Introduction

Human beings, as a whole, have always adored trees with a high esteem. Since the dawn of civilization, all the races and clans around the world has understood and accepted them as one of the main forces of life. Their growth and death, the elasticity of their branches, the sensitivity, the annual fall and revival of their foliage – everything were carefully observed and perceived as powerful symbols of life, decay and resurrection. So, in all the ancient civilizations, trees have been symbolized and/or worshipped in various form and expression. In this process, they have also been imposed with some deep and sacred meanings and hence offered with an important place in all the mythologies and religions.

In this connection, the concept of ‘World Tree’ is the most ancient cross-cultural symbol representing the construction of this universe. It’s a motif present in several religions and mythologies, particularly the Indo-European, Siberian and Native American traditions. It is represented as a colossal tree, connecting the heavens, the earth and the underground.

This ‘World Tree’ may also be strongly connected to the motif of the ‘Tree of Life’ – which is depicted as a tree with many branches. It’s a mystic concept referring to the interconnection of all life on earth and signifying a common descent in evolution. It has been used in science, religion, philosophy, mythology, and many other areas.

Both of these – the symbol and the motif – were/are extremely popular in many of the mythologies. They also appear in various forms in several folklore, culture and legend – often relating to immortality or fertility. And thus, they hold a cultural and religious significance to the people of the clan from and for whom do they appear.

Apart from this, some other trees that have been featured in mythical form and expression are the Banyan and the Asvattha or Pipul or Peepal (Ficus religiosa) in Hinduism, the Bodhi in Buddhism, the Tree of Knowledge in Judaism and Christianity, the Oak in Slavic and Finnish mythology, and the modern tradition of the Christmas Tree in German mythology. On the other hand, in case of the folk-tribal religions and folklores, trees are often said to be the residence
of tree-spirits. For example, the Egyptian Book of the Dead has mentioned Sycamores (Dumur, kind of fig tree) as part of the scenery, where the soul of the deceased rests in peace.

(ii)

The ancient Indian tradition has always put much emphasis on environmental ethics. It has always believed in ecological responsibility and considered this Earth as their mother. And in this connection, Trees in Indian mythology and folklore have always been perceived as sacred; an hence worshipped in each and every corner.

Flora in general plays a central role in the Indian culture, which has a large an ancient tradition of vegetarianism. The antiquity of tree-worship in this country can be traced back t the Indus Valley Civilization. Later on, the hymns of the Vedas also contain references to suc sacred trees and plants because of their being associated with certain deities and because of the potent medicinal properties. The symbolism of tree has been mentioned in the Rg-Veda (book 7 hymn 135), and Bhāgavat-Gītā (ch 15, sutra 1-4). The scriptures also mention that worshipping trees like Kalpa Vṛksa and Chaitya Vṛksa have been an ancient Indian practice; which is continuin even today all over India – both in the rural and urban areas.

Apart from worshipping, the Indians have also maintained a close proximity with the trees in the daily life. Each local tradition bears a strong advocacy in favour of this age-old relationship; an hence plants and trees were – and still are – closely associated with several Indian rituals an beliefs. We have come to know about one such instance where, a productive tree was believed t be fertilizing a childless woman, while a fertile woman could also do the same to a barren tree. Th Mahābhārata has raised almost a somewhat similar voice. It says that even if there is only one tre full of flowers and fruits in a village, that place becomes worthy of worship and respect.

