Woodcarvings from Pabbar Valley

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Woodcarving was the favoured medium of artistic expression of the Indian subcontinent. Indian houses and temples were profusely adorned with it and are often inseparable from it. Woodcarving, an indigenous tradition craft finds a mention in the ancient texts such as the Rig Veda and Matsya Purana. Woodcarving craft was well developed in many states specially, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Kerala, Kashmir and Madhya Pradesh. They differed in terms of the kind of wood and the craft tradition. In the early days of kings and nawabs, woodcarving was essentially seen as an adjunct to architecture. Palaces, havelis and temples were decorated with incredibly carved doors, windows and jalis (lattice work). The present paper describes traditional woodcarving work adorning houses and temples of Pabbar valley of Himachal Pradesh.

Keywords: Woodcarving, Traditional Craft, Pabbar Valley, Himachal Pradesh

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The woodcarving, an indigenous craft tradition has retained its economic and cultural importance for hundreds of years. Wood was one of the most important materials used in arts to express thoughts. Wood was used to carve various items for household use as well as for ceremonial uses. In the good old days of kings and nawabs, any palace or haveli worth its name had to have incredibly carved doors, windows and jalis.

The tradition of woodcarving existed in India from ancient times. The early wood-carved temples bear witness to this. Wood-carved temples are surviving till date in many states. In India, each region has developed its own style of structures and carvings. Local traditions and locally available wood varieties influence them a lot. The whole of North India has a tradition of carved wooden doors with intricate designs, brass inlay and trellis work for the windows. In Punjab, old havelis have carved doors and windows. Tamil Nadu has a well-developed tradition of wooden doors with intricate designs, brass inlay and trellis work for the windows. In Punjab, old havelis have carved doors and windows. Tamil Nadu has a well-developed tradition of wooden doors with intricate designs, brass inlay and trellis work for the windows. Tamil Nadu has a well-developed tradition of wooden doors with intricate designs, brass inlay and trellis work for the windows.

The Pabbar or Rohru valley consists of the area drained by the river Pabbar in the upper Shimla hills of Himachal Pradesh that originates from Chansal peak - South of Kinnaur and its tributaries. The valley extends from Hatkoti up to Tikri at the base of Chansal. It extends from the South of Kinnaur to the Yamuna valley in Uttrakhand (Fig. 1). It is situated in 31°7’ N and 77° 48’ E. The altitude of the valley varies from 1.21 km - 3.81 km. The undulating snow clad peaks, traditional hilly architecture, green field of the crops, fruit laden orchards and conifer forests make it heaven. The valley is connected with the plains of Uttar Pradesh with the highway road running along the right bank of Pabbar and Tons rivers. The road leading to Rohru from Shimla connects this valley with the state capital. This valley is at the distance of 95 km from Shimla city.

The valley has magnificent forests of pine, deodar, shisham, etc., which serve as one of the most durable material for construction of temples, palaces and houses. Andhra Pradesh has a tradition of manufacturing wooden doors with intricate designs, brass inlay and trellis work for the windows. Earlier the deities were carved out of sandalwood. In Kashmir, the houses are lined with wood, with ceilings worked in geometrical patterns and lattice-worked windows made up of pieces of wood. In Bengal, the clay houses have large wooden pillars and beams with intricate carvings. Assam has a rich tradition of wood works. Their places of worship included large carvings of mythical figures.

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woodcarvings. Besides, these architectural purposes, wood was also used for making images of divinities and semi-divine beings, which speak of the mastery over the technique in the craft of woodcarving. Now only a few specimens of woodwork could be noticed in the temples and the old houses as well. The woodcarvings could not survive for long time. Because of its perishable nature, when a woodcarving gets decayed, a replica either depicting the old motifs or introducing new patterns replaced it. The wood employed for the carving are deodar, pine, walnut, shisham, tun, etc. Ornately and beautifully carved wooden panels and sculptures testify the height of the craft, which had reached in the early time. The composition is greatly influenced by the grains of the timber used. For instances, the deep carving in relief is achieved on the deodar and walnut wood, whereas the low relief carvings are done on pine and deodar. Deodar is chiefly used for the architectural woodwork and intricate carvings. Woodcarving was widely used for the purposes of embellishing the architectural members as well as the sculptures.1,3

