

# Wooden Idols of India: the Antiquity of a Traditional Excellence

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Since time immemorial, the people of India have always adored wood as a suitable plastic medium in their daily-life. The easy availability and ready tractability of the material was greatly used by the artists and craftsmen of this subcontinent, both in their architectural and sculptural endeavors. Unfortunately, the perishable nature of wood – intrigued by the hot and humid climate of the region – didn't allow the earlier specimens to survive till date. However, plenty of other resources testify the antiquity of woodcarving activities within the panorama of Indian art.<sup>i</sup> It's a long traditional ancestry, beginning from the days of Indus Valley, which has evolved through the ages to remain alive even today.

In this process, the age-old passion of the Indian folk has always been manifested in multiple forms of visual expression – both secular and religious – that include the tradition of making divine images as well. Since quite an early time, though not identified yet, these religious idols have been made of wood<sup>ii</sup>; while clay, stone, metal and other mediums were also of frequent use.

## The Earliest Reference

The earliest reference to any wooden idol made in India goes to the legend of *Jīvantasvāmī* – a sandalwood image of *Mahāvīra* or *Vardhamāna*<sup>iii</sup>, the last *Tīrthāṅkara* of Jain pantheon. It is said that the idol was carved in his lifetime and worshipped by his followers.<sup>iv</sup> This myth, though not materially substantiated, is an obvious proof in favor of an artistic practice – prevailing in the sixth century BC. However, it was only after another seven centuries that we find the oldest literary mention of wood as a suitable plastic medium for the sculpting of cult-icons.<sup>v</sup>

## Textual References

The first concrete evidence to the tradition of making wooden idols comes in the form of an epigraph, hailed from today's Andhra Pradesh. This inscription of *Abhirā Vāsudeva*, dated c. AD 278, describes an eight-armed wooden sculpture of Lord *Viṣṇu* – named as *Aṣṭabhujaśvāmī*. This effigy, said to have medicinal and energizing properties,<sup>vi</sup> was installed on the Siddhalahari hill bordering Nagarjunikonda valley. The specimen, however, is not available today; yet the reference

indeed ensures a living tradition in the third century AD. The next thirteen hundred odd years saw the tradition continuing with its vitality and context – and being documented in a series of indigenous literature.

All these texts, variably dated c. second-sixteenth century AD, tell us about a prevailing convention for the classification of divine images – based on the materials used in making them. They also tell us, categorically, how each and every such classification has referred to wood as one of the most suitable medium for this purpose.

<u>Source</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Classification</u>
<i>Matsya Purāṇa</i> <sup>vii</sup> (Ch 258, <i>sūtra</i> 20-21)	c. late-second / late-fourth / sixth century AD	Gold, silver, copper, jewels, stone, iron, wood and alloy. <sup>viii</sup>
<i>Mānasara Śilpaśāstra</i> (ch 51) <sup>x</sup>	c. fifth century AD <sup>ix</sup>	Gold, silver, copper, stone, wood, <i>sudhā</i> (stucco, also mortar and plaster), <i>śarkarā</i> (gravel or grit), <i>ābhāsa</i> (painting <sup>xi</sup> ) and earth
<i>Hayaśīrṣa Pañcarātrama</i> ( <i>ādi kānda</i> , ch 15, <i>sūtra</i> 1-2) <sup>xii</sup>	c. fifth-eleventh / seventh-eighth century / AD 800 <sup>xiii</sup>	<i>Mṛṇmayī</i> (clay), <i>dārughāṣṭī</i> (wood), <i>lohajā</i> (iron), <i>ratnajā</i> (jewels), <i>gandhajā</i> (fragrance), <i>śailajā</i> (stone) and <i>kousumī</i> (flowers)
<i>Devī Purāṇa</i> (ch 22, <i>sūtra</i> 9-10) <sup>xiv</sup>	c. fifth / eleventh century AD <sup>xv</sup>	<i>Svarṇamayī</i> (gold), <i>rajatamayī</i> (silver), <i>mṛṇmayī</i> and <i>dārumayī</i>
<i>Vṛhat Samhitā</i> (ch 60, <i>sūtra</i> 4-5) <sup>xvi</sup>	c. early-sixth century AD	<i>Dārumayī</i> , <i>mṛṇmayī</i> , <i>maṇimayī</i> (jewels), <i>sauvarṇī</i> , <i>rajatamayī</i> , <i>tāmramayī</i> (bronze) and <i>śailī</i>
<i>Śāmba Purāṇa</i> (ch 30, <i>sūtra</i> 2) <sup>xvii</sup>	c. AD 500-800 / 500-900 <sup>xviii</sup>	<i>Svarṇamayī</i> , <i>raupyamayī</i> (silver), <i>tāmrī</i> , <i>pārthivi</i> (clay), <i>prastaramayī</i> (of stone), <i>vārkṣī</i> (wood) and <i>ālekhya</i> (painting)
<i>Bhaviṣya Purāṇa</i> (vol. I, ch 131, <i>sūtra</i> 5-8) <sup>xix</sup>	c. AD 500-1500	Wood, clay, jewel, gold, silver, copper and stone
<i>Śukranītisāra</i> (ch 4, sec 4, <i>sūtra</i> 147-151) <sup>xx</sup>	--	Sand, paste, paint, enamel, earth, wood, stone and metal

