

Masks of Assam

(Special Reference with the Mask artform of Chamguri Satra, Majuli, Assam)

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Abstract - Assam is also very famous for its mask tradition. Assamese people due to their shy nature hide this talent of mask making. They mainly use mask to express the emotions, mood of human life which human face are unable to convey. In the meantime, this process turned into an art. The main epicenters of mask art in Assam are Majuli, Sibsagar, Goalpara and Darrang region. In Goalpara and Darrang area, drama programme called 'Khulia Bhaoriya' has usage of mask and that is supported by Khatpura Satra of Sibsagar. The masks used in this programmes are safely conserved in 'Srimanta Sankardeva Kalakshetra' of Guwahati. The mask art forms of Majuli are sponsored by Chamuguri Satra, Bihimpur Satra and Elangi Narasimha Satra. At present, Kamalabari Satra of Majuli also maintained the tradition

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I. INTRODUCTION

A mask is a cover or partial cover for the face used for disguise to show entity of humans. Masks are used since inception of human civilization. We can trace its origin in the historical sites of various places. In this regard, we get example from France's 'Caremedu Volp', 'Attamire care' of Spain, 'Kundusi' of Tanzania. Apart from this, sites from Algeria, Libya, Sweden, Siberia, Canada, Peru, Egypt and Bhimbetka of India can be mentioned.(vaidhya,174)

People use mask for various purposes such as spiritual, cultural, hunting, sport and defence. It is difficult to ascertain the origin of the word 'Mask'. The word 'Mask' is related to French word, 'Masque', Italian word 'Maschera' or Spanish word 'Malscare'. Some experts suggest that the origin of the word 'Mask' is derived from the Latin word 'Mascus' and 'Masca' meaning ghost.(vaidhya,174)

Two types of masks are used in the society. One is real mask, which is wore by a person on his face or on his body parts. The other type of mask is abstract. This type of mask is not permanent in nature. It is rather drawn on the

face of a person by colours (Zaman,91) Earlier, artists used woods, metals, ivory, soil, horns, leather, feather etc. to make the masks and these were difficult to conserve for a long time.(Malik (ed),107-109.) Due to lack of conservation system, many masks were lost. The earliest prehistoric mask is found at the gallery named 'Bible et Terre Sainte' at Paris ([https:// bibleterresaintwordpress.com](https://bibleterresaintwordpress.com).)

The mask tradition is very ancient in India. It was firstly used to demonstrate the entity of 'Devatas' and 'Asuras' of Hindu mythology. The mask culture in India is also used for dramas, cultural and religious festivals. The Indian state, Karnataka has contributed towards the enrichment of mask tradition in India. Masks are made of wood in Karnataka and Kerela. It is used in 'Kathakali' dance by artists called 'Kirtam'(Pande, 110). The 'Ramleela' festival of North India has special relation with masks. Masks are used for the characters like 'Ravan', 'Hanuman', 'Jambavant' etc. Likewise, in the festival of 'Dushera', a ten headed 'Ravan' masks are also used. In South India also, a mask called 'Bhuta' is used for religious ceremonies. Moreover, 'Hanuman Mask' of Odisha is one of the best manifestations of mask tradition. The mask trading of Purulia district of West Bengal is also very famous. In Buddhist tradition, a special masked named 'Sam musk' is used in Tibet region by the Buddhist monks to pay respect to their religion.(Chatterjee,3)

The north-eastern region is known for variety of mask tradition, especially in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. Tribes like Cherdukpeng, Khamba and Monpool – Arunachal Pradesh use the masks. One critic namely Elwin stated that mask tradition of Arunachal has distinctive features. The holes and structure of the masks are made of wood. They are painted with colours which are brought from Tibet and Assam. Only male persons wore mask, females are not allowed to wear mask (Vidyarathi,91)

II. MASK ART OF ASSAM

Assam is also very famous for its mask tradition. Assamese people due to their shy nature hide this talent of mask making. They mainly use mask to express the emotions, mood of human life which human face are unable to convey. In the meantime, this process turned into an art.

Sankardeva magnificently added new dimension in mask art of Assam. Masks were used in his outstanding creation 'Ankia Bhaona', Ramcharan Thakur has described in 'Charit Puthi' that Sankardeva himself made mask of Gaduda and Brahma for Bhaona play(Vaidhya,174) This tradition got accolades in the 'Bhaonas' that were being played in the state. Due to the support of Satras, the mask art flourished rapidly.

