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Wooden Dolls of Bengal: A Descriptive Overview

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Abstract

Bengal's wooden dolls reveal an exquisite and astonishing impact in Bengal art comprise with the other doll making in other states. The native hands give these dolls an innocent and sophisticated handling which infuses in them simple shapes and forms. These dolls are not so realistic in style but one can't stop himself in appreciating those artisan's skills that made these dolls beautiful. Also these dolls are known with different names concerned with their regions, purpose, even the material in which they are made. Each doll has its own special feature which differ it from the others. This research manuscript would endow reader an eloquent account of making of different types of wooden dolls in different regions in West Bengal and their purpose and relevance to the native culture and rituals. It will also put some light on the social-economic conditions of the artisans and their life styles as a professional in this field.

Key Words: Dolls, Art, Bengal, Wood, Ritual, Culture.

From times dolls in the rural areas of West Bengal are serving various purposes either they are social, religious and as far as the toys for the children and thus we find variations and huge abundance of these dolls in the whole West Bengal. These dolls also reflect the styles, skills, and sensibilities of the various communities to which artist belong. Vibrant colour, intricate design and ethnic style, there are the characteristics features of the wooden dolls. These wooden dolls are carved from one piece of wood. A cylindrical form of wood is cut off accordingly and then chiselled out. While man does the carving, women would do paint and finish the dolls; moreover their children in their free time will paint and help their parents in this task.

Initially these wooden dolls have been made as in the forms of small toys for children but also used in different day by day folk rituals such as Bar-brata(ritual occasions) etc. People of Bengal also offer these wooden dolls while performing adoration or making a wish to the temples of different Gods and Goddesses. We have also references that these wooden dolls have been used in Tantric practices in and around Bengal. The value and regard for these wooden dolls can immensely be seen in the eyes of children who play with them, the worshipers who use these dolls for their sacred rituals, the art appreciators, and last but not the least the businessmen of these dolls.

With these intentions these dolls are also made in different materials such as in clay, thermocol, wood, rags, palm leaves, paper mash, and even with sugar. These dolls are made varyingly in different regions of Bengal as we have mentioned these dolls are connected with day to day rituals of the Bengali peoples, so these dolls are made differently and varied to each other due to the regional customs, and purposes.

Wooden dolls are prominently prepared in many regions of West Bengal which includes the regions of Howrah (Raspur), Kalighat, Navadwip, Natungram, Bardhaman, Bankura, Bishanpur, Birbhum, Purulia etc. Apart from these wooden dolls we find another dolls which are done in other materials in other regions in Bengal like from Midanapore we find “Patua-dolls”, “Shilet dolls”, “Hingli dolls”, “Musk dolls”, “Jhum Jhumi dolls” etc. From Maldah, Murshidabad district we find “Tasu dolls”, “Goalini dolls”, “Coloured terracotta dolls” from Nadia, “Realistic dolls” from Ghurni, Krishanagar etc. Panchmura village in Banjura district is also famous for making different types of dolls like “Shosti-Putul”, “Rail dolls”, “Bonga dolls”, “Tiger dolls” etc.

The major concern of this paper is as the title suggests is about the wooden dolls of different regions of Bengal so it is worth to discuss and emphasise on them.

It was once when craftsman carried on their heads, baskets full of these wooden dolls for selling them in village fairs or on sacred occasional carnivals. They sell them for the earning of their livelihood. But now the days gone and people moved towards the plastic products not only in art but also in their day to day consumable articles. The future and present scope/ life of these wooden dolls as from where these dolls are originated are left there only.

The characteristic features of all these images are vigour and weight. The form has always been reached in an abstract manner. The brittle lines of the figures indicate pent up energy and dynamic movement. The passage of thousands of years does not disturb the inherent primitive quality in the treatment of these hand-made figures. Though these dolls, cult objects and figure toys are grotesque in form, there is a vigorous implication of movement in them. The traditional artists do not attempt to depict feet and palms either in human or animal figures realistically. They are sometimes suggested by thick lines and curves. This special formal practice also goes back to a very early age. The wooden figure toys are treated with a great economy of means both in form and decoration. These qualities of simplicity charge them with strength and vigour. In these wooden dolls and toys, colour scheme is represented by red, black and blue and yellow forms the general ground of the body. The treatment of the line is especially worthy of notice and represents a very old tradition. All these dolls and toys which are mentioned above are not made after a study of child-psychology; it is their novelty of form and colour which has charmed the minds of children for ages. The wooden dolls which are found in Rathas (chariots), thrones, bedsteads, bull-pillars and in the woodworks attached to the thatched cottages are big in size.

The place Kalighat in Kolkata is a very sacred place and people of Bengal are connected with this place with very sensitive sentiments. It is near to the Kalighat temple region in Kolkata where these wooden dolls, along with articles related to worship, household utensils, images and icons of different gods and goddesses are sold together. These same dolls are sold with the name of “Kalighat dolls” or “Kalighat Putul” in Kolkata. The reason behind is, People buy these wooden dolls for their children along with other things while they visit to Kali temple for worship. The very important feature of these wooden dolls reminds us the image of Mummies from Egypt as their forms and shapes resembles with them. Though of very small in sizes comprise to the Egyptian mummies their heights may be of 15 to 22 centimetres. And as these resemble with Egyptian mummy’s people called them as “Mummy dolls” also.

Likewise, earlier these wooden dolls have been sold in Nadia district in Navadwip for pilgrims; there these are called “Navadwip dolls”.

Many researches on these wooden dolls conclude that these were initially made in Natungram village of Burdwan district by community of “Sutradhar” (Carpenters) and were sold to the whole

sellers from which they moved to different regions of Bengal. But due to the covetousness, plastic culture of urban life and also the plastic products vanished the significance of these wooden dolls. The coloured brushes of many artists dried up now. The enthusiasm has now gone in making these wooden dolls.

