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Role of wood in contemporary Indian art with special reference to Nagina and Saharanpur

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Abstract

The art of woodcraft is too old in India. Originally it had been begun from 1300 to 1350 in Middle English. Though artistic woodwork came into existence with temple and palace craft and flourished along with architecture and sculpture. Saharanpur and Nagina in Uttar Pradesh are some of the leading centres for wood carving in India. In Saharanpur, artisans prefer Sheesham for their woodcraft, though teak, rosewood, walnut and mango are used as well as in Nagina. In 1990, the craftsmen of Nagina, armed with a newly acquired confidence and recognition got together from the Nagina. Crafts Development Society which has been actively involved in elevating the woodcraft of Nagina. In Saharanpur, the first organized wood carving unit is said to have been set up in 1882 by Atta Hussain, an immigrant from Multan. Designs are first prepared on paper and transferred with the help of ink onto the wood. These are then carved using various tools like the tools of 'U' and 'V' shape etc. and after that it is polished to bring out the shine of the wood.

As a contemporary artistic medium, woods are being used as a new medium in artworks and considered as an excellent medium for new art. Wood is used in forms of installation, craft, sculpture, and decoration including chip carving, wood burning, and marquetry. Most famous contemporary artists used wood and several types of metals attached with wood for their works, which were highly appreciated. The distinguished artists among them are:

Balbir Singh Katt- Yellow sun-split across the wood stone, *Rajesh Sharma*-Wooden Installation, and other artists are *Ramesh Bisht*, P.T. Reddy and so on.

This matter will allow me to explore the significance of wood which is used in both traditional and modern styles in the form of contemporary art as a new medium. In this article, some major issues have been discussed as pointwise, like which cover impact, significance, innovation and analyzed the role of wooden craft in India with special reference to Saharanpur and Nagina (Uttar Pradesh).

Keywords: Role, wood, contemporary, special, reference

1. Introduction

The term craft is derived from the German root which means 'skill' or 'strength'. Craft is often used to describe the family of artistic practices within the family. The decorative arts are traditionally defined by their relationship to functional or useful products (such as sculptural forms in the vessel tradition) or by their use of such natural media as wood, clay, ceramics, glass, textiles and metals.

Along with several crafts, woodcraft is a common heritage in India and it's found across the country. The origin of "woodcraft" is about 1300-50 C.E. in Middle English. The art of woodcraft is ancient in India. According to some scholars since 1500 B.C., wooden things were considered the most luxurious items throughout the tremendous Indian peninsula; human beings had started decorating their homes by different methods of wood designing items and used it to make dolls and toys for their children.

The artistic wooden craft appeared in a temple and palace craft and flourished alongside architecture and sculpture. Depending on local availability, various woods were utilized for different techniques with style and fashioned into decorative, religious and functional items. Ancient Hindu temples were decorated with doors, terraces and various fittings carved in teak and other woods, with patterns of extreme richness and subtle detail. These have architectural remains of Kashmir Smuts (Punjab) which date back to the 3rd or 4th century, and the designs are bold and use of intense decorative characters.

The doors of the Somnath temple on the northwest coast were famed for their glory and were highly valued as sacred relics.

The religious items included images of gods and legendary figures like Durga, Luxmi and Ganesha, etc. Some artisans carve a single piece of wood to form an object. These attempts are made for artistic demonstration.

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Some distinct forms and shapes of woodcraft items have come down from the remote past and some innovative forms have been evolved, maintaining custom and simplicity.

Uttar Pradesh is the most significant state for wooden craft in India where woodcraft is very popular and its main centres are, Mainpuri, Nagina, and Saharanpur.

Nagina is a famous town in the Bijnor district of Uttar Pradesh. The woodwork traditions in Nagina, Bijnor have been traced as far back as 1881 when The Imperial Gazetteer of India, a historical reference work was first published in 1881 under the aegis of the British Empire. In Nagina, many types of wooden crafts are found which developed the art.

In Saharanpur, the Tarkashi craft of Uttar Pradesh is known today for its fine inlay work with brass wire, strips and themes on dark Sheesham wood with fine dots and patterned lines and is used extensively for furniture and boxes. Saharanpur in Uttar Pradesh is a leading centre for wood carving in India. The first organized wood carving unit is said to have been set up in 1882 by Atta Hussain, an immigrant from Multan.

