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in

Benga

By

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CHEVALIER O. GHILARDI.

Officiating Principal, Government School of Art, Calcutta.



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MONOGRAPH ON WOOD-CARVING IN BENGAL.

PREFACE.

MR. E. B. HAVEL was selected in October 1901 for writing a monograph on wood-carving in Bengal. But he having gone to England on leave, his duty devolved upon me.

From the report obtained by the Government of Bengal from the different Collectors, it appeared that no wood-carving was carried on in other districts of the Province than Monghyr, Bhagalpur, Patna and Gaya. It was suggested that I might visit Gaya, Patna and Monghyr to see the wood-carvers at work. Accordingly I visited the above places, and append the following notes:—

Subsequently I received a Note on Wood-carving in the district of Cuttack, prepared by Babu Monmohan Chakravarty. But as the industry in wood-carving is not in a better stage here than in Behar, I did not think it worth while to visit the district; but I am glad to add to my modest work Babu Monmohan Chakravarty's note.

The Economic Section of the Imperial Museum in Calcutta possesses a good collection of wood-carving, made in many parts of India and Burma. But so far as it regards Bengal, there are only three specimens—a nice massive pillar carved in Muzaffarpur and the models of the temples at Kantanagar and Barakar, which are excellent indeed.

These three samples are a good proof that the wood-carving industry in Bengal had, and may have still, clever mistries, able to do any sort of decorative work in wood-carving.

PATNA.

Nothing remains in Patna to testify to its identity with the ancient Pali-botra, the Capital of the Maurya Emperors, visited by the Greek Ambassadors of the successors of Alexander.

The existence of wood-carving here at the present day is practically nominal. Judging, however, from the remains of the older wood-carvings in that interminable line of houses extending from Bankipore to Patna, it is clear that much better work was produced in the past, when this industry appears to have enjoyed a period of happy florid forms, with which the work done at present cannot bear comparison. It would appear that all the old carving visible along the road, where the villages of Muradpur, Chowhatta and Aru are situated, was cast more or less from the same mould, so little is the variety in form and design; still we can observe a special characteristic in each group of carvings, which distinguishes it from those of the other villages. The carving to which I allude is that in connection with the buildings, such as the pillars, architraves and brackets supporting their verandahs and roofs. The village of Gulzarbag has the best local specimen. Unfortunately, nowadays, the taste of the inhabitants has changed. When a house is near to fall in pieces, and it is re-built, no more carved pillars are used; bricks are the only substitute. Originally most of those pillars were first worked by the turner, even those with large diameters, and afterwards carved by clever artisans. The wood used here is teakwood in general, but sometimes sisoo and paison. When the present proprietor of a house changes the old pillars, the work of the turner is dispensed with, and the pillars, although fairly well carved, remain of a quadrangular form. This is easily gathered from the fact that all the quadrangular carved pillars are invariably the new ones. The freizes also are good, and a few of the panels, too; but in general this carving, although effective, is of very rough execution, and cannot stand comparison with that by the artisans of Lahore, Delhi and Agra. There are very few wood-carvers at present at Patna, and the decay in this profession has proceeded so far that

none of the new buildings on the long road between Bankipore and Patna has any wood-carvings at all. A very small percentage of the men make their living by carving blocks for printing cotton materials, and their wages vary from 6 to 12 annas per day. The demand for these blocks is constant, and will certainly increase in the future. These artisans do not follow any given design or pattern; they invent their own motives of decoration. Youths earn two or three annas per day by copying the blocks made by the men, but they seem to possess a very abundant view of invention. I have seen more than 60 blocks, all different, deserving praise and encouragement. Having made some interrogations, and especially asking them why they do not devote themselves to the more important branches of wood-carving in connection with architecture, such as pillars, architraves, brackets, doorways, window-framing or screens, fancy chairs, fancy tables, boxes and caskets, they answered that they could do all these things, but that no demand exists for them. I pointed out to them that they have beautiful specimens to copy from in the marble pillars made in Jeypore at the entrance of the beautiful Sikh temple, which are really masterpieces of their kind. Unfortunately they seem to be destined to continue making these wood blocks for printing cotton, and may never have a chance to use their talent for better work. Many others are making toys, which are distributed in great quantities in the country, and find their market in bazars and fairs. The turners work with very primitive apparatus and tools. With some up-to-date inexpensive machinery they could triplicate their output of work; but then there is the risk that the production might become too much for the demand, therefore it is advisable in this respect to let them go on in their old ways.

