MUSEUM**  
Nalinikanta Bhattachal  
Bangladesh National Museum, 1929/2008 | A general introduction on Bengal sculpture  
Detailed account on the Buddhist and Brahmanic sculptures — in stone, metal and wood — kept in Bangladesh National Museum |
| **BANGLAR KATHER KAJ (in Bengali)**  
Tarapada Santra  
Centre for Archaeological Studies and Training, Eastern India (2003) # It's an elaboration of 'Bânglî Dārubhâskarya' (in Bengali) by the same author (1980) | Temples and houses, raths (processional carts), sculptures and idols, decorated doors and others |
| **WOOD CARVINGS OF EASTERN INDIA**  
Kalyan Kumar Dasgupta  
Firma KLM Private Limited (1990) | Wood as a medium; and the techniques of carving in India, especially the eastern region  
Historical overview on Indian woodcarvings  
Woodcarvings of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Bengal, Bihar, Manipur, Nagaland and Orissa  
A comparative approach between the woodcarvings and works in other mediums  
Socio-cultural life in the woodcarvings |
### Major findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Major research gaps</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A lot of references, in support of the antiquity of woodcarving tradition in India</td>
<td>The discussion is on woodcarvings of eastern India; hence, stress on the wooden idols of West Bengal is inadequate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A detailed account on various applications of wood in the states of Eastern India</td>
<td>Importance to the specimens of antiquity; information is not enough about the newer versions that are still being worshipped.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iconographic and aesthetic similarities between specimens from: (a) the same region and (b) different regions.</td>
<td>Discussion on the evolution of wooden idols is not clear in respect to socio-economic and cultural changes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Name of the book | Issues of investigation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the book</th>
<th>Issues of investigation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BANGLADESER DĀRUSILPA (in Bengali) Zinat Mahrukh Banu</td>
<td>Development of woodcarving in Bangladesh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh Jāṭiya Jādaghar, 2003</td>
<td>Classification and description of the specimens in the Bangladesh National Museum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comparison between the woodcarvings of Bangladesh and the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Application of designs in the woodcarvings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Major findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Major research gaps</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A detailed account on the specimens in Bangladesh National Museum</td>
<td>The discussion is based mainly on Bangladesh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A meticulous study of the designs, patterns and motifs on the woodcarvings</td>
<td>No special emphasis on the wooden idols</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No detailed discussion on the material, the artists and the technique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Historic evolution and the aesthetic significance haven’t been highlighted</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This survey and research on the wooden idols have been based mainly on the primary sources, i.e., the existing specimens in West Bengal – as well as Bangladesh – found both in the temples and in museums. Besides them, the help of secondary sources like going through the books and manuscripts, along with the interactions with various resource people, have helped us to formulate and strengthen the final deductions.

### a) PRIMARY SOURCES:

- **Field trips:**
  
  In order to acquire updated information about the existing specimen of wooden idols, being worshipped in various corners, several field trips have been undertaken. While doing so, almost all the southern districts of West Bengal have been touched; whereas beyond Murshidabad, there were hardly any specimens except a very insignificant few from Jalpaiguri. At the same time, trips to Dhaka and Rajsahi of Bangladesh also have enriched the study a lot.

- **Museums visited:**
  
  Museums are always the storehouses of historical data and documents; and hence frequent visits in order to check, verify or discover various specimens related to the project have been beneficial.
b) SECONDARY SOURCES:

► Literature:
In this connection, literary sources have been exploited – ranging from the ancient text of *Rgveda* to the recently published *'Akriti to Sanskriti: The Journey of Indian Forms'* by Harsh V Deheja. A detailed description of such books has been given in Select Bibliography.

► Meeting resource people:
Meeting various resource persons is always important to gather information that is more direct from their first hand experience on the particular subject. In our project, we have met many people, many of whom have enriched us with various information, as well as with their priceless observations. There names have been incorporated, separately, in the page of acknowledgement.

Thus, the materials accumulated were substantial and yet only those, which appeared as historically relevant and aesthetically significant, have been included. A complete list of the available specimens of wooden idols has also been added irrespective of any artistic inhibition.

Now, we all know that every opportunity has its own limitations. While working on this particular project, we also had to face certain obstacles, which we couldn't overcome. Some of them could be worked out in future, but the others would always leave us helpless, under any circumstances.

► Perishable nature of wood as a medium has been one of our biggest limitations. Due to this phenomenon, we could not encounter the sandal wood image of *Viṣṇu* from Krisnapur (PS Muradnagar, Comilla), a very important specimen of the Pal-Sen epoch, which was once kept at the Bangladesh National Museum (now perished).

► Lack of awareness in general, which has led towards the destruction or abduction of historical relics. That's the reason why:
• a 9-10 cent image of Tārā, which was hailed from Kanheri, could get vanished, leaving only a trace of photograph; and
• a 13 cent wooden idol of Tripurāsundari of Boral could be drowned in the Ganges very easily.

However, we have discussed about both the issues, in detail, in chapter II of this book.

▶ In most of the cases, exact information – regarding time, date and other historical data – are not available. The oral nature of our collective history, carried forward by the native folk from generation to generation, hardly kept/keeps any specified documentation. Therefore, in many cases – the exact date of installation, name of the initiator or patron, and the artist – of many of the specimens that we visited in person have not been possible to be extracted.

▶ Apparently, the subject of our research is considered to have a religious flavour, and hence emotionally sensitive. So, many people have literally refused to talk about them. In many cases, photography was strictly prohibited and even we were not allowed to draw sketches. And thus, we have failed to document some of the precious specimen of wooden idols; though we believe that there is a hope of this obstacle to be removed in future.

However, the journey through the wooden idols of West Bengal has been a multi-faceted learning experience. The entire process is enriching not only on the main subject, but also on the relevant historical-social-economic-political-religious perspectives. It has provided a scope to go through the texts like Rgveda, Mānasara Silpaśāstra, and Vṛhat Sanhitā etc. At the same time, it has also pushed me out to travel extensively and intensively through various corners of West Bengal and even to Bangladesh. As a result, an opportunity was created to visit places – to meet people of different colour, tone and texture – to see life in person.

As a whole, the entire work is designated with a comprehensive picture of what we know as Bengal art and what actually it is; how do we perceive the artistic history of this soil and how exactly we should look at it. And this very lesson would definitely help us to explore our own aesthetic quest with a better clarity and precision.

In writing this thesis, I have received help and co-operation from a number of individuals and institutions. My acknowledgement of the courtesy to many of them has been made (see page v) separately. However, many names are left out – beyond that list and even beyond my memory – whose owners have provided invaluable inputs and help, and that too without any material-interest. At the same time, I should not forget to mention about those, who did otherwise, quite surprisingly and out of nothing specific whatsoever. In any case, I am extremely grateful, to all of them.

Sanjay Sen Gupta
April, 2012