

Wood Carvings of Sattras and Nam-ghars of Assam

[With Special Reference to Bardowa *Than*]

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www.tributetosankaradeva.org presents before the readers an important paper on Wood Carving in Assam which highlights one of the lesser known fields of the Sankaradeva Movement. Not many people perhaps know that some of the wood carvings of Assam are the '**finest specimens of the entire range of wood carving in the sub-continent**'. The writer of the piece is Dr Naren Kalita, eminent art-critic and scholar, who has also authored another valuable book on the subject entitled *Bardowar Silpavastu* (see Bibliography). The paper is redacted from the Journal of the Srimanta Sankaradeva Research Institute, Nagaon (2006).

The word *sattra* in the context of Assam Vaisnavism embraces, on the one hand, the congregation of devotees for regular religious services, and on the other, a complex with a distinctive architectural design, the central structure being a prayer-hall popularly known as **kirtan-ghar** or **nam-ghar**. Each village in Assam also possesses one or more community prayer-halls known by the same appellation of nam-ghar. Compared to kirtan-ghars in the sattras, the village nam-ghars are humbler in respect of architectural planning and also in the matter of richness of **wood carvings**. The area or areas of investigation of this paper will be restricted to the sattras and some of the kirtan-ghars which have not been organised in the manner of a sattra. It is also intended, in particular, to dwell on the repertoire of wood-carvings of Bardowa *Than* which incidentally happened to be the birth-place of **Mahapurusa Sankaradeva**. Bardowa is stated to be a *than* - a holy shrine - instead of being a sattra, because it was not organised like a sattra in style and function. However, it is flanked by two household sattras bearing the names Narowa and Salaguri respectively on its north and south. It is *than*, a seat of pilgrimage,

for containing some relics of the past which are directly related to the birth and activities of Sankaradeva.

Sankaradeva initiated a vigorous religious movement, the bhakti movement, with the doctrine of surrender to one God, **Krsna**, during the 15th - 16th centuries A.D. This movement, accompanied by a vigorous cultural upsurge, resulted primarily in the formation of a distinct regional identity and the creation of a uniquely Assamese style of architecture for the sattrā institution, which patronised a vernacular literary tradition besides taking beneath its facade the artistic creativities of the people in diverse fields. Wood-carving was one of the fields which in direct response to the movement and the cult of bhakti began to flourish as a major form of art of the people. Guided by an impulse to decorate the places of worship, the local artisans created stylistic variation in the medium of wood. Availability and easy accessibility of wood in the local environment provided support to the development of the art form.

The first community prayer-hall to hold regular prayers - apart from holding dance and drama recitals - was built at Barpeta at the instance of Mahapurusa Madhavadeva in late 16th century A.D. It was the ***Rangiyal-ghar***, a term equivalent in meaning with Skt. Rangagrha, and its association with dance and drama enhanced its significance as the first built-in premise for an auditorium in medieval Assam. Since then the community prayer-halls of the Vaisnavas have been functioning also as premises for dramatic presentations. Some of the biographers of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva relate that the pat-duwar or the principal door constituting the main entrance to the hall contained carvings of creeper designs called lata. Having observed the carvings and also in commendation of the carpenter's skill, Mahapurusa Madhavadeva himself had composed a cluster of verses called lata-kata ghosa in imitation of the meandering creepers in wood. This instance of the village carpenters whom Madhavadeva commissioned for the construction of the Rangiyal-ghar had become a source of inspiration for the later artisans in maintaining a vigorous culture of wood-carving in the society. Later on, the introduction of the hierarchy of a centralized religious institution in the name and form of sattrā and its vigorous proliferation throughout the length and

breadth of the Brahmaputra valley during the 17th - 18th centuries A.D. subscribed to the cultures of various other art forms besides the art of wood-carving.