In brief, all these scriptures proclaim in favor of seven major varieties – while each list contains wood as one of the most common phenomenon.

Such evidences are available also in other medieval writings like *Vṛhat Samhitā*<sup>xxi</sup> and *Viṣṇudharmottaram*<sup>xxii</sup>. They have discussed in length about all the intricate details on the ways and means of procuring suitable timber for the fashioning of divine images. Both have emphasized, in particular, on four significant aspects:

- suitability of different varieties of wood,
- trees that should be considered as forbidden, and
- suitable time for entering the forest, and
- technique of cutting down the required tree/s.

Similar instructions could also be traced in other texts like *Viśvakarmā Prakāśa*<sup>xxiii</sup> and *Rājaballabhava*.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Mention could be made, in this connection, about the historical accounts by Huen Tsang or Hiuen Tsang<sup>xxv</sup>, the Chinese pilgrim, who came to India in the first-half of the seventh century AD. During his visit, he encountered a reference to – or the actual specimen of – a wooden idol of *Kuan-tzu-tsai Pusa*.

*“According to the Life the marvelous image of the Kuan-tzu-tsai Pusa was made of sandal wood, and it was enclosed by railings...”*<sup>xxvi</sup>

Here, *Kuan-tzu-tsai Pusa* is none other than *Avalokiteśvara*, one of the sixteen forms of *Bodhisattva*; and it's a sandal-wood image of him that the author has written about. The actual specimen, however, is not available today. But the reference advocates in favor of wood, as a useful material for the making of Buddhist-icons during late-sixth or early-seventh century AD.



Fig 1. Buddhist *Tārā*, c. 9th-10th century AD, 24 x 10 x 8 inches. Present location unknown. (Photo: Marg, 36/1, 1982, p. 84)

Fig 2. Bodhisattva Lokanātha, c. 9th/11th century AD, 49 x 17 inches. Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka. (Photo: Banu, Zinat Mahrukh: 2003, Bānlādeśera Dāruśilpa, Dhaka: BNM, pl. 128)

Fig 3. Sthiracakra Mañjuśrī, c. 11th century AD, 54 x 16 inches. BNM, Dhaka. (Photo: Banu: 2003, Bānlādeśera..., pl. 129)

Continuation of this phenomenon has later been substantiated by a freestanding sculpture of *Tārā*<sup>xxvii</sup>, the Buddhist goddess (see Figure 1), discovered by late (Dr) Moreswar Dikshit. In

terms of iconography and style, it belongs to c. ninth-tenth century AD and is considered to be an import from eastern India. Similar Buddhist icons – collected in a monastery at Chittagong, Bangladesh – ranging in date from about ninth to twelfth-thirteenth century AD,<sup>xxviii</sup> could also be mentioned in this connection.

### The Earliest Specimen

Most Indian wooden idols of perceptible antiquity and aesthetic excellence – either originate, or belong to the eastern region of this country. Earliest of this genre is the *Tārā*-image mentioned above, hailed from the debris of cave XXX-I at Kanheri, near Mumbai of Maharashtra. But unfortunately, its present location is yet unknown. A photograph – published in *Marg* (36/1, 1982) – remains the only evidence, reminding about the *Pāla*-figures from Bihar and Bengal<sup>xxix</sup>.

Among the surviving specimens, *Bodhisattva Lokanātha*<sup>xxx</sup> (see Figure 2) from Tongibari of Munshigunj, Dhaka (in today's Bangladesh), is considered to be the oldest one. Both in terms of form and style, it bears a striking similarity with the figure from Kanheri; and hence could be assigned to c. ninth-tenth century AD. Yet official records have opted for a much later date – i.e., the eleventh<sup>xxxi</sup> – making it contemporaneous with another specimen from Rampal, also of Munshigunj. This latter one is of *Sthiracakra Maṇjuśrī* (see Figure 3), which in that case has also its share of the claim. However, both the specimens are presently on display at Bangladesh National Museum (E-189 and E-188) at Dhaka.