There is no doubt that woodcarvings in relation to architecture is of a very ancient decent although we have no surviving examples of the past work due to perishable nature of the material. But it can safely be assumed that even in very early ages, wood was widely used for varied purposes from the dawn of civilization. It may be believed that the Indus people used wood. The Rig Veda attests the popularity of wood in the next phase of culture. In the Rig Veda, elaborate directions as to the season and manner of felling a tree, seasoning of the wood and the methods for making different articles are given. Painstakingly created, every woodcarving is a story of dedication and perseverance. The ancient Indian treatise, the Matsya Purana mentions that every home should have a doorframe in carved wood as a sign of welcome to visitors. Brihatsamhita, an early 6th century text by Varahmihira, holds forth about the sanctity of wood, specifying the type and use of trees.5 This tradition of carved wooden frames and carved wooden balconies supported by brackets of animals, birds and human forms, is a part of the architectural design of homes, palaces and temples built all over India. It was the wood that first came to the mind of the Vedic sage in the creation of the universe by the Vishvakarma. The architectural carvings were done according to the tenets of Hindu Shilpashastra, representing the geometrical, floral and figures of animals and birds.

The places best known for rich ornamentation, skilful execution and characteristic designs are Hatkoti, Jubbal, Bachoonch, Badiyar, Pujarli and Rohru area, etc. In Hatkoti, the ceiling of Shiva temple is richly carved. The figures of gods and goddesses are carved out of a block of wood measuring 2x2 feet (.6096 x .6096 m) and then made to fit into and ornamented wooden frame (Fig. 2). Woodcarvings have also been noticed at Durga temple. The eves’ planks of the temple are carved with the scenes depicting the life...
led by the deities during their various incarnations. The deities are also shown combat with the demons in battlefields. The floral and geometrical patterns add the beauty of the panels and make it beautiful and interesting. Vishnu with its various incarnations is carved so beautifully showing the mastery of the contemporary artesian in wood (Fig. 3). The interlacing snakes (symbol of fertility) also serve the part of woodcarving on the panel. In the temple, the carved hanging bells of wood produce the pleasing sound with the blowing of air. The Chabutra in the temple complex stands as an ideal example of contemporary woodcarvings (Fig. 4). It is richly carved with intricate floral and geometrical patterns. The traditional concepts and basic techniques used in the woodcarvings are the representation of human, divine and animal forms. These are not direct copies of natural appearance, but the artistic expression of their intangible qualities and significance. In the same way, leaves, flowers, creepers and other floral designs are created from the essence of the forms rather than direct copies of their natural shape. Natural forms such as plants, flowers and leaves have special characteristics, such as graceful curves, groupings of buds, unfolding of flowers, their folding and creasing, the spiralling growth of plants, lustrous colour, delicacy and softness of various textures, etc. All these are observed, understood, well savoured and the response of the artist, expressed through his unique artistry and skill, and seen in his representation of plant forms in his works (Fig. 5).

The temple of devta Banar at Pujarli is profusely embellished with woodcarvings, depicting floral and geometrical patterns. However, the battle scenes are also carved, as usual noticed in the wooden temples of the valley. These scenes are depicted either on the door or the eaves of the frontal part of the temple. The eaves planks are also carved with the rows of musicians beatings drums and the warriors marching forth towards the battlefields. The floral and geometrical patterns enhance the beauty of the temple, which have their significance in Hindu mythology. The floral motifs are employed to ornament the various architectural features. Narrow strips in architectural features of buildings such as bands, columns and doorframes are adorned with the patterns of intertwined creeper and leaves. Stem of the creeper is shown curving, arching and curling and leaves are represented with aesthetic grace. Lotus, sunflower and rose flowers are the commonly used symbols in the ornamentation of the architectural members of the buildings.

The entrance door of Mahasu devta temple at Badiyar has very interesting woodcarvings. The doorjambs show the figures of minor deities on both side and their names, Kaulu and Narsing are carved (Fig. 6). The artisan has borrowed this idea from the legend that these two deities are the gatekeepers of the devta Mahasu. Both the deities hold a spear in their hands and are standing on the lotus pedestal. Through the employment of such a symbol, the architect attempted to indicate the power, majesty and potential of the god consecrated within. The gatekeeper is carved in an erect posture and carrying the weapon in their hand. The upper part of the doorjambs is embellished with the floral patterns, while the lintel of the door is further decorated with the image of Ganesha with its vehicle mouse in the centre and sides are carved with the faces of lions known as Simhamukh. The horizontal beams of the frontal part of the temple are carved with interlacing snakes and floral patterns, which adds beauty to the temple.