The establishment of sattras at different places led to the evolution of a historic architecture style called sattriya, conditioned by traditional domestic architecture as well as by a definite scheme of construction at the execution level. The customs and beliefs of the society, of which the inmates of the sattras formed a part, played a vital role in determining the architecture scheme, its components and the general principles of design and construction. The new architecture of sattra did not depart from the hut type houses in its plan and structural design but developed its preference for elaborateness of scale and decorative details. There was no shift for building materials from bamboo, wood reed and thatch, as construction in brick and stone was beyond reach besides it being exclusively the royal privilege. However, the sattriya architecture developed its own symbolism with a couple of religious discourses in the background. The carvings of the sattras also formed a part of these discourses.

The Vaisnavite society of Assam was divided into two with the majority of the inhabitants leading household lives and the microscopic minority joining celibacy. Two distinct categories of sattras emerged in its wake: - the first category with sets of cloisters called hatis for the monks within the main enclosure and the second category comprising household devotees living outside the enclosure. As such, the scheme defining the architectural complex in the context of the first category differed from that of the second except in their practice of erecting the community prayer-hall, which was common with both the categories. The architectural complex of the celibates provided close living among themselves and for that matter, the scope of community participation in all affairs to the maximum. The increase in the wealth of wood carvings in the past depended on this factor in particular.

Till a few decades ago the sattra architecture with the kirtan-ghar in the centre surrounded by four rows of huts forming the four hatis, with openings or gateways at the cardinal points followed the vernacular idiom of construction in bamboo, wood, reed and

thatch. With the progression from thatch to iron-sheets for roofing and from bamboo or reed walls to brick and cement in the past few decades of the last century, the architecture has undergone a sea change and a prosaic concept has come to prevail upon the structure. As a matter of fact, the basic pattern of the architecture evolved over a long period and sanctified by tradition has been affected to a great extent. The effect has been disastrous in the context of wood carving with the handing over of the construction of building to professional carpenters and masons. The result is the total disappearance of carving activities from the society barring the instances of Barpeta Sattras and one or two other sattras in and around Barpeta, where the walls in the prayer-halls have been amply decorated in the past century with objects of wood in continuation of the tradition of the past.

The different sattras of Assam have preserved very few specimens of wooden objects of art belonging to the past tradition. Even in the case of those the earliest examples rarely belong to the 18th century. Bardowa *Than* retains a considerably big repertoire of wood carvings of the past. These objects have been recovered from an uncared-for state by this writer: they have been deposited with the mini-museum now run by the Directorate of State Museums at the *Than* premises. The wooden objects in the Vaisnavite shrines of Assam were closely linked with parallel developments in literary tradition. But these objects have never been considered to be ritualistic although the artisans' preference for subjects narrated in religious scriptures, viz, the *Bhagavata-purana* and the Ramayana, etc., was beyond question. The objects were visual accompaniment to the general literary tradition. The persistent belief around the objects was that they were representations of eighty out of eighty one categories of bhakti that the human beings could visualise on earth. This was the reason for the display of the objects in the shrines. Therefore, for the understanding of the social significance of the display it would be necessary to look at the areas to which the embellished objects belonged and which greeted the eyes of the beholders. We can break up the areas as below: -

- i. The facade and the doors

- ii. Walls around the kirtan-ghar
- iii. The pillars and pillar-capitals
- iv. The areas inside the prayer-hall
- v. The component parts other than the kirtan-ghar

