

INDIGENOUS ELEMENT IN APOTHEOSIS OF LORD SRIRAM AND RAMAYANA THEMES IN WOODEN TEMPLES OF UTTRAKHAND

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Abstract

Lord Sriram, one of the dashavatars, incarnated on the sacred land of India, to set an epitome of an ideal son and a paragon of sacrifice/righteousness in his sacred profane life which came to be eulogized pandemically. Devabhumi Uttarakhand finds several references in the Ramayana and Sriram is apotheosized in religio-cultural fiestas celebrated in the state. Ramman – a religio-cultural fiesta celebrated in the Saloor Dungra village in the Painkhanda Valley in Chamoli district and Ramlila, alike other parts of India, is enacted in different pockets of Uttarakhand, both have been included in the list of intangible cultural practices around the world by UNESCO. The visual arts of the state, whether its miniature painting, mural painting or plastic arts, are replete with visual fiesta commemorating the legendary heroic deeds of Lord Ram or narratives/ episodes of the Ramayana derivation. The presence of indigenous ingredient in the visual and performing arts of the state attribute to them a distinct facet, a vital factor enabling the rich cultural heritage of the state to acclaim recognition not merely throughout the country but at the international platform. The wooden temples of Uttarakhand, which posses a distinct significance from the point of view of the study of art and architecture, enriching cultural heritage of the state, validate the popularity of Lord Rama in this region, though local deities are prominently venerated here

A distinct feature of these temples is the indigenous element in the treatment of forms which attributes outstanding character to them in comparison to those found at other places. The exterior of the temples of Mahasu devata at Hanol, Chalda Mahasu at Thadiyar, Basik Devata at Kuna, Mahasu Devata at Zadi, Duryodhan Temple at Saur, Pokhu Devata at Naitwar, Karna Temple at Deorah, Kali at Koti –Kanasar etc. in Uttarakhand, have wooden components or doors with metal embossed sheets with scenes glorifying Lord Ram and

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episodes derived from the Ramayana. There is a wooden temple dedicated to Lord Raghunath at Pujaili.

Keywords

Indigenous elements, cultural heritage, religio-cultural panorama, ethnic, simplicity, visual equilibrium, aboriginal visual arts

Lord Sriram, one of the *dashavatars*, incarnated on the sacred land of India, to set an epitome of an ideal son and a paragon of sacrifice/righteousness in his sacred profane life which came to be eulogized pandemically. *Devabhumi* Uttarakhand finds several references in the Ramayana and Sriram is apotheosized in religio-cultural fiestas celebrated in the state. Ramman – a religio-cultural fiesta celebrated in the Saloon Dungra village in the Painkhanda Valley in Chamoli district and Ramlila, like other parts of India, is enacted in different pockets of Uttarakhand, both have been included in the list of intangible cultural practices around the world by UNESCO. The visual arts of the state, whether its miniature painting, mural painting, or plastic arts, are replete with visual fiesta commemorating the legendary heroic deeds of Lord Ram or narratives/ episodes of the Ramayana derivation. The presence of an indigenous ingredient in the visual and performing arts of the state attribute to them a distinct facet, a vital factor enabling the rich cultural heritage of the state to acclaim recognition not merely throughout the country but at the international platform.

The wooden temples of Uttarakhand, which possess a distinct significance from the point of view of the study of art and architecture, enriching the cultural heritage of the state, validate the popularity of Lord Rama in this region, though local deities are prominently venerated here. The roots for preference of a particular deity in the temple cella and restriction of the Ramayana themes or Vaishnavite/ Brahmanical themes on the exterior wooden architectural components of these temples lie in the socio-religious matrix of the state. Uttarakhand was a stronghold of Vedic customs, the hermitages of Vedic Rishi-munis served as training centers for Vedic rites and rituals as borne out by the archeological evidences found from the state. Shaivism was in vogue in Uttarakhand during Kuninda rule (200 BCE-

200CE). It gradually lost its popularity due to the growing influence of Buddhism, Buddha is believed to have visited the Uishirdhvaj mountain on the bank of the river Ganga in Southern Uttarakhand. Buddhist monasteries were established in Uttarakhand in circa 5-4 BCE.¹

The visit of Adi Shankaracharya to Uttarakhand in early 8th Cent CE revived/rejuvenated Brahmanical cults here. He established Jyotir-math or Joshimath monastery and restored the temple of Narayan at Badri and died at Kedar at the age of thirty-two. This resulted in the construction of a number of temples dedicated to