In this connection, refer could be made of the famous *Jagannātha*-triad of Puri in Orissa, which was originally installed sometime in c. eleventh century AD. It thus makes the tradition of *Balarāma-Subhadrā-Jagannātha* contemporaneous to the above-mentioned specimens from Bengal. But the actual specimens in the temple today are not of that antiquity; as the idols have customarily been replicated and replaced in regular intervals.<sup>xxxii</sup>

It's true, indeed, that the earliest surviving wooden idols in India are not as old as that of from Egypt or China. But their refined approach and stylistic maturity certainly affirm a high quality practice, generated by an extremely old and rich traditional ancestry.<sup>xxxiii</sup> It had a long history of evolution, though undocumented, which finally resulted into the new school of Indian sculpture – taking shape in the eastern provinces in c. AD 800.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Following the earlier traditions, this new school also embraced wood – equally with other mediums like clay, stone, metal etc. – for the execution of plastic forms in relief and in-the-round. This very genre of wooden sculptures kept on flourishing till c. AD 1200, while the making of divine images remained as a virile and integral part. After losing volume and scale in the next three centuries, it regained strength and vitality through the renaissance of sixteenth. It again evolved, finally, through the following centuries in the dynamism and abundance of Assam, Bengal, Karnataka, Kerala, Nagaland, Orissa and Rajasthan.

### NOTES & REFERENCES

<sup>i</sup> "...a motif was not necessarily invented or borrowed at the date of its first appearance in permanent material; indeed, a first appearance in stone is almost tantamount to proof of an earlier currency in wood." – Ananda K Coomarswamy. see (1972). *Introduction to Indian Art*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal. p 17

<sup>ii</sup> see Dasgupta, Kalyan Kumar. (1990). *Wood Carvings of Eastern India*. Kolkata: Firma KLM Pvt. Ltd. p 13

<sup>iii</sup> Died in c. BC 527.

<sup>iv</sup> see *ibid*, p 11. In this connection, mention could be made of another old tradition that refers to a wooden effigy of *Yakṣa Moggarāpāni* in a shrine outside the city of *Rājagrīha* (modern Rajgir, dist Nalanda, Bihar).

<sup>v</sup> The other mediums are gold, silver, copper, jewels, stone, iron and alloy (Ch 258, *sūtra* 20-1). [see Tarkaratna, Panchanan & Nyayateertha, Sreejib (tr. & ed.). (*BS* 1394). *Matsyapurāṇam*. Kolkata: Nava Bharat Publishers. p 892]

<sup>vi</sup> see Chakraborty, Shyamal Kanti (ed.). (2001). *Wood Carvings of Bengal in Gurusaday Museum*. Kolkata: Gurusaday Museum. p 7; also see Dasgupta, Kalyan Kumar. (2000). *Pratimāśilpe Hindu Devadevī*. Kolkata: *Paścimāṅga Bāṅglā Ākādemi*. pp 11-2

<sup>vii</sup> see the Preface of Agrawala, Vasudeva S. (1963). *Matsya Purana: A Study*. Benares: All India Kashiraj

<sup>viii</sup> see Tarkaratna & Nyayateertha (tr & ed) *BS* 1394: p 892

<sup>ix</sup> see Mitra, A (ed.). (undated). *Census 1951, West Bengal – The Tribes and Castes of West Bengal*. p 352

<sup>x</sup> see Acharya, Prasanna Kumar. (1934/1981). *Manasara Series*. Vol. II (Indian Architecture According to Manasara – Silpastra). New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation. p 70

<sup>xi</sup> Prasanna Kumar Acharya has described *ābhāsa* as marble (!) and has subdivided it into three kinds: *citra*, *ardha-citra* and *ābhāsa* (i.e., *citrābhāsa*). According to him, *Citra* is *sarvāṅga-drśyamāna* hence transparent (!), while the other two are half-transparent and partially (one-fourth) transparent [see Acharya 1934/1981 (vol. II): pp 70-1]. But, it seems that *ābhāsa* has nothing to do with marble, but painting; and its classification is purely on the basis of form. Hence, they should be defined as full-figure (*sarvāṅga-drśyamāna*), three-quarter and portrait.