Therefore, we can understand how important a place – both ritual and spiritual – has been assigne to these trees in Indian legends and history. And in this regard, we can go through a long list of tree along with the myths and traditions related to them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tree</th>
<th>Myth and Tradition</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aśok (Saraca asoca)</td>
<td>The Hindus, Buddhists and Jainas worship this tree. Myth says that Gautam Buddha was born under this tree in Lumbini. Lord Mahāvīr renounced the world under an Aśok tree in Vaisali. This tree is dedicated to Kām Dev, the God of Love. Rāmāyan also mentions about the Aśok-forest, where Hanumān meets Sītā for the first time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bodhi Tree</td>
<td>This is an old sacred fig tree located in Bodh Gaya, under which Gautam Buddha attained enlightenment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coconut (Cocos nucifera)</td>
<td>This tree is known as 'Kalpa Vṛksa' (wish fulfilling tree) in Sanskrit and enjoys special importance in most Hindu households. The fruit is believed to represent Lord Śiv and the three black marks on its shell depict his eyes. Hence, it is used for all the religious and ritual purposes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mango (Mangifera indica)</td>
<td>Signifying love and fertility, its leaf is used for religious and social ceremonies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nimba or Neem (Azadirachta indica)</td>
<td>This tree, for ages, has played a substantial role in Ayurvedic medicine and agriculture.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 "Plants are mothers and Goddesses." – Rg Veda Samhitā (book X, sutra 97.4)
| **Kadamba**  
| (Neolamarckia cadamba) | There are various myths about the origin of this tree. According to one, it's assumed to be the 'Tree of Buddhism'. Several traditions have established the association of this tree with Lord Kṛṣṇa. His dance with consort Rādha and other gopis under this tree is a very popular legend and is often manifested in the miniature paintings and relief sculptures. This tree is held consecrated by the devotees of Lord Kṛṣṇa, while its flowers are used as offerings at various temples. |
| **Peepul or Asvattha**  
| (Ficus religiosa) | This is also a sacred fig tree and a symbol for happiness, prosperity, longevity and good luck. In Bhāgavad-Gītā, Lord Kṛṣṇa has said that among trees, I am Asvattha. |
| **Sthala-vrksa** | In South India, temples were constructed at places where certain trees were considered as the home of a particular deity. Later these trees were considered as 'Sthala-vrksa’s. Coconut tree is one of the most popular examples of this kind. The sweet-smelling Jasmine (mullai), which is used in worship in temples and homes, is the sacred tree of many Śiv temples in South India. |
| **Vata or Banyan**  
| (Ficus Indica) | This tree symbolizes the Hindu trinity – Brahmā-Viśnu-Maheśvar – the lords of birth, life and death. Depicting life and fertility in many Hindu cultures, this tree is also worshiped by those who are childless. |
| **Vilva or Bel or Wood apple**  
| (Feronia limonia Swingle) | The Skanda Purāṇ mentions that Goddess Pārvati’s perspiration, which fell on the ground while she performed penance, gave birth to it. Hindu mythology also says that various incarnations of Pārvati reside in each part of this tree. |

*fig 2. A wooden idol is being worshipped beneath a tree, in front of the Garcanṭi Temple, Raspur, PS Amta, Howrah*
In this way, the Indians have developed an extensive and intensive relationship with the trees; which was inevitably reflected in their choice of materials for the making of divine images for worship. As a result, besides clay and stone, wood also became a natural and automatic choice for them.

(iii)

There are no substantial evidences available regarding the exact date, when the tradition of making divine images in wood was started in India. Instead, we could only come to know that the people of this soil were well into this practice as early as in the 6-cent BC; whereas the earliest Bengali connection to this pan-Indian phenomenon could hardly be traced back to the reign of Mauryan emperor Asok (c 274-237 BC). However, none of these ancient references has been advocated by any material specimen, which – however – is to be assigned much later.

(iv)

Before we turn the following pages and begin our journey through this aesthetic approach, towards the wooden idols of West Bengal, it would be appropriate and beneficial to have a clear idea about what exactly is meant by the term ‘idol’ itself.

► The Oxford English Dictionary (second edition, vol VII) says that ‘idol’ means “...images or figures of divine beings and saints, and, more generally... any material of worship...” It also says that its “an image, effigy, or figure of a person or thing; esp. a statue.”

► The Chambers Dictionary (new edition) has described this term as “an image of a god... and object of worship... an object of love, admiration and honour in an extreme degree...”

► Whereas, The New Lexicon Webster’s Dictionary of the English Language (Deluxe Encyclopaedic Edition, 1991) has quenched our thirst for more specification by saying that an ‘idol’ is “an image of a god constructed of wood, stone etc. and worshipped as if it were the god it represents...”

These three descriptions together have come up with a clear vision and we can easily understand what exactly the ‘wooden idols’ actually are. In addition to this, the title itself has denominated the geographical boundaries of this aesthetic approach. Though, in certain cases, we had to go across the borders as well – Bangladesh in particular – in order to study the earliest material specimens; since the historical accomplishments of the west (Bengal) can never be separated from that of the eastern provinces. However, for several unavoidable factors, we have limited our main course of study within the political territory of West Bengal only.

(v)

The approach towards these wooden idols is basically an extension of a journey through various rural corners of West Bengal, which is always a leaning experience regarding the traditional art and culture of this very soil. In this connection, one can easily discover a unique context in the daily
living of the Bengali folk – mostly of Brahmanic and other folk-tribal belief. (Even one can find some occasional participation by the Muslims in this regard, which glorifies the secular character of this wide spread phenomenon.)

This very context is manifested as a multi-faceted and multi-dynamic character of a collective subconscious – embracing all the socio-economic-religious-cultural and philosophical factors. And it's through this collective characteristic that the day-to-day activities of the Bengali folk are related – both externally and internally – with the deity that they worship, which is often represented by an idol made of clay, wood, stone, metal etc.