Vishnu and Shiva in Uttarakhand. Gradually local gods and goddesses gained popularity and the advent of the cult of Mahasu devatas- Basik, Pawasi, Botha, and Chalda from Kashmir which according to Walton dates back to some four or five hundred years ago² influenced the religion-cultural nexus of the state, occupying the cella of the temples. Nevertheless, the age-old belief systems, deep-rooted veneration of Brahmanical deities, strong remembrance of awesome heroic deeds of the legendary heroes, and profound approbation for the great epics- the Ramayana and the Mahabharatha remained pivotal factors in determining the religious-cultural panorama of this region. These temples, which have sumptuously carved wooden exteriors eulogizing Lord Ram or thematic depictions of the Ramayana derivation, can be categorized as Canopied Composite Roofed Temples, Gable Roofed Temple, and Multi-Tiered Pyramidal Temple. The wooden architectural components of these temples carved with varied episodes related to the life of Sriram as described in the Ramayana/ Sri Ramcharitmanas, serve as a picture gallery for the visitors/devotees preaching them morality, righteousness, universal values and also idolize the gallantry accomplishments of the Lord. The cella doors with metal embossed sheets are also sometimes embossed with the image of Lord Ram or his life events.

A distinct feature of these temples is the indigenous element in the treatment of forms which attributes outstanding character to them in comparison to those found at other places. The exterior of the temples of Mahasu *devata* at Hanol, Chalda Mahasu at Thadiyar, Basik Devata at Kuna, Mahasu Devata at Zadi, Duryodhan Temple at Saur, Pokhu Devata at Naitwar, Karna Temple at Deborah, Kali at Koti –Kanasar, etc. in Uttarakhand, have wooden components or doors with metal embossed sheets with scenes glorifying Lord Ram and episodes derived from the Ramayana. There is a wooden temple dedicated to Lord Raghunath at Pujaili.

The Multi-Tiered Pyramidal Temple of Basik *Devata* at Kuna is a unique example of intricate and ethnic wood carving of par excellence. It is situated in Kuna valley in Jaunsar – Bawar *pargana* of Dehradun district, on the right hillside above the subsidiary road from Kanda to Tuni. The exquisitely carved wooden door jambs of the temple are carved with Brahmanical god and goddess including Lord Ram and Laxman on the outermost door jamb on the right side, Goswami Tulsidas below them, Lord Ram holding bow and arrow just above Kartikey, Mahisasuramardini, Varaha avatar Vishnu, Vishnu holding a lotus in his both hands, Indra mounted on Airavat elephant and Shiva, etc. The figure with a rosary in hand is undoubtedly Goswami Tulsidas, the author of Sri Ramcharitmanas, as a similar but more explicit representation of him is found on the door jamb at the temples of Mahasu *Devata* at Hanol and Thadiyar. One wooden panel is carved with ten-

headed and multi-armed Ravana. This type of representation of Ravana appears in Indian miniatures too. As Sri Ram was *Suryavanshi*, an unprecedented Sun motif is carved on the wooden door leading to the veranda in front of the cella. It consists of a roundel with the visage of the Sun god in the center and six horses radiating from the sides of the roundel, whereas two are carved at the bottom to maintain visual equilibrium and also to resolve the problem of tackling the vast space at the bottom of the roundel and probably due to challenging, the indigenous craftsman might have experienced in depicting the front of a horse's head. Thus, contrary to the iconography associated with the depiction of seven horses harnessed to the Sun's chariot, where the number has increased to eight. The detail of a massive pillar in the verandah has two male figures with bows and arrows, one slightly bigger in size which seems to be a representation of Sri Ram and Laxman. Besides other scenes depicted are related to the Mahabharata. The style in the treatment of forms carved in low relief is characterized by marked simplicity, round faces, wide-open eyes, tube-like limbs, frontal or profile figures, and the use of few incised lines to suggest clothes. The temple at Kuna is very old and has not gone through a renovation in recent years. It is a marvelous example of original indigenous style of the woodwork of Uttarakhand.

The sanctum of the temple of Mahasu Devata at Hanol, situated on the left bank of the river Tons in Jaunsar Bawar *pargana* of Dehradun district, is Nagara in style and dates back to circa. 9th -10th CE. It is followed by a *bhandar*, an *antral*, a *sabha-mandap*, and a porch in front. The temple has undergone a renovation from time to time. The wooden pent roofs raised above the *garbhagriha*, *bhandar*, *antral*, *sabha-mandap*, and a gable roof raised above the porch as well as wooden *chhatris* are later addition. The entire wooden components are carved with the Brahmanical gods and goddesses and with the episodes derived from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Splendid carving on the wooden components narrating lionized heroic deeds of Sri Ram in exile reveals how Sri Ram and the episodes related to the Ramayana which are nexus of the folk songs, performing arts of the native folk, remained a pulsatile subject matter of the aboriginal visual arts too.