The Shilpi community of Purulia started making these dolls in a very new style which are mostly in women form, and is called “Rani dolls”. Though simple but these dolls appeals a life like charm in them, as if through these dolls we wonder a fairy world where a human is transformed to doll or a doll is transformed to human within no time.

Not only in Natungram but these wooden dolls are also made in different places like Patuli, Daihat, Kastha-shali, villages of Burdwan district of West Bengal. Communities of carpenters in different districts in Bengal are famous in making these dolls best examples of which are from the “Thole-Rospore”, region of Howrah district, “Srirampore” and “Chandan Nagar” of Hoogly district. Wooden dolls of “Garbeta”, “Keshpore”, “Kanashol”, “Daspore”, “Jharbani”, “Raulia” and “Hoom Ghar” of Midnapore district are also famous. “Bishanpor”, Beletore’s dolls from Bankura district through which the famous world known artist Jamini Roy was inspired. “Seneda”, “Chodda” from Purulia district. Dolls of Brandabanpore are also famous. In the fairs of “Kenduli” and “Bakreswar” of Bribhoom district “Blunt dolls” are very famous. These wooden dolls can also be seen in the different states of Bangladesh also.

There was a time when wooden doll making was monopolized by the carpenter communities of Bengal. These dolls were earlier made in the districts of Howrah, Bankura, Purulia and West Midnapore, but is now restricted to places like Natungram, Daihat and Patuli in Burdwan. The dolls are carved from white teak wood and then coloured. Some of the popular dolls in this range are the owl, bride, mummy, king and queen, Radhakrishna, Gaur-Nitai, etc.

Abanindra Nath Tagore has discussed a story regarding this concern which was published in Biswa Bharti Magazine, 1935. He narrated, once four friends were left for a village through a dense forest. At the time of dusk they decided that they will spend night under a tree but each of them would awake for an hour to guard themselves from the wild beasts of jungle. The first turn was of a carpenter. He thought of how to spend time in this dark night? He broke a branch of tree and carved it in a shape of women doll. Thereafter, he awaked the other man to guard them. He was a mason. He saw that doll and painted it to spent time. He painted it in gold color with pink hands and paint bird like eyes with deep black colour. His turn is now ended. He awaked weaver who was with them to guard them. He saw a beautiful painted doll but without clothes. He put some clothes on doll. With this the doll becomes more beautiful. Now last turn was of a son of King he learned a Mantra from a saint through which he can make a dead man alive. To test the mantra, he infused life in that lifeless wooden doll. Now the doll turned to beautiful women and in the end of story that woman was married to king. Though it can be a fairy tale but taking this gives us a glimpse of a relationship between contemporary kings and artists. Also the approach of donation an appreciation can also be understood through this story.

These dolls are made in different sizes and forms. Some are angular in shape, some are circular in shape, some are in triangular shape and are made of different type of woods, such as Amra, Chatim, Shimul, Shaoda, depends on the availability of wood obtained from that region. Dolls are carved on these woodcuts of different sizes. After carving wood is painted. Male in the family of carpenters carved those dolls and females usually paint on them. Paint is prepared by mixing of

tamarind seed's gum with red, blue, yellow, white and earthen color. These dolls are known with their names such as Owl doll, Raja-Rani, Radha-Krishna, etc.

Emphasising the life of these artisans, these people lead a very simple life. Involving their-selves with a keen interest in making these wooden dolls. Families of these artists are either solely depends upon the sale of their products or few of them also cultivate their ancestral lands for their livelihood. And sometimes they even face hardship just for the food. But with a positive faith these artists begins their day with a new energy and started work with an effort for sale of their products. Though state government have taken an initiative to provide them an assurance of sale of their products and treated them as the clusters of artisans working for mass productions of these wooden dolls for the whole sellers of handloom industry. But not every artisan does this profession. There are varieties in their art forms and products and they are in a very large number. Moreover, sometimes they have to think upon the market demand as told by the buyer to produce. But after all it is only the effort of artist alone that this kind of art in its original form is preserved and expanded. Government is also taking initiative and interest for motivating these artists so as to prop up and swell the handloom industry, also generating possible buyers for these artisans and their works.

The positive consequence that are stated above are worth enough that the wooden dolls are sustaining their lives or journey with the help of government and the handloom industries. But the other face that one should also look upon is that, now a day due to the plastic dolls, china material and high prices of wood this wooden doll art is going to be vanished. These wooden dolls can be seen in a very few village fairs only. This art can only be saved if art buyers can understand the concern of these dolls in Bengali culture. Moreover, government should take more interest and initiative to conserve and promote this kind of rare folk art by conducting more and more fairs even in urban regions so that people could also stay in contact with their cultural values and customs. These dolls not only are in effort to survive themselves but also trying to maintain a long relationship with culture and society. We have several references from our mythology and history that how these images are connected with us. Jaganath Rath yatra and the wooden image of Lord Jaggannath is the perfect example in this concern through which we can see how pious is the concept of a wooden image when connected to a devotee with the sentiments and emotions, transmit hope and faith. Likewise these wooden dolls though originated from rural mind but try to convey the very originality and purity of life for which a man tries in his whole life. Though these wooden dolls are static but when in the hands of children these play a very significant role for that child who is playing with it. These wooden dolls talk, move and even speak. The psychology of persons according to their age matters here. The historical facts tells us that while performing a ritual the prehistoric man used to make wooden images(dolls, human, animals) so that they could connect with it.

Though urbanization and the advancement in the technology is ruling over mankind now but at places human sometime desires to connect with his culture, himself and the his roots again and these types of art products(wooden dolls) are the best way to connect within ourselves.

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