▶ Besides clay, wood has also been used by the Bengali artisans for making divine images and the antiquity of both these traditions is quite old.

▶ In comparison to clay, another ancient medium of making divine images, earlier specimens in wood are available in a greater number. The reason behind is quite understandable; as the clay-images – unless and until they are baked – don’t have the life of the wooden ones and hence perish very soon.

▶ The size and volume of the wooden idols of Bengal are quite significant in comparison to the divine images made of stone or metal. Available specimens of the metal images are mostly very small and – apart from a handful of exceptions – one can rarely get any stone image of a real big scale.

On the other hand, many of their wooden counterparts are really large – as large as 7-9 feet or even more. The most significant specimens of this genre are Balarām of Boro and the Mahākāli of Khalor – both around 11 feet in height.

As a whole, this very tradition is seemed to be something quite exceptional and extraordinary. Because, even beyond their religious context, these wooden idols appeared to be sculpturally independent, as well as aesthetically significant. The stylistic accomplishments that we observed in them were extremely rare and unique in character; which is not found in any other local tradition of this Indian subcontinent. As a whole, these idols appeared to be representing a significant school of sculpture typical to Bengal; and hence something worthy of an aesthetic quest.

(vi)

In terms of geographical area (see the map in page xv), the present work deals with the wooden idols of West Bengal; with an obvious historical focus on Bangladesh, since most of the specimens of appreciable antiquity are kept in Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka. Otherwise, most of the chosen objects are from the districts like Kolkata, South 24 Parganas, Howrah, East Medinipur, West Medinipur, Bankura, Hooghly, North 24 Parganas, Nadia, Bardhaman, Birbhum, Murshidabad and Jalpaiguri. There is, however, no specimen from Maldah, North and South Dinajpur, Coach Bihar and Darjeeling since information is not available about any such comprehensive tradition in those areas. Even Maldah and the two Dinajpurs, in spite of having an age old tradition in woodcarving, do not make any wooden idol – as they consider their ‘Mukha’ (wooden mask) to be the highest form of visual divinity.

The present study extends chronologically from the earliest times to the recent past, though the obvious focus is on the specimens ranging from 9-12 and 16-17 cent AD, as the ones belonging to the other periods are either few in numbers or almost repetitive – all in terms of content, style and aesthetics.
The entire content of this thesis has been divided into three gross divisions and every division has chapter of variable numbers under their heads.

The first one – under chapter I – deals with the antiquity and historical background of the art of woodcarving in India and thus in Bengal; and hence has been dedicated for discussing all these in detail.

The second division includes four chapters, dwelling on the main theme. Chapter II provides us with a comprehensive account on the history of making wooden idols in West Bengal. It shows how this ancient tradition has developed, flourished and evolved on this very soil throughout the ages. Chapter III provides us with a long list of wooden idols available in West Bengal; mentioning the names of the district, subdivision, block and/or police station, Pinal Code or mouza\(^2\) and address or name of the locality. Late Tarapada Santra has provided us with a list of 144 specimens, whereas information about 691 pieces has been enlisted in this thesis. Chapter IV gives us all the technical details regarding material, artisan and the technique; while the next one deals with the aesthetic significance of wooden idols of West Bengal along with a detailed comparison with the nearest tradition of Indian origin Orissa.

The third division comprises two chapters out of which the former one summarizes the changing face and facets of this tradition throughout the passage of time, while the later – which also is eventually the last one – draws the conclusive connotations.

However, the titles of all the chapters are quite self-explanatory and each of them has been divided into sub-chapters for further clarifications. A quick look through the Contents would help the reader to accumulate a basic idea about what exactly they have dealt with.

Being divided under these titles and subtitles, the following pages have been devoted to an in-depth study of the wooden idols, found in different corners of West Bengal; highlighting the common denominator they belong to and the stylistic differences they exhibit. In this process, efforts have been made to compare their uniqueness with the sculptures made in other mediums, as well as to show their relationship with the main stream of pan-Indian art. Thus, the entire thesis – as a whole – is destined with an aesthetic approach in establishing the wooden idols of West Bengal in the panoramic world of art and aesthetics.

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\(^2\) In Bengal, a *mouza* is a type of administrative division, corresponding to a specific land area within which there may be one or more settlements. Before 20-cent AD, the term used to refer to a revenue collection unit in a *Parganā* or revenue district. But, later on, as populations increased and villages grew in number, the concept of *mouza* declined in importance. Today it has become mostly synonymous with the *grām* or village.