

## Wooden Sculptures from Bardowā in the Assam State Museum

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Wood has been an important medium for the artisans to carve out their products. Not only in India but in the other parts of the world as well wood has served as an important medium for art productions. So far our country is concerned we have the examples of wooden art right from the Mauryan period, as is evident from the pieces housed in the Patna Museum. The wooden rafters used in the Bhājā caves in Maharashtra are other early examples. In the Himachal Pradesh as well wood seems to have remained in common use, however, the earliest specimens available there are datable to c.8<sup>th</sup> cent. C.E. examples of pre-eighth century C.E. might have been lost due to the perishable nature of the material.

The same seems to have been the case with Assam as well. Here the earliest available examples are to be attributed to the Ahom period (c. 1228-1826), worth mentioning are those present in the Vaiṣṇava *satras*. These depict subjects and themes from the *Bhāgavata* and other Purāṇas, but the Śaiva and Śākta material is conspicuously absent. These wooden pieces, independent figures, carved plaques or the decorative parts have been painted with white, yellow, deep blue, red and black colour as per need. These figures were meant to be fixed on walls of the *satrās* for which necessary holes have been provided therein. The depictions also reveal some peculiarities of *satra* style carving.

One such Vaiṣṇava-*satra* was there at Bardowā in Nagaon District. At present the old building of the *satra* has been replaced by a new Nāmaghara but the old wooden pieces have been stored in the Site Museum at Bardowā and a few have been shifted to the Assam State Museum. These are datable to 18th century, one or two might be still later in date.

The Sculptures in the Bardowā Site Museum have been discussed by Naren Kalita in his Assamese work "Bardowār Śilpavāstu."<sup>1</sup> Those in the Assam State Museum form the subject matter of the present paper.<sup>2</sup>

### **Viṣṇu (31x26 cm., Acc. No. 7651, Fig. 8.1)**

Free standing four-armed Viṣṇu on Garuḍa devoid of emblems in hands; normal right hand missing, absence of attributes is in keeping with the style of the later period in Assam. Viṣṇu's body, crown, lower garment, ornaments and even the eyes have been painted with deep blue, yellow and white colours respectively. Garuḍa below is in *namaskāra-mudrā*. Carving of Viṣṇu and Garuḍa faces evince elements of folk style.

### **Viṣṇu (31x26 cm., Acc. No. 7652, Fig. 8.2)**

Stele shows Viṣṇu standing with *cakra*, *gadā*, *padma* and *śaṅkha* in hands. He wears *dhotī* and *uttariya (aṅgavastra)*, has a crown on head along with other ornaments on body. The nose of the god, originally a separate piece to be fixed in the provided hole, is now missing. The *tilaka* mark, eye brows, eyes, ornaments are white in colour, the garments are yellow and the emblems too are painted in white, with red and black decorations.

The stele in blue colour has three holes on either side of the feet and in the upper portion for fixing it on the wall.

### **Kūrma-avatāra (26x28 cm, Acc. No. ASM.3966, Fig. 8.3)**

The plaque shows four-armed Viṣṇu with usual emblems in the hands emitting from the mouth of a big tortoise. Right border of the plaque has two lines of an indistinct inscription. A hole is there on either side of the figure. Deep blue colour painted on the image is now vanishing. The icon shows folkish traits.

### **Narasimha-avatāra (36x29 cm. Acc. No. ASM.3968, Fig. 8.4)**

Narasimha tearing the belly of the demon Hiranyakaśipu, who is in the lap of the God. The God carries a big bow in extra left hand, the arrow in right is not distinct. The demon holds the sword and shield in hands. The damaged border and back of the plaque have *hiṅgula* (vermilion) and *haritāla* (yellow orpiment) colour paints.

### **Paraśurāma-avatāra (28x28 cm., Acc. No. ASM.3969, Fig. 8.5)**

Standing Paraśurāma has axe in the left hand, the object of the right hand is half broken. The God has semicircular tufts of hair reaching the shoulders. His lower garment is somewhat alike a modern frock used by children. There are two small holes on right and one on left at the lower level.