The wood-carvers on blocks use better tools, but they expend too much time in finishing their work, the old adage 'time is money' will probably always remain unknown to these poor men, to whom the whole world seems to be circumscribed to limits of their own land, and, as a natural consequence, they are, as a class, very improvident. In conclusion, I do not see any prospect of a better future for the wood-carving industry in this district.

GAYA.

In this old city the wood-carving industry must have reached the apex of the beautiful as shown in the examples which belong to the earliest periods of this art. Unhappily this excellence has not been maintained in the pieces of later date. I do not hesitate after twenty years' experience in India decisively to say that the taste of the well-educated and rich classes has so deteriorated in recent times from that exhibited in these earlier works, that it would be childish folly to entertain the slightest hope for much improvement in the wood-carving industry under present conditions, and should the industry stand in need of patronage from the present generation of natives.

The rich as well as the poor people of the past, while building their dwellings, appear to have held to the constant idea that some part of the ambient, where they had to spend the greater part of their lives, should possess something to delight the eyes, therefore stone and wood carving was employed in the erection of a frontage to a house whose proportions, adequate to the means and æsthetic of its owner, would generally afford at least some carved pillars, doorways, architraves, carved windows, etc., etc.

I went through the remotest recesses of the extensive native quarter and had the opportunity of admiring some really beautiful wood-carving, which must have originated from the splendid examples of old carved stone on the Buddhist and Hindu temples which seem so gloriously to defy the ravages of the centuries.

I visited the house of Rai Behari Lall Barrick Bahadur, where the best specimen of ancient carving can be admired and profitably studied. Here I found a door with its pillars, architrave and freizes so admirably carved that they might well be exhibited in a museum. Near this house is the corner of a very narrow lane, at which there is a small house evidently old, and displaying some beautiful carvings of the more minute style, almost resembling chased silver or filigree work. The natives themselves have great veneration for this building, owing to the beautiful construction of its verandah, beams, pillars and

freizes. Many other fine examples here are injured by several coats of tar having been laid over them in such a way as almost to obliterate the ancient carving, of which little or no trace is now visible. The same barbarous process of tarring or coating has unfortunately not spared the grand Buddhist temple at Buddah Gaya, a site which cannot fail to inspire in the archæologist the same interest as Niniveh, Memphis, Thebes, Jerusalem, Athens and Rome. Alas! With such opulence of good samples of the wood-carving industry, the modern mistri is just like the Araba Fenice—

“Che oi sia ognun lo dice
Dove sia nessun lo sa.”

In fact, there is now no wood-carver in Gaya who may be able to do any work similar to these splendid remains. Industry in the strict sense of the word does not exist either in Gaya town, Manpur, Maksudpur, Buddha Gaya or Tikari. The mistries are mere carpenters, and very seldom receive orders for even common carving.

In Budha Gaya I spoke with a mistri who had carved a nice architrave in the court-yard of the Buddhist monastery four years ago, and from that time he has had no orders for any other carvings, for which the man has special talent. He insists that this architrave carved by him is in the ancient Buddhist style; but it is not so, as the carving possesses all the characteristics of the Burmese manner, as indeed do the greater part of the old carvings in the town of Gaya. An exception might be made in favour of those of Rai Behari Lall Barrick Bahadur's house and a few others. Patna has a style more purely Hindu, and is certainly more free from this Burmese influence. I was extremely disappointed to find the few wood-carvers in the abovementioned villages doing carpenter's work only, because in order to see them at work upon the higher branch of their handicraft (I allude to wood-carving) I had travelled in very uncomfortable conveyances, sometimes 16 miles at a stretch, from the town of Gaya. All the mistries when not engaged on simple carpenter's constructive work, employ themselves making boxes of different sizes, inlaid with brass, a very common work indeed in this locality, for which there is always a demand, and from which they can earn from 8 to 12 annas per day.