The prayer hall is built with both ends facing the east and the west. The symbolism of the architecture of the prayer-hall corresponds to **Eternal Purusa**. He is conceived in four segments - the pada (the region of the feet), the nabhi (the navel region) the hrdaya (the region of the heart) and the sira (the head or the crest) in the context of the prayer-hall. The façade corresponding to His pada points to the west. The kirtan-ghar should possess three doors one of them constituting the principal door variously called as pat-duwar or simha-duwar being placed in the segment of pada. This door is open to all visitors and devotees who wish to enter the prayer-hall. In some parts of Assam the facade in the pada segment is built with the architecture of an apse corresponding to the semicircular shape of the toes when the feet are placed close together. The apse also serves as a decorative adjunct to the hall and, therefore, it drew the attention of the artisans of the past for further decoration with carvings in wood. As a matter of fact the principal door along with the vertical jambs, the lintel and the threshold became the immediate choice of the artisans to embark on decoration. The biographers of the Vaisnava saints relate that the first community building built at Barpeta was embellished with creeper designs at the entrance door. It is also reported that the artisans carved the figures of Jaya and Vijaya, two semi-divine deities, and installed both at the door as dvarapalas. On the basis of the description recorded in the biographies it can be presumed that the images of the semi-divine deities were two sculptures in the round whereas the designs carved on the door were relief works.

The principal door is also called simha-duwar for it contains the motif of a lion at the centre of the door lintel. The symbolism of lion corresponds to God in His omnipotent Name (*nama*) and the Vaisnavas of Assam conceived the form of Narasimha to illustrate this. The artists of Bardowa accordingly devised a mask like figure out of the lion-head they usually carved for corner decoration of the lion-seat (simhasana). Carved in the

round out of a single log of wood the lion-head was given a sharp pointed nose with a row of kesaras decorating the forehead and also with some fluttering hairs on either side of the head. The Narasimha mask serves the same function as the kirtimukha does in the Hindu temple elsewhere in India. The simha-duwars recovered from Salaguri Sattrā, now preserved in the mini museum at Bardowa are some distinguished pieces of art of the past probably belonging to the 18th century A.D. One of the doors contains two sakhas in each of the vertical jambs, a carved threshold and an arched lintel decorated with cusps and two figures of magara (makara) at the terminal ends. This door-frame with exquisite carvings is remarkable for framing of miniature panels depicting the childhood sports of **Krsna** and several other subjects inside some niches. The vertical jambs of another door contain the images of Visnu and Jaya, Siva and Vijaya respectively. Both the door-frames display fine sense of proportion of the carvers. In the context of technique and finish, the carvers allowed their tools to travel deeply inside the wooden plank so as to provide the figures with round contours pleasing to the eyes.

Very few door-leaves belonging to old shrines have survived the ravages of time. Those surviving till today are either carved or with surfaces partly or wholly covered with moulded metal sheets. Sri Hati Sattrā at Suwalkuchi and the sattras of Ganak-kuchi, Sundaridiya and Patbausi at Barpeta and a few other sattras at different places of Assam have preserved a few door-leaves embellished with cut-out figures, mostly diminutive inform, in bell-metal. One Layan Kahar made a door for his bibliophile named Bhaktacarana Atai, probably a monk, to donate it to Sundaridiya-Sattrā on the 17th day of the month of Magha in the Saka year of 1769. The door contains metal panels depicting the vastra-harana episode of the ***Bhagavata-purana***, apart from a good number of metal discs nailed at the bottom of the door-leaves with verses inscribed on each. The vastra-harana episode finds an elaborate treatment in a door at Ganak-kuchi. The door at the north wall of the prayer-hall at Patbausi is embellished with cut-out figures of all the ten incarnations of Visnu. In most cases, the artisans developed their preference for covering door surfaces with bell-metal discs of various sizes so as to give the impression of a starry look. The discs called caka (Skt. cakra) for being circular in shape create an uncommon texture of aesthetic variety. There are a few doors coated with molded brass-

sheets which constitute a type by themselves. Bardowa *Than* possesses two doors of this type with a crowd of molded figures surrounding a spread-up rosette at the centre. These doors are unique, for the brass-sheets masking the surface constitute the canvas for the images and the metal gives a shining colour effect to the gate-ways.

The huts belonging to the monks, inspite of their preference for humbler living, generally possess a single-shutter door containing carvings - floral, vegetal and geometric devices of the local idiom. A door in the dwelling of a monk at Sundaridiya Sattrā presents a pictorial version of a peahen feeding two nestlings. Another door belonging to the same sattrā is dated on the 1st day of Asadha in the Bangla year 1318.