As a contemporary artistic interpretation, wood is used in traditional and modern styles and is an essential medium for new art. Wood is used in forms of installation, sculpture, craft, and decoration including chip carving, wood burning, and marquetry. Wood provides a fascination, beauty, and complexity in the grain that often shows even when the medium is painted.

2. Study Area and Research Methodology

The present study is based on secondary data. The secondary data has been collected from the reports of government of India and states as well as the articles published in journals, books, magazines, e-books and many e-resources etc. The published articles are also main resource of this Paper and this research would be accomplished using the descriptive method.

3. Literature Review

Since the very old period the people used to pay due attention considering and realizing the significance of Wooden craft therefore various scholars and researchers worked in an artistic style consequently provided us different trends of wooden craft, some of them are mentioned below-

- Ranjan, Aditi, Handmade in India; Crafts of India
- Indian Handicrafts, research done by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, Indian Council for Cultural Relations, 1963.
- The glory of Indian handicrafts research done by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, Indian Book Co., 1976.
- Trends evaluation in wooden folding screen of Saharanpur, research done by Ayushi Verma and Ila Gupta, published in the magazine Chitrolekha
- International magazine on art and design Vol.6 no.1, 2016
- Wood Handicraft a study of its origin and development in Saharanpur, Research done by O.C. Handa and Mandu Jain Published by Indus Publishing Company New Delhi.

There are also various works related to wooden craft in Saharanpur.

4. Centres of Wood craft in India

Over the time, different centres of wooden craft appeared, each with its unique style. The important centres, along with their typical products are:

- Karnataka: Kumta – carved figures; Mysore – carved rosewood animals, especially elephants.
- Kerala: Trivandrum, Trichur, Ernakulam, Cochin – ebony, rosewood and sandalwood figures.
- Madhya Pradesh: Indore, Alirajpur, Bhopal, Ujjain, Ratlam – carved wall panels, boxes and furniture.
- Maharashtra: Miraj – musical instruments.
- Orissa: Puri – wooden masks and raths (chariots); Baragarh – toys
- Punjab: Hoshiarpur, Jalandhar, Amritsar, Bhera – furniture; low relief carving, with geometrical, animal, floral motifs.
- Rajasthan: Bassi – carved figures, wooden shrines; Pipar, Bhari Sajanpur – bowls.
- Tripura: carved plaques, tribal and animal figures.
- Andhra Pradesh: Bhongir and Madhavmala - carved chairs, mirror frames, idols; Udayagiri - wooden cutlery.
- Assam: carved sinhasanas (thrones) for prayer houses.
- Gujarat: Pethapur – printing blocks; Surat – engraved and inlaid sandalwood and teak boxes; Bhavnagar, Rajkot, Mahuva – chests
- Himachal Pradesh: Kangra – carved doors, windows, panels.
- Jammu & Kashmir: carved walnut wood utility and decorative items – bowls, trays, jewellery boxes, screens, tables, cupboards.
- Uttar Pradesh: Saharanpur – screens, folding tables, trays, bowls, boxes; Pilkhuwa, Farukkabad – printing blocks.

5. Wood Craft Tradition in Nagina

The wooden craft traditions in Bijnor at Nagina occupied an important place in the field of wooden craft since 1881 when the Imperial Gazetteer of India, a historical reference work was first published in 1881 under the Aegis of the British Empire. “Nagina is celebrated for the excellent workmanship of its carved ebony wares, such as walking-sticks trays, boxes, which are frequently inlaid with ivory. Large quantities of small glass phials are blown here and exported to Haridwar for the pilgrims who carry Ganges’ water.”(ref.7)