I met a man named Paghu mistri in Mahalla Koivibari, whose right arm was injured. He showed me the little carving he had in stock, for which I regret I cannot share the opinion of Babu Baij Nath Sahay, who admires it much, and describes it in his Note on Wood-carving in Gaya. Altogether the mistries, who are tolerably good at wood-carving, in Gaya and its surrounding villages already mentioned do not exceed twenty in number, and the cleverest of the lot are Alkon (the one who carved the long architrave at the Buddha Gaya temple) and Ghamandi. Given workmen of this class, there is very little hope for the betterment of modern wood-carving, which, as an industry, is rapidly becoming extinct even in this district.

The wood used here, as at Patna, is *sisso* or *paisor*, which offers a better medium for carving than teakwood, which possesses a viscous fibre, giving a good deal of trouble even to the most skilled artisan. The tools I have seen used by the local mistries are good ones, and all of European manufacture. With the exception of the already mentioned Barrick and two or three other rich native gentlemen, nobody cares for good carving in Gaya, as the new houses are built in a pseudo-European style, or in a horrid mixture of styles which, while giving a partial suggestion of Oriental character, shock the aesthetic sense, and may be broadly defined as outrages on architectural taste.

MONGHYR.

I have observed in this town, which I have crossed in every direction, that the wood-carving used for the frontages of houses and for their interior decoration is of very poor quality indeed. The reason is easily found in the fact that wood-carving, as it is understood in Bankipore, Patna and Gaya, is not carried on here. In reality there is no wood-carving in Monghyr but only inlaid work, for which there is a fair demand and clever artisans. The small quantity of carving necessary in this inlaid work on small articles of daily use is made on ebony or mahogany wood, the depth of the carving not exceeding

the thickness of a rupee, and therefore the work of the local artisan is not employed on heavy carving in paison or sissoo wood, such as pillars, architraves, freizes, doors, etc.

The Monghyr carving has a certain reputation for the embellishment of inlaid work, and the craft has been handed down from father to son for several generations. The few families practising it were established here in the middle of the 18th century, and they were brought to Monghyr, as the tradition goes, by Mir Kassim, with his gun-makers. It may be supposed, then, that the wood fittings of the guns were the only articles worked upon in the very beginning of the industry by those mistries who, it is known, excelled so well in making rich inlaid work on the gun-carriages. When the demand for such work ceased in the course of time, the artisans devoted themselves to other branches of the industry, and applied their inlaid work to objects such as those in use at the present day.

