

Palki

P A L A N Q U I N





Palki

(PALANQUIN)

*"Lightly, O lightly we bear her along,
She sways like a flower in the wind of our song;
She skims like a bird on the foam of a stream,
She floats like a laugh from the lips of a dream;
Gaily, O gaily we glide and we sing,
We bear her along like a pearl on a string."*

- from Palanquin Bearers by Sarojini Naidu

The *palki* was a traditional mode of travel in the bygone days, a wheel-less human powered means of transport, usually for one person, carried by an even number of

bearers, who were known as the *beheras*. It would be borne by two, four or even eight *palki* bearers, who carried the poles of the *palki* directly on their shoulders.





In the pre-steamer and pre-railway times, people belonging to affluent and aristocratic families, particularly the women, travelled in *palkis*. The palanquins came in many sizes and designs – the smallest, which would be borne by two bearers, was called a *doli* – the larger ones were borne by six to eight bearers. In the 17th and 18th centuries, European traders in Bengal, used the *palki* for visiting *haats* and bazaars and also for transporting their cargo. Even young writers joining the Company's service in Bengal at very nominal salaries, often indulged themselves by buying and maintaining staff to power a *palki*. However, this indulgence often led to neglect of business in favour of "rambling". In 1758, the Court of Directors of the East India Company, issued orders

that prohibited the writers, who were low ranking employees, from buying and maintaining palanquins.

Palanquins were used for travelling short as well as long distances. In the early 19th century, the postal department started using palanquins to carry mail. Soon the department began hiring out the palanquins to approved passengers. One could buy a ticket for a long distance travel and relays of bearers would transport the palanquin between stations. The team consisted of two torch bearers, two luggage porters and eight palanquin bearers, who worked alternately in group of four. Passengers could travel straight through or even break their journey, as per their convenience.

By the mid 19th century, with the development of roads and highways and the introduction of steamer and rail communication, the Europeans by and large stopped using the palanquins. Carriages came into existence and became a more convenient mode of transport. However, the Bengali aristocracy continued to use the *palki* till the end of the 19th century. In the 1930s, rickshaws were introduced in urban areas, thereby making the *palki* an obsolete mode of transport, except for women from very conservative, traditional families. The *palkis* used by the women were enclosed by shutters and curtains as the women travelers followed a strict purdah system.

The palanquins would vary in their grandeur. The ornamentation would reflect the social status of the owner of the palanquin. The interiors of the *palki* would

often be furnished with pillows and bedding, for the comfort of the traveller. Many of the *palkis* used by the affluent gentry had the amenities for reading, writing, eating and sleeping. Often the palanquin bearers would hum and sing together to beat the monotony of the trek. *Palkis* were an ideal mode of transport across rough terrain.

Palanquins have been mentioned in the *Ramayana* (250 BC), Ibn Batuta, the famous traveler, has described palanquins being carried by eight people, in two lots of four, who would carry and rest alternately, giving relief to the tired. *Palki* bearers, who belonged to the economically disadvantaged sections of society, would always be found standing near bazaars and at the gates of the homes of the affluent people, waiting to be hired.

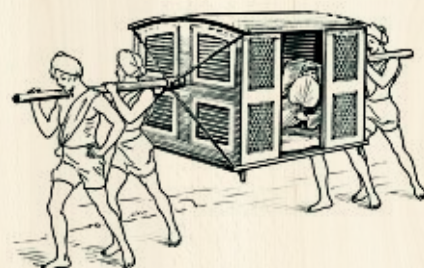




Today, the use of the palanquin is only for ceremonial occasions – a bride is carried in a *doli* in a traditional wedding – images of gods and goddess are carried in a decorated *palki* during religious processions.

EZCC organized a *Palki* Making Workshop, in which the craftspersons made the palanquin from scratch, on our premises. Watching the palanquin taking shape was a delight for the visitors. The *palki* along with

the models of the *beheras* carrying it has been installed in front of the Bengal Hut Cluster at the Srijani Shilpagram.





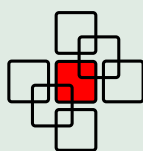


Palki Making:

Artist - Radhamadhab Ghosh, Assistants - Partha Ghosh, Karunakar Sutar

Palki Bahak:

Artist - Pallab Singha, Assistants - Sujit Murmu, Dip Mukherjee, Gopi Gibon Ghosh



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