It has been a practice in some sattrās to decorate the crest of the doors in the prayer-hall with a kapali depicting one of the seven Vaikunthas in molded silver. The kirtan-ghar at Barpetā contains two exquisite kapalis (like an ornament for the forehead) one in the north door and the other above the simha-duwar depicting Golak-vaikuntha and Ananta-sayya respectively.

The myth of Ananta-sayya finds a pictorial depiction in the kapali placed above the simha-duwar at Patbausi. This door is also dated and it bears the 7th day of the month of Aghona (Agrahayana) in the Saka year 1789 (equivalent to 1867).

The walls of the kirtan-ghar constitute the major areas for the display of wood-carvings. Earlier the walls were made of reeds neatly plaited in innumerable compartments inside flat pieces of wall battens. Each wall was divided again into two horizontal segments - the upper and the lower, and was placed in such a manner that adequate vacant space could be provided for display of carved panels in wood. The setting of the panels in the vacant space would make a bend-like girdle in the walls. Sometimes isolated panels of vertical dimensions interspersing the girdle would create a break, pleasing to the eyes, in the linear rhythm of continuous friezes. The Kali-damana panel to be discussed later is the lone specimen recovered from the hive of wood-carvings belonging to the prayer-hall of Bardowa Than. Sometimes holes were made in the

negative spaces in the panels to facilitate air and light inside. The extant literature refers to the holes as kundraksa, i.e., eye-holes in the shape of denticles resembling the kundra flower. But the holes in the context of the panels hardly resemble the shape of the flower. However, the eye-holes in the panels enabled the visitors to have a look inside the hall.

The carvers derived their subjects mainly from the *Bhagavata-purana* and the Ramayana and occasionally from everyday life of the people. They were mostly devoted to illustrating the ten avatars of **Visnu** and the Lila scenes belonging to the childhood frolics of **Krsna**. However, they were not as much concerned with the iconographic details of the child God as with the depiction of the drama of his frolics. In this context, a figure of diminutive size and the tit-bits of costume here and there would subscribe to present the image of **Krsna**. For example, the child is dancing in the midst of three women figures and also the child being chastised by his mother and spaced near the terminal points in the door-lintel of Salaguri Sattrā do not demonstrate anything important in terms of iconography, but the beholder is never deceived in identifying the child as **Krsna**.

In illustrating the Lila scenes, **Krsna** is sometimes portrayed as the annihilator of the demons like Bakasura, Aghasura and several others and sometimes dancing and dallying with the gopis. He is also seen enchanting Brahma when the latter concealed the cows and the cowherd friends of **Krsna** in confinement. **Krsna** as Natabara dances on the hooded canopy of the serpent Kali. The Bardowa panel depicting the black God in this aspect is a masterpiece capable of evoking admiration of connoisseurs. The panel is remarkable for structural harmony of the pictorial forms, which are vibrant and plastic. In a picture-frame of 120 cm x 28 cm the carver defines his subject with superb ingenuity and completes the drama by placing the kadamba tree at the bottom left of the serpent's tail suggesting the bank of the lake. This is a unique piece of art, may be without a parallel in the entire Indian sub-continent.

The sattriya artisans were meticulous in their treatment of the avatars of God. They had, in fact, a distinct programme of carving the avatara figures as visual