I commenced my tour at Kassim Bazar, where there are a number of toy-makers, notably the shop of an artisan of good repute named Bisu mistri; but in this case I was not fortunate, as I found the suburb in deep consternation on account of the ravages worked by plague during the last two weeks. Poor Bisu mistri was himself unfortunately registered among the victims of this dreadful disease. His shop was closed and his family had gone elsewhere. The people of the neighbourhood, whilst lamenting his death, informed me that he was a clever artisan, and not inferior to Kali Charan and Bansi, also prominent wood-carvers here, whose work I was able to examine afterwards in their shop at Baherotol. These two men are now considered the local celebrities of the profession in Monghyr, having been specially selected for this reason to work on the exhibits of the Darbar Exhibition at Delhi. These men doubtless possess talent, but they lack originality. The forms of the articles they make are in each case always the same, and the decorative motives are never changed, whether it be the cabinet, the table, boxes, brackets, caskets, inkstands, stools, frames, etc., the pieces have always the same form, the sole difference being confined to the proportions. When we have seen the small stock of these goods usually kept in a shop, all the other collections are mere repetitions, with more or less finish, which latter factor influences the cost of production. Kali Charan and Bansi mistries have their large workshops in Baherotol, but they do not possess the happy knack of showing off their labour to advantage. The shop is large and dirty; the so-called stock is accumulated in a small dark room at the back, and the objects are shown to the visitor piece by piece. I had a long conversation with these two artisans on the technical part of their work, giving them some good hints on it, and showing how their tools, are of old pattern, and the ease with which they could get good modern tools which would both work better and shorten their labour. But as I know from experience how the natives act after receiving good advice, I fear they will never change their old tools, unless they go to work under European direction and management in the Government workshops or elsewhere. I also pointed out to them how useless and absurd it is to have ebony or any other hard wood soaked in water previous to carving it, which is erroneously supposed by them to make it better fitted for carving purposes. The wood, I explained to them, must be well seasoned and *dry*, in order to get the best results in carving.

The price of ebony is Rs. 3 per square cubit, while ivory sells at from Rs. 6 to Rs. 16 per seer.

The wages earned by the men employed under Kali Charan are Rs. 12 per month, and boys receive Rs. 5 to 8 per month; these are somewhat low rates for the skilled labour necessary for work of this kind. No doubt Kali Charan takes the lion's share of the profits and could pay a little more to his assistants. Fortunately, for him, and his class of employers, this country is yet a stranger to the Trades Union strikes and socialistic combinations of Europe. The humble condition of the operatives and the comparatively small financial interests involved in these industries, contribute, no doubt, towards this happy immunity.

I visited also Madapur, where one Kidru Mistri has his shop with a few boys to assist him. He has a small stock of carved work ready, executed in the cheapest line, and told me that he does not care to produce better work, as the public is not ready to pay for it. I did my best to persuade him that his

theory was wrong, and that a better article, nicely formed and well finished in all its details, will always command a good price.

Ivory and stag-horn also are used for inlaid work in Monghyr, and the price of an object varies in accordance with the material used. Stag-horn costs only a rupee per seer.

This industry is carried on also at Banaik by three families of mistries.

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*Note on Wood-carving in Cuttack by Babu Manmohan Chakravarty, Special Excise
Deputy Collector, Cuttack.*

The industry of wood-carving is a minor one in this district, less important than the art of (*e. g.*) stone-carving. It is also a decaying art, carved works of wood being much less found or done than before.

2. In the following kinds of work wood-carving is, or rather was, mainly used:—

- (i) Wood-work of houses, specially veranda's (*ver. chandni* such as—(a) *ora, gnja, thorasta, chitakathi* of thatch frames;
(b) doors, door-frames and windows;
- (ii) Furniture: articles for personal use, such as bedsteads (leg and head specially), stools, chests, lamp-stands, *pothi-guards, pothi-stands (vyasasana), haldikathna* (cups for holding turmeric), combs (*pania*), small-boxes;
- (iii) Vehicles, such as *palki, chaudola* Vimana (of idols), boat's prows;
- (iv) Carved mythological figures for show at the time of *yatras*, such as *Ravana* and other demons, *Hanumana* and other monkeys, and so forth.
- (v) Toys.

3. The following are the principal objects carved on the works:—

- (i) Beings, mythological or otherwise, such as Krishna, Radha, Sakhis (mainly in the thatch wood-work), and demons, monkeys, &c., in the *yatras*).
- (ii) Animals: lion, elephant (specially in thatch wood-work and bedsteads; crocodiles, horses.
- (iii) Plants, lotus in bud, half-blown or full-blown (the most favourite of all kinds) *was* flower, *muckhindi* flower, creepers (leaves on turning stems with flower, and occasionally fruits).
- (iv) Other objects, such as ropes (round posts).
- (v) Geometrical patterns, as in windows (the toy figures are not included in the above).