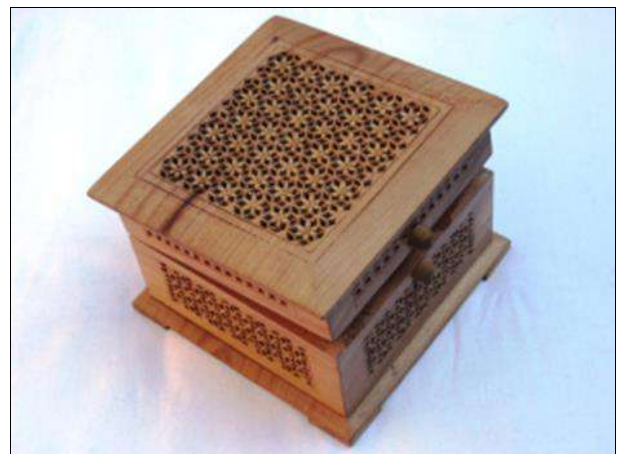


Fig 1: Intricate Jaali work on a wooden box

The small town occupies a place in the book *Ain-i-Akbari*, a 16th century constitutional book of the Akbar Empire. Given such rich history, it is unfortunate that so many of us are not even aware of the arts and crafts traditions of Nagina which found patronage even from the Mughal emperors. The evolution of the art and craft traditions has been an organic one and has also been inspired by the flora of the region. The geographical proximity to the Shivalik range meant that the raw material, wood was always naturally available in abundance to act as a canvas for these handicraft traditions.

Another form of craft which is widely practiced in this region is Tarkashi or the metal inlay work. In this technique, fine wire like strips of brass, copper or silver is inlaid into wood. Typically, dark coloured and seasoned sheesham wood is used as its high oil content allows the inlaid metal to be held securely. The patterns are usually geometric forms or florals of Mughal inspiration. A small pocket of craftsmen in Nagina and Bijnor specialize in carving ornamental combs and trinket boxes from ebony. The combs are made in pairs, male and female. The male combs, *raja ki kangri*, have teeth on one side and the female combs, *rani ki kangri*, have teeth on both the sides.

6. Wood Craft Tradition in Saharanpur

Saharanpur in Uttar Pradesh is a main centre of wood carving in India which proved to be very crucial platform for art. Here Wood carving is done entirely by hand. In Saharanpur, Sheesham is the first choice of artisans, though teak, rosewood, walnut and mango are also used. Designs are first made on paper, and transferred onto the wood using ink. These are then carved using a variety of chisels. The article is finished by polishing in order to bring out the shine of the wood.



Fig 2: Wood- inlay jewellery box

This is usually done with the help of a lathe mechanism. The first organized wood carving unit is said to have been set up in 1882 by *Atta Hussain*, an immigrant from Multan. Closely associated with architecture, wood carving incorporated the design vocabulary of architectural carvings. These influences go on to reflect in the finely shaped screens and jaalis work, anguri and the elaborated floral and creeping plant leaves patterns found in many contemporary products from Saharanpur. It was also influenced by Kashmiri designs, with many of the craftspeople having descended from Kashmiri immigrants. With its development into a major hub for woodwork, wood carvers from other

centres have also migrated here. As a result, Saharanpur can boast of a wide and highly skilled repertoire of techniques and products, catering to both the domestic and export markets.

7. Wood Craft practices by Contemporary artists in India

Wood works proved to be an excellent medium for artists in India. Most of the famous contemporary artists used wood and several types of metal attached with wood for their high appreciated work. The renowned artists are:-

Dhanraj Bhagat worked on several media like paper-Mache, aluminium, copper and stone, most of his known works are in wood and are characterized by their geometric shapes. His best work is *Bull* made of wood.



Fig 3: Bull by Dhanraj Bhagat

Bull, is one of the most inventive sculptors of India. He has carved a niche for himself in the history of art of the Indian subcontinent. It was because of his exceptional creativity that he gained recognition in the art world. Works and installations by Dhanraj Bhagat prove the excellence of his arty talent.

Rajesh Sharma is one of the distinguished artists. He worked uniquely on wooden craft and his works is known globally like wooden installation. He also worked on several media like scrap metal, lime, organic materials like wood which are available largely in forest near Khairagarh like acacia (*Babool*), sheesham, teak wood, and so on.