Fig.8.1 : *Viṣṇu* (31 x 26 cm), ASM-7651



Fig.8.2 : *Viṣṇu* (31 x 26 cm), ASM-7652



Fig.8.3 : Kūrmāvātāra (26 x 28 cm), ASM-3966



Fig.8.4 : Narasiṅha (36 x 29 cm), ASM-3968



Fig.8.5 : Paraśurāma (28 x 28 cm), ASM-3969



Fig.8.6 : Halirāma (26 x 45.5 cm), ASM-7654

**Halirāma or Balarāma (26x45.5 cm, Acc. No.7654, Fig. 8.6)**

Two-armed Balarāma has plough held in both hands. The face and feet of the God are little damaged. The lower portions of the plaque are cut probably in order to fix it on the wall.

**Buddha (31x26 cm, ACC. No. ASM.3967, Fig. 8.7)**

Buddha, curiously in *namaskāra-mudrā* seated in European style (*pralambapādāsana*) on a four-legged seat. His long *jaṭās* have been prominently shown touching the seat itself. The right side of the plaque is broken, while the left shows decorative motives in relief. The pose of the hands and the sitting posture of Buddha are somewhat peculiar.

**Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma(27x25 cm., Acc. No. ASN. 3970, Fig. 8.8)**

The panel shows two male figures moving to their right, the face of one with crown is in profile, while the other is enface. Both appear with *gadā*-like *āyudha* in the right hand (the crowned figure may be holding *śaṅkha* in the left). Lower garments of both are similar to each other.

The second figure, on the basis of manuscript paintings can be identified as Balarāma; if so, then the crowned one can of course be Kṛṣṇa. Naren Kalitā also agrees with this sort of identification.

**Elephant rider (46x25 cm, Acc. No. ASM.3925, Fig. 8.9)**

A wooden block is depicting an elephant with its rider (*māhāvata*). The latter carrying the goad in hand, is controlling the walking elephant. Lower part of the block shows a reclining male figure flanked by floral decoration. This figure is painted in red, while the elephant is in black and the rider is in yellow.

**Gajavyāla/Gaja-śārdūla (45x28 cm, Acc. No. ASM.3972, Fig. 8.10)**

The Elephant and Lion motif is common in Indian art and architecture. The wooden piece under reference showing a lion placing its front legs on the back of an elephant has been painted with *hiṅgula* and *haritāla* colours. The stylized lion is in keeping with the *satra* style.

**Winged Lion (37x21 cm, Acc. No. 3923. 38x23 cm. Acc. No.3924, Figs. 8.11,12)**

These two wooden lions with wings might have been decorative parts of one or two

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Editors Note : The figure seems to be not of Buddha but of some devotee seated in *namaskāra-mudrā*.



Fig.8.7 : *Buddha* (31 x 26 cm), ASM-3967



Fig.8.8 : *Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma* (27 x 25 cm), ASM-3970



Fig.8.9 : Elephant (46 x 25 cm), ASM-3925



Fig.8.10 : Gaja-vyāla – Elephant and Lion motif (45 x 28 cm), ASM-3972



Fig.8.11 : Winged Lion (37 x 21 cm), ASM-3923



Fig.8.12 : Winged Lion (38 x 23 cm), ASM-3924

different seats intended to be used as stands for sacred books like *Bhāgavata*. One of the two preserves the original red paint. Both are good specimens of *satra* style.

In our collection, as well as in Barodwā Site Museum Collection Matsya, Vāmana, Varāha, Rāma and Kalki are absent. Kalita has, however, published a photograph of Kalki also. The Gaja-vyāla is to be seen at both the places, but winged lions are absent in Kalita's descriptions.

In the Assam State Museum there are two Viṣṇu images from the Janiā *satra*, which are of different types, though the style is same.

### References :

1. N. Kalita, "*Bardowār Śilpavāstu*", Nagaon, 1985, pp.41-51.
2. R.D. Choudhury, "Some Wooden Sculptures Newly Collected for Assam State Museum", *Rupāñjali*, Ed. Kalyan Kumar Ganguli and S.S. Biswas, Kolkata, 1986, pp. 279-282.