4. Five kinds of woods are chiefly used, as *sala*, for thatch wood-carving, door-frames and other rough works; *sissoo*, for bedsteads and chests; *piyasala*, for doors and windows; *giringa*, for toys; and *paldhua*, for *yatra* figures. Jack-fruit wood is also used for bedsteads, boxes, chests, etc.

5. The principal tools used are—

- (a) *Nihana*, for cutting.
- (b) *Kholas, patuli* and *nagula*, for turning wood.
- (c) *Tagis*, for carving, in varying sizes, from the breadth of a thread (*suta*) to an inch broad.

6. The carved-works are done chiefly in the mofussal, and rarely in the town of Cuttack. They are generally done by carpenters (*barhai*), but the toys are carved by a class of *chasas* known as *kharadi*. The latter are deemed inferior to *barhais*, and do not intermarry with them.

7. The wages in the mofussal are *khoraki* (food) plus three annas to four annas in cash. In the town they vary from five annas to eight annas per diem.

8. The industry of wood-carving is more or less dying out. In old days temples, *maths* and large houses had their inner verandah wood-work elaborately carved, while the doors and windows contained good specimens of lotus and geometrical screen patterns.

Some idea of old carvings may be found from—

- (1) Tulsipur *matha* in Cuttack town ;
- (2) Thakurbari (chapel) of one Gobinda Swain at Kola Sarchna, parganna Kodinda, thana Sadar ;
- (3) The *matha* at Sujanpalsuda, pargana Hariharapur, thana Jagatsingapura.

CONCLUSION.

In my humble opinion the wood-carver in Bengal will never improve his craft, and will always produce the same kind of work. All his forebears did so, therefore he does not trouble himself to think for a moment of inventing a new form or a new detail. This sad apathy is perhaps due to the proverbial laziness of the Hindu artisan, or to his narrow mind, which often amounts to actual prostration, and accounts for this want of research and invention in his craft.

I do not by any means advocate innovation at this late period of Indian art, when its forms and conventions have become so familiar to the public mind, that they in a variety of cases virtually constitute its sole claim to a distinctive existence. There is no possibility in India of any movement, even remotely similar to the *Arte Nova* recently exemplified at the International Exhibition of Decorative Art at Turin, where its English exponent, Walter Crane, is looked upon as a man with a new message for the art world. Nor is this desirable, for Indian art, in consideration for its past, is not called upon to develop any radical changes in the future, and cannot now have an evolution like the art of other nations. It has been for too long a period in a state of lethargy. To hope, then, for an evolution in Indian art to-day would be vain; but we can well hope for a *revival* following a very short programme (similar to the one formulated with three words only by the grand composer, Verdi, about Italian music "Torniamo all' antico") which would consist more in the restoration to Indian art of all that was admirable in its earlier forms than in changing the classic traditions of artistic industries, which have already suffered enough from the intrusion of corrupt forms, largely due to foreign exploitation.

The present object of the Government of India, as well as that of all lovers of Indian art, is to co-operate for the betterment of the Indian artisan's condition, as well as for a revival of all the Indian arts, of which happily some noble examples belonging to the most flourishing periods of each branch of art and industry are preserved to us.

The Durbar Exhibition at Delhi will, no doubt, be the great starting point. There we shall see the productions of the past compared with those of the present; and I trust that a serious and deep study of that Exhibition will clearly point out the lines along which future progress is to be made in order to insure the revival of every branch of this Indian art.

When the Indian artisan will commence to understand that he is an object of real interest to his rulers, he will become another man.

With more confidence in himself and his prospects, the artisan may be expected to cultivate his artistic ideas through the glorious roads already marked by tradition.

With such a magnificent past to guide him, it is not unreasonable to expect that the Indian artisan might with patience and encouragement be induced to take a personal interest in the regeneration of his art, which, though it may not, as I have already pointed out, be profited by change, must improve and prosper during the era of revival which, let us hope, is impending, and may lead eventually to a renaissance of Indian art.