The wooden door jambs of the temple of Mahasu *devata* at Hanol is carved in low relief with various scenes derived from the Ramayana and Sri Ramcharitmanas, viz- Sri Ram, Laxman and Sita in exile, *Swayamvar* of Sita where the latter holds a garland in front of Sri Ram, Sri Ram handing over his ring to Hanuman for Sita, Hanuman with clasped hands in front of Sita seated under a tree in Ashok *vatika*, Mandodari pleading Ravana to return Sita with all her dignity to Ram, the reference of which occurs in Sri Ramcharitmanas, the trio of Sri Ram, Laxman and Sita, *Lanka dahan*, Sri Ram's army crossing the ocean, Laxman lying unconscious on ground

after being hit by the *Virghatini Shakti*, annihilation of five commanders of Ravana by Hanuman as mentioned in Sundarkand in Balmiki Ramayan, Hanuman flying over Ayodhya with *Sanjivani* while Laxman who mistook him to be a demon, aims with an arrow at him., Sri Ram aiming with his arrow at ten-headed Ravana and finally appears Goswami Tulsidas, the author of Sri Ramcharitmana, seated under a tree with a rosary in hands and the text -Sri Ramcharitmanas is in front of him.

The forms are painted with yellow, green, blue, red, and brown colors against an off white flat background devoid of suggestion of horizon or ground, hence they project out of the background prominently to be visible with clarity from a distance and impart a sense of action taking place beyond the restrictions of time and space except the brown stripes dividing the scenes on which they are at times grounded, few leaves suggest foliage, few incised lines suggest folds of the clothes, boldly outlined eyes appear prominent on simple elongated faces, figures are rather naive, lively but more or less static. The wood carving of the temple was done by the craftsman Ganga Ram for eleven years, from 1984 to 1995, as informed by him during my meeting with him in China in 2011.

The canopied composite roofed temple of Chalda Mahasu at Thadiyar is located across the river Tons at a short distance approachable on foot from the Hanol-Mori road. It was under construction in 2002, when I visited the site. The task was undertaken by Ganga Ram in 1998 and after completion, the wooden façade of the temple was painted with golden color. The glory of Sri Ram is an integrated part of the visual commentary which is so well knitted with the architectural components of this religious edifice to narrate the heroic deeds and important episodes related to the life of Lord Ram to the devotees. Mahasu *devata* is also considered to be the manifestation of Maha Shiva. As the woodwork at both the sites, i.e., Hanol and Thadiyar, has been done by the same craftsman, the style, as well as episodes, are more or less the same-Sita in Ashoka *Vatika*, the trio-Ram, Laxman and Hanuman, Ram entrusting his ring to Hanuman, Hanuman dropping Sri Ram's ring for Sita seated under the Ashoka tree, Sri Ram and Sita exchanging garlands at *Swayambar*, *reclining* Ravana receiving news of the arrival of Sri Ram's army from his attendants, Laxman lying unconscious in the lap of Lord Ram after having been struck by *Shakti-ban*, Hanuman flying over Ayodhya with Sanjivani, Sita's *agnipariksha* and Goswami Tulsidas with the manuscript-Sri Ramcharitmanas in his hands, seated cross-legged under a tree.

A very old Tower Temple of Pawasi *devtata* was situated in China, beyond Arkot to the west of Tuni, on the Tuni-Rohru road. The temple was demolished to make way for the new structure and when it was revisited by the

author in 2011, it was undergoing reconstruction by Ganga Ram, the renowned craftsman of Uttarakhand. During my revisit at the site, I found two panels lying at the site belonging to the old demolished structure. One of the panels has a representation of Varah-*avtar* Vishnu and above it are two figures, one taller than the other, holding bow and arrows, which seem to be a representation of Sri Ram and Laxman, a probability also supported by the fact that common warriors could not be depicted along with depiction of Varaha-*avtar* Vishnu. This assumption is further strengthened by the second only found panel at the site with ten-headed Ravana carved on it. Another panel which is now lost, with the lost glory of the old temple in China was carved with the vigorous image of Hanuman. The style of these panels is very unsophisticated, marked by simplicity in treatment of forms, stylistically two variations have been noticed here, the panel with the image of Sri Ram and Laxman standing with the weight of the body resting on one leg whereas the other is bent with a cloth tied at the waist hanging downwards, wide-open eyes on round faces, a unique indigenous style which is an outstanding feature of the wood carving at the Temple of Basik *devata* at Kuna and most probably the legendary craftsman Bona Bari of Kuna might have worked at the old temple at China too. The second style is represented by Ravana where a single row of holes punched on the forms suggests clothes as well as ornaments, a peculiar indigenous style that was evolved by the local artisan entrusted with the task of wood carving in China.