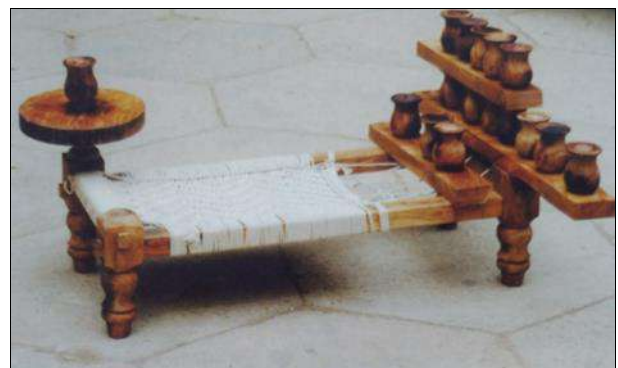


Fig 4: Installation by Rajesh Sharma

Sankho Chaudhary began close to cubism. His themes have included the female figure and wildlife. He worked in a wide range of media, and has produced both large-scale reliefs and mobiles e.g. *Figure of woman*, in wood.

Balbir Singh Katt used traditional Indian subject created with a contemporary sensibility or even, the combination of different mediums, such as Balbir Singh Katt's use of marble and wood together in 1967 e.g. *Yellow sun splite*

across wood stone and other artists are *Jeram Patel, Ramesh Bisht, P.T. Reddy, Dhruve Mistry* and others used wood with other materials

8. Impact of wood in contemporary Indian art

From ancient time, human beings are utilizing the wood into various form of art, whether it has been used to construct the building or to make daily use items. We observe frequently the use of wood in contemporary Indian Art, whether we look at the art of Satish Gujral or the art work of Rajesh Sharma. Likewise there are many examples of Indian contemporary art whose art is the medium of art and he has been success to express his inner feelings by this medium.

In recent era the wood is being used as valuable form of art because nowadays another option of wood is available such as metal, fibres and synthetic wood is used for wooden doors and windows. So the texture of wood amongst people and their desires of colour and form remain in such a way that people like to make colourful texture, doors, windows, almirahs and furniture. As a result we see the utmost use of it in Indian Art and thus Indian artist are using wood as an important medium of art considering the changing environment whose examples are seen in different art activities of Indian contemporary art. For instance Delhi Art Fair 2017 where some articles made of shining wood were kept to exhibit and it looks like wood is the medium of art.

In Indian architecture lattice and doors were made of iron and stone and in making such items human being used to tackle many difficulties because cutting the stone into pieces or melting it is very challenging work, although the use of wood made this task more easier in the place of it because it can be easily rotated and twisted or it can be easily inlaid for the purpose of decoration. Thus wood has been important part of architectural art so this is nothing but integral part of art.

In the contemporary Indian art, artist use different forms of art like metals, aluminium, iron, plastic and stone etc, to create art sculpture, installation and assemblage. There is a lot of difficulties in using these items because casting and moulding metal and iron is difficult and lengthy process although it is very easy to cut the wood into pieces and to make it artistic work for the expression of inner ideas. In such a way the wood has been significant medium for artistic work. Wood works provided an excellent medium for artists in India. Most of the famous contemporary artists used wood and several types of metals attached with wood for their high appreciated work. Mainly artists are:-

Satish Gujral experimenting and creating new forms in different mediums, initiated with an organic evolution from lived reality and delving into the very essence of the substance – this has been epitomized by his burnt wooden sculptures. He liked the sooty blackness of burnt wood from which he created deities and other forms combined with a hint of vermilion and gold like glowing embers of the elemental fire. This medium interconnected the tradition with contemporary sensibilities which he infuses into his work. He later started exploring the colours and textures of granite. His burnt wood is e.g. Tree of life and Raising of Lazarus.

Chintamani Kar was a globally recognized Indian sculptor, who created sculpture with the aid of various materials like terracotta, metal, stone and wood. Mahogany wood was used in his notable artwork, was named flight.

9. Conclusion

Briefly, it can be concluded by only expressing that in modern world as we all know, the wood has been inseparable part of human beings, without using of it, it seems like our decorative works are imperfect. So, since the time when its significance and its various uses emerged in a result of inventions and creations, artists also worked as an art work and in their artistic works they exhibited differently and showed us various styles, uses, its methods, characteristics and new trends of wooden crafts.

When we study the wooden craft in Nagina and Saharanpur, we come to know about creative works such as Tarkashi, wood engraving, Anguri and so on. As well as Nagina is also mentionable in this field because here we find many types of wooden art that is coming from generation to generation for instance Jaali work on the wooden boxes, carved wooden jewellery boxes with ivory work and carved wooden chair etc. Undoubtedly Nagina and Saharanpur play a significant role in the field of wood craft.

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