<sup>xii</sup> see Sankhyateertha, Pandit Bhupan Mohan (ed.). (1952). *Hayasirsa Pancharatram*. (vol. II). Rajshahi: Varendra Research Society. p 1

<sup>xiii</sup> see *An Introductory Note* by Ksitish Chandra Sarkar (pp ix-x) and the *Foreword* by Prof Dines Ch Bhattacharya (pp v-vi) [Sankhyateertha (ed.) 1952: (vol. I)]; see Dasgupta 2000: p 25; also see Smith, H Daniel. (1975). *A Descriptive Bibliography of the Printed Texts of the Pancarātragrama*. Vol. I. Baroda: Oriental Institute. p 550

<sup>xiv</sup> see Tarkaratna, Acharya Panchanan & Nyayateertha, Sreejib (tr.). (*BS* 1384). *Devīpurāṇam: Maharsi Vedavyāsa-Viracitam*. Kolkata: Nava Bharat Publishers. p 143

<sup>xv</sup> *ibid* (see the Preface)

<sup>xvi</sup> see Bhat, M Ramakrishna (tr.). (1982). *Varahamihira's Brhat Samhita*. (part II). Delhi: Motilal Banarsi das. pp 568-9

<sup>xvii</sup> see Goswami, Bijan Bihari (tr. & ed.). (*BS* 1390). *Vaśiṣṭha-viracitam Śrī Śāmba Purāṇam*. Kolkata: Nava Bharat Publishers. p 177

<sup>xviii</sup> see Rocher, Ludo. (1986). *A History of Indian Literature*. Vol. II, Fasc. 3 (The Puranas, ed. Jan Gonda. Wiesbaden, Otto Harrassowitz). Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz. p 219

<sup>xix</sup> see Arora, Raj Kumar. (1972). *Historical and Cultural Data from the Bhavisya Purana*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers (P) Ltd. p 198

<sup>xx</sup> see Sarkar, Benoy Kumar (tr.). (1914). *The Sacred Books of the Hindus*. Vol. XII (The Sukraniti). Allahabad: The Panini Office, Bhuvaneswari Asrama, Bahadurgunj. pp 167-8

<sup>xxi</sup> Written by *Varāhamihira* in c. sixth century AD. See Ch XLIII, LIII and LIX [Bhat, M Ramakrishna (tr.) 1982 (part II): pp 564-7]

<sup>xxii</sup> Dated abruptly c. AD 400-500/450-650/600-900/600-1000. See Khanda III, ch 89 [Shah, Priyabala (tr.). (2002). *Sri Visnudharmottara Purana*. Third Khanda. Delhi: Parimal Publications. pp 214-6]

<sup>xxiii</sup> see Dasgupta 1990: p 7

<sup>xxiv</sup> see *ibid*

<sup>xxv</sup> Also known as Hiuen Tsiang, Hsuan-tsang, Yuan Chwang and Xuanzang.

<sup>xxvi</sup> see Waters, Thomas. (1961). *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India*. Vol. II. Delhi: Munshi Ram Manohar Lal. p 175

<sup>xxvii</sup> In *Mahāyāna* Buddhism Tārā is a female *Bodhisattva*, who appears as a female Buddha in the Vajrayāna branch of the religion. She is known as the ‘mother-of-liberation’, and represents the virtues of success in work and achievements. In the Indian subcontinent, Tārā is a Tantric meditation deity, whose practice is used by devotees of the Tibetan branch of Vajrayāna-Buddhism in order to develop certain inner qualities related to compassion and emptiness. However, Tārā is actually the generic name for a set of *Buddhas* or *Bodhisattvas* of similar aspect. These may be understood as different aspects of the same quality, as *Bodhisattvas* are often considered metaphoric for Buddhist virtues.

<sup>xxviii</sup> see Spooner, D Brainerd (ed.). (1923/1990). *Archaeological Survey of India, Annual Report, 1921-22*. Delhi: Swati Publications. p 81

<sup>xxix</sup> Here ‘Bengal’ refers to the region, comprising today’s West Bengal (the Indian state) and Bangladesh (the neighboring country).

<sup>xxx</sup> In general, all the *Buddhas* and *Bodhisattvas* can be called as *Lokanātha*, i.e., lord of the world; but in a more specific sense of the iconography, he should be considered as one of the forms of *Avalokiteśvara*. Generally, the lord is represented alone and is occasionally accompanied by Tārā and *Hayagrīva*.

<sup>xxxi</sup> According to the record of BNM.

<sup>xxxii</sup> This traditional ritual known as ‘*Navakalevara*’ takes place, only when a double Āśāhr̥ha month (June-July) appears in the local astronomical calendar – usually on every eighth / eleventh / nineteenth year.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> “... a reasonably large-corpus of pre-Pāla sculptures... shows a continuous development from the introduction of figural art in Eastern India, many centuries before the Pāla period.” [see Asher, Frederick M. (1980). *The Art of Eastern India, 300-800*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. p 4]

<sup>xxxiv</sup> see *ibid*; also see Banerji, R D. (1933). *Eastern Indian School of Mediaeval Sculpture*. Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India. p 18

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