accompaniment to the literary tradition and embellished the walls and the doors of the shrines whenever they found scope for their treatment. The available specimens show that these figures were carved in isolated panels to make their impact profound on the viewers. These figures were carved sometimes in high relief and sometimes in the round. Gadamur Sattrra in the riverine island of Majuli has preserved the images of Kurma and Varaha with sensitively rounded form and plastic volume. Bardowa *Than* is comparatively richer in respect of avatara figures. There are as many as nine images of seven avataras. Each of the images carved in high relief was provided with a separate picture-frame in some continuous friezes. The carvers were meticulous in their treatment of space and composition in the limited picture-frame provided to them for pictorial delineation. So, we have found the carving of the image of Narasimha in a balanced composition. The image is seen caressing his long tail with his two hands above his head. His stance reminds one of the *ati-tandava* form of Siva of classical dance tradition. His feet with the toes slightly raised and the heels deeply planted on the ground represent vigour, while the upper part of his body appears static with the exception that his profile head makes the figure animated. Buddha and Parasurama are presented in an uncommon hair-style defined by a few furrowed strokes. Compared to the Kalki panel of Sri Hati Sattrra, the Bardowa panels depicting the same subject with Kalki riding on his horse and holding an upraised sword in one of his hands are more animated and dynamic.

In another panel Kalki as depicted in a forceful stance with a deer representing Kala in the standard iconographic norms belongs to the local idiom.

Apart from the above, a host of subjects dealing with divine and semi-divine beings together with accessory subjects drawn from day-to-day life and environment formed an integral part of sculptural decoration. The Bardowa panel depicting the composite image of Hari-Hara is interesting for the physical presence of the vahanas of Hari and Hara along with the image at the centre. In illustrating the image the carver deviated from the standard iconography and followed contemporary improvisations derived from the local idiom.

Accessory figures - animal-fight between two elephants, two buffaloes, two horses drawn from the environment - found masterful exposures in the walls at Bardowa Than. Fight between man and animals and scenes of animal-hunting also formed part of temple decoration. Dr. K. K. Dasgupta finds parallels of the Bardowa figures of carved animals in the animal figures of the 'Babylonian and Assyrian repertoires of the remote past'.

Stories from the Ramayana constituted the major narrative compositions on the panels carved by the artists at Bardowa. It is stated that the old kirtan-ghar at Bardowa before its demolition for reconstruction in the fifties of the last century had the entire Ramayana translated into the medium of wood. At least four panels illustrating the moment of slaying of Bali by Rama from behind a tree is a monumental composition marked by structural balance and rhythm. The carver derived the benefit of the painting technique of the sattriya school of Assam in defining his picture-space and organised his pictorial forms of two distinct planes directly at the eye-level vision of the beholder. To avoid the complexities of technique that could arise in depicting the two events that happened simultaneously in the horizontal format of his canvas he too, like the manuscript painters, executed the figures in linear progression without discriminating between the subjects in the foreground and those in the background. The tree served as a motif interlinking the figures on either side. **Dr. K. K. Dasgupta claims that the panel is undeniably the finest specimen of the 'entire range of wood carving in the sub-continent'.**

Apart from the above, Bardowa has got three more panels of the past depicting certain aspects of the Ramayana stories. The scene identified by me earlier as a man hunting two bickering animals may be a pictorial narration of the above subject without the tree. The subjects of the remaining panels are: -

- i. Rama sitting on his throne amidst royal grandeur, and
- ii. The four heroes with Nila, Sugriva, Hanumana and Jambubana.

An interesting panel belonging to Gadampur Sattrā in Majuli depicts the episode of Hanumana lifting the mount Gandhamadana. The carver makes it interesting by incorporating the images of several local divinities - Khoba-Khubuni and Jvar of folk belief among the inmates of the mount. Another interesting relief work which originally belonged to Sundaridiya Sattrā and is now preserved in the State Museum presents a curious figure of Ravana with twenty hands constituting an upturned semi-circle as if attached to his extraordinarily corpulent body. Nine out of a total of ten heads constitute a row parallel to his shoulder line and contribute to a grotesque look in the figure. The figure is extraordinarily heavy and finely expressive of inner vigour.