A newly constructed temple has replaced the old structure in China which has been reconstructed by Ganga Ram who had also carried out renovations/ reconstructions at Hanol and Thadiyal, Thematically and stylistically the three bear a close resemblance. The visual lionization of Sri Ram includes episodes like- Sri Ram shooting at the Golden Stag with his arrow, Ravana disguised as a saint asking Sita for alms whereas Sita is depicted within the Laxman *Rekha* offering alms to Ravana, Laxman chopping off Suparnkha's nose at Sri Ram's instruction, Sri Ram entrusting his ring to Hanuman, Hanuman carrying fainted Laxman in his arms, Sita handing over her *churamani* to Hanuman, Laxman instructing the two caught disguised spies of Ravana to deliver Sri Ram's message to Ravana and Sri Ram aiming at the Ocean to punish it. The indigenous methods evolved by the artisan to tackle the problem of limited space include the introduction of a diagonal platform to raise the golden stag to Sri Ram's eye level, incised wavy diagonal lines suggesting the ocean which also serve as a raised platform to bring the small icon of the

personified ocean to the level of Sri ram's arrow and scenes are often depicted on a low raised platform as if taking place on a stage in a drama. The carving at Hanol, Thadiyal, and China is less ornamental and more narrative, preaching the perfection Sri Ram possessed in his profane roles as a son, brother, husband, and followed *Maryada*, i.e., self restrain one has to follow in one's life throughout. The magnificent carving is bound to create feeling of awe in the devotees for Sri Ram before they enter the temple.

The gable-roofed temple of Mahasu *devata* at Zadi has some portions of the temple which have been reconstructed during the last three decades whereas some architectural components are old hence here we witness amalgamation of indigenous as well as contemporary elements in the execution of forms. The wooden façade of the temple has a carved and painted image of Hanuman , whereas Sri Ram, Laxman, and Sita are carved on the racking cornice under the gable roof. Aboriginal style is noticed here in other treatment of other gods and goddesses including Hanuman with a mace, Though the form is very modest, yet one leg slightly lifted up gives a sense of movement. The monkeys or *vanarsena* carved on a wooden plank are also folks in style.

The temple of Kali at Koti-Kanesar in the Rawain region of Uttarakhand has a sumptuously carved wooden façade with the themes of the Ramayana derivation, Sri Ram and Laxman in exile, Hanuman presenting Sri Ram's ring to Sita, ten-headed Ravana being killed by Sri Ram and coronation of Sri Ram, etc. The figures are flat and modestly carved.

The Raghunath Temple, a canopied Composite-roofed structure, is situated at Pujaili, fifteen kilometers away from Barkot. The temple enshrines a metal face image of lord Raghunath.

The embossed metal sheets covering the entrance door of the temple of Pokhu *devata* at Netwar depict an image of Sri Ram standing with his magnificent bow and arrow, Hanuman flying with a mountain containing *sanjivini*, and a Varah-*avatar* Vishnu and Hanuman standing with his mace. The temple is situated at the confluence of the Rupin and Supin rivers, reachable from Hanol via Mori.

The subject matter of Ramayana derivation is also seen on the embossed metal sheets covering the wooden door of the Duryodhana temple at Saur, which is located at a distance of fifteen kilometers from Netwar.. The left side of the gilded door frame of the cella depicts Hanuman flying with a mountain containing the *sanjivini* plant and again reappears on the right side standing on a lotus pedestal on the top whereas he is depicted again, this time seated on his long coiled tail, forming

a high column. The gilded door of the cella has a beautifully embossed image of Sri Ram, Laxman and Sita mounted on the *Pushpak-vimana*.

Ten-headed Ravana and above him Sri Ram and Laxman with bow and arrow are embossed on the metal sheets covering door jamb of Karna temple situated at the village Deborah and can be reached after 2 to 3 kilometers climb from the main road.

Undoubtedly, the wooden temples of Uttarakhand which are located in the Jaunsar-Bawar and Gawain regions of Uttarakhand, are astounding examples of apotheosis of Sri Ram and the Ramayana themes which pulsates in the religio-cultural lives of the native populace. The visual fiesta of the epic Ramayana is solemnized in wood carving and gilded metal sheets of temple doors in a luxuriant manner with propensity for typically indigenous style evolved by the native craftsmen in the hoary past, especially as seen in the case of the temples at Kuna and China, and evolution of indigenous creative visual methods to deal with the limitation of space. The exquisitely carved wooden components of these temples exclusively made of *Deodar* wood are spectacular examples of indigenous visual folk art and glorification of Sri Ram and the epic Ramayana which are deeply rooted in the psyche of the native inhabitants of Uttarakhand. This rich cultural heritage of the state is at the risk of getting lost as we have witnessed in the case of the old temple in China, where rare and old wood carvings belonging to the demolished temple have got lost due to negligence and indifference towards the significance of cultural heritage these religious edifices possess. It is a prime time to undertake concrete and organized efforts at every level to preserve the rich cultural heritage of the state for the posterity.

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