In addition to these places, there are a large number of temples in the valley, which have, more or less similar kind of motifs and style of woodcarvings. In Sikroo temple at Rohru, the symbols of sun are invariably depicted in various forms like that of sunflower, the human face of sun emitting rays, revolving charkha. The floral and geometrical patterns are the most common symbols used for adornment of the temple. Many animals and birds have also been represented in a graceful, and imaginative manner in the architectural members. Among the animal figures, lion, elephant, horse, bull and deer are commonly used symbols in woodcarving. The artisans used the lion motif to characterize the symbol of bravery. The form of lion in sculptures is quite unlike the actual, realistic shape of a lion. The artist represents the attributes and various inherent physical characteristics of the animals skillfully, without copying the original. The lion possesses a powerful body built for swift movement. Elephants and horses are carved in the panels depicting the battle scenes and bull and deer are depicted as a vehicle of deities. The interlacing snakes are also carved on the architectural member that is the symbol of fertility, which signifies that faith and worshiping brings blessing for its public to propagate like the snake. Similarly, the artist represents various animals and birds in an eloquent and lyrical manner.
Fig. 2 Ceiling block, Shiva temple, 18th century

Fig. 3 Eve plank, Durga temple, Hatkoti, late 20th century

Fig. 4 Chabutra, Temple complex, Hatkoti

Fig. 5 Window arch, Chabutra, Hatkoti, late 20th century
Fig. 6 Carved doorjamb, Badiar, late 20th century

Fig. 7 Window arch, Rohru, 19th century

Fig. 8 Rama with bow, Shiva temple, Hatkoti, 18th century

Fig. 9 Craftman working at Hatkoti temple complex
Besides these temples, some houses of royal families are also decorated with woodcarvings. These houses are carved externally on all four sides consisting of arches, pillars, balconies and windows while the interiors have carved windows frames, door jams, door panels and ceiling, etc. (Fig. 7).

Wooden sculptures of a very high order are an integral part of the temples. There are several texts containing allusion to the practice of making wooden images. A large numbers of wooden sculptures in folk style are noticed in the temples of the valley. Three-dimensional freestanding sculptures are found in a very small number, while those carved in relief on the wooden panels are innumerable. Both the types of sculptures are marked by unique expression. The local people have unshaken faith in these sculptures and their forms are not symbolic but representational. Each sculpture represents a well-known Hindu deity and is carved in strict adherence to iconographical tenets for immediate recognition (Fig. 8). The master craftsman (Fig. 9) makes the sculpture with religious belief and fidelity that it makes a lasting impact on the people. Three-dimensional sculptures usually represent the minor gods called Beer and are placed in the small shrines in the complex of the principal deity. These sculptures are carved out of a single block of wood and carver carefully keeps the grain of the wood intact. In wooden panel, the figures of various incarnations of the deity and their heroic deeds are carved with great artistic skill. Such relief are carved on the small wooden panels and vary in size from few cm to several metres and are made to fix either with the architectural members or placed in the niches of the temples. In Banchoonch, the wooden sculptures of gods and goddesses are lying in miniature shrines with in the temple complex. The temple of the presiding deity is also decorated with woodcarvings. A two-armed wooden sculpture, showing Vishnu riding on his mount Garuda, is carved with great artistic skill. He is holding a disc and mace in his hand and resting his right foot on the shoulder of Garuda. The other sculptures such as Mahishasurmardini riding on lion, Shiva, etc. are installed in the courtyard.

Masks are the other types of woodcarvings, which are used either on festive occasions or to portray the character in dramatic performance and in re-enactment of mythological events. The masks are carved with human and animals faces and vary in shapes and sizes, which apparently suggest an eloquent testimony of folk art of the area.

Conclusion

The tradition of sculpture expresses some of most profound ideals and experience of men through simple and easily understandable symbols, which have a direct influence on everyday life. Even through art, particularly the three-dimensional form is capable of translating the subtleties of the philosophical principles by way of posture, flexion, ornamentations and facial expression. There are certain aspects, which can only be expressed through the specific symbols, which have associated meanings. Furthermore, the architect has also used several imaginative symbols in his creative craftsmanship.

Besides the decoration of architectural members and making of images, wood has been used in the past for utilitarian purposes like that of furniture, decorative artifacts, utensil, etc. The utensils were hewn out of cylindrical wooden logs and were given a proper finishing and shape. Generally, these vessels were used for the storage of grains, churning the curd and kneading the floor, etc.

Wood was a widely used material for the construction of buildings that made it possible for the carver to design various artistic forms and designs, which were elaborated and refined under the impact of various styles with the course of time. The workmanship of the wooden craft of the Pabbar valley has also been influenced by the artistic trends of the neighbouring regions that resulted in the assimilation of few new ideas and patterns. However, the working style in carving adopted from its surrounding remain unchanged even with the introduction of new techniques. Thus, the craftsmen prefer to work with their traditional tools and equipments and the new patterns and symbols were included to fulfil the aspirations of the taste of local people.

References
5 Chauhan Hari, Hatkoti- a place of religious sanctity, Marg Magazine, 53 (3) 2002, 61
6 Brihtsamhita, Chapter 58, Vishnudharmotra BK.III, Chapter 89.