Bardowa *Than* presents a few rare pieces of pillars illustrating some divine and semi-divine beings. Life-size carvings of Brahma, Visnu, Siva, Narada and Ganesa constitute the pillar-statues. Although looking like tribal totem-poles, they do not represent any belief associated with tribal society in the nam-ghar. The carvers derived their images from the local literary tradition and the cylindrical format of wood contributed to their forms marked by sensitively rounded and plastic volumes.

The prayer-hall inside provides large areas for display of wood carvings. The hrdaya region of Purusa which constitutes the eastern segment of the hall is decorated with a magnificent simhasana enshrining the vangmaya image of God in the form of a sacred scripture. The simhasana itself is an impressive object of art, composed with many tiered stages varying between five and nine. As an object of architecture the tiers appear to be receding gradually, but from the constructional point, the super-structure called amahi-ghar is first worked out to accommodate the other tiers below it from top to bottom in chronological order of measurement.

Each of the tiered stages has at its four corners the sculpture of a lion trampling on the elephant. Moreover, each of the tiers has at its four sides the picture panels called lekhani-pat for display of paintings and accessory designs of inter-twined flowers and

meandering creepers. Sometimes the picture panels contain carved images of different incarnations of God and narrative compositions.

The inside of the kirtan-ghar is sometimes replete with a large number of sculptures in the round. Of all the sculptures, the most significant one is the colossal figure of Garuda, a semi-divine winged god, in the kneeling posture. Bardowa *Than* possesses a few pieces of sculpture of the winged god. The sattriya artists developed the form of Garuda as a hybrid one with a prominent beak and wings of a bird. One of the Garuda sculptures of Bardowa forms a variety by itself. It has no wings; its face with a curved beak is emphasised by the deeply furrowed lines creating the eyelids and the brows. The carver maintains the cylindrical feature of the medium in carving in the pot-belly and closely knit limbs in the figure. Rhythm of line creates movement in the figure and endows it with a sinuous contour of round and sensitively modelled plastic volume.

The artists of Bardowa also carved two images of **Hanumana** portraying him in two different aspects. In the aspect of a hero, he is seen carrying Rama and Laksmana on his shoulder immediately after rescuing them from the nether world of Mahi Ravana. Rama and Laksmana are holding Hanumana's head closely and the feet of the former dangling on either side of the breast of the latter have enriched the figure in equipoise and balance. **Hanumana** is a devotee in his other aspect. To represent him in this aspect the sattriya artist devised his iconographic norms as wearing a garland of rudraksa and holding a ladu or ladduka in his right hand. The Bardowa figures of Hanumana with his eyes housed in large concaves being accentuated by arch-like eye-brows are expressive of his inner feelings.

The method followed by the sattriya artists of Assam in carving sculptures was one of deep incision inside the wooden panel. It is known as charaikhuliya in which charai and khuliya stand for bird and carving respectively: it is similar to the woodpecker's method of digging holes in the tree. In this method, the uncut portions of wood remain raised to give the pattern of the objects.

All objects require to be executed in two distinct phases. The first phase is called kondhowa meaning slicing off the surface in flakes. In the final stage, further work is done upon the patterns to give finish to the objects. Thereafter, the sculptures, whether relief or in the round, are painted with colour.

As regards finish, it can be said that the carvers practised an extremely primitive carpentry with a limited number of tools comprising an axe, a knife and a few batalis (chisels) of various sizes and shapes. These tools are very much useful for creating a very impressive texture with imprints of the edges on the sculptures.

The intensive practice of carving sculptures in wood was primarily a phenomenon of the sattras, which conceived the technique, a style and the subjects of carving. Nevertheless, the art gradually spread to the village level, although it did not develop equally in the grand scale of the sattras in the embellishment of the village nam-ghars. Each of the sattras in the past maintained an atelier of artists, which the village nam-ghars lacked. These artisans were professional scribes, master painters, designers and make-up men in the traditional theatre and sculptors, besides being the carpenters responsible for building constructions. Moreover, they were psychologically more closely associated with the intellectual development of the sattras, which supported them in creating something grand in whatever medium they took to work.

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