The main epicenters of mask art in Assam are Majuli, Sibsagar, Goalpara and Darrang region. In Goalpara and Darrang area, drama programme called 'Khulia Bhaoriya' has usage of mask and that is supported by Khatpura Satra of Sibsagar. The masks used in this programmes are safely conserved in 'Srimanta Sankardeva Kalakshetra' of Guwahati. The mask art forms of Majuli are sponsored by Chamuguri Satra, Bihimpur Satra and Elangi Narasimha Satra. At present, Kamalabari Satra of Majuli also maintained the tradition. The wooden mask tradition found in Ramdiya Banshi Gopal Satra and Kaljirapar Satra of Kamrup also indicates that mask artform is prevalent in this region also.(Phukan,Picture no,4,7,11)

III. PROCESS OF MASK MAKING

There are four types of processes of mask making. Wooden mask, Bamboo mask, Cloth mask and Sanchi mask. But mainly Bamboo masks are used extensively.(Saikia, 34) Bamboo mask is used very much due to availability of bamboo and it is economically cheaper. The main ingredients required for making bamboo stick mask are bamboo, soil, cloth, cane, dung etc.(Goswami,18)

Firstly, Jati bamboo which is premature should be cut into a particular size and it must be soaked in water for some days. Then, sticks must be drawn from it to prepare the skeleton of the mask. The skeleton must be shaped according to the character it is going to be portrayed. It needs to be tightened by small ropes of cane. Then paper and cloth is mixed in water with soil in desired proportion to shape the skeleton. After it is dried up, then mixture of soft soil are placed into the structure to add nose, ears, and eyes shapes to the mask. After this one more layer of net clay made of dung are placed to add finishing. Then colours are placed to beautify the mask. Earlier, colours were made naturally but now, artificial colours are used. (Goswami,(Personal Interview).

Paper is not necessary for mask making but it has a value. Sometimes, instead of bamboosticks, papers are used. To add nose, ears, teeth, tongue, nails etc. into the mask skeletons, thick papers are used for the same. To lessen the weight of the masks nose, eyes, forehead parts of the face mask is made of 'Kuhila' (a kind of plant growing on marshy ground). The ornaments of the mask are also made of 'Kuhila'(Goswami, 29).



Figure No. 1: Step 1- Making a shape of face by bamboo stick.



Figure No. 2: Step 2- Covering the bamboo shape with cloth and mud.



Figure No. 3: Step 3- Making shape with mud on cloth covered mask.



Figure No. 4: Step 4- Finishing with colour and preparing for marketing.

IV. TYPES OF MASK

On the basis of size of Assamese mask artforms, masks can be divided into two categories – folk and supernatural or miracle. (Saikia,33) Masks of human, animals, birds etc. are known as folk mask and masks of ‘Asuras’, ‘Rakshaks’ (demon) are known as miracle masks. There are mainly three types of mask prevalent in Assam – ‘Chu’mask(a big mask), ‘Lutukai’ mask(a small mask) and ‘Mukh’mask (face mask). (Goswami,34-35)

The big mask are big in size. The face part and body part of mask are made separately. The artists of ‘Bhaona’ use this mask. These are 8-10 feet tall. The big masks are made for characters like ‘Ravan’, ‘Banaraja’, ‘Kumbhakarna’, ‘Narsimha’ ‘Murdanava’ etc., small mask are similar to big masks except its size. The face and body part of the mask is made separately. The body parts like hand, head can be operational during the possession of this mask. This mask is used for characters like ‘Putuna’, ‘Taraka’, ‘Trishira’, ‘Sankhashur’ ‘Dunduvi’ etc.

Face mask are the most extensive used mask. Artist portraying special character wear the mask clothes. This mask is used for characters like ‘Marish’, ‘Subahu’, ‘Surpanakha’, ‘Bakasur’ etc. Also, on the basis of the shape of face masks, it can be further divided into three categories – Neckless face mask, head face mask and half face mask. Half face masks are not used for ‘Bhaona’. They called as ‘High relief-sculpture’ and are made for showpiece purposes. (Goswami,37-38)

a. *The expansion of trade Mask Artforms of Chamuguri Satra of Majuli -*

In 1663 AD, Chakrapani Aata established Chamuguri Satra near a Cham tree. Since its establishment, Ankiya Bhaona, Sattriya dance as well as mask artforms are prevalent in the Satra. Earliest spiritual leaders of the satra like Tankeshwar Dev, Mokheshwar Dev, Rasheshwar Dev Goswami Aata continued the legacy of mask artforms in the sattriya atmosphere.

In the new Chamuguri Satra, late Rudrakanta Dev Goswami motivelously put efforts to enrich the mask tradition and he also got pension in the year 1988. Famous Art Critic Nilamani Phukan wrote an article about Rudrakanta Dev Goswami at 'Prantik' (2nd year, 2nd edition) that – "The traditional mask artform of Chamuguri Satra got a new dimension in the hands of Rudrakanta Dev Goswami." (Mahanta(ed.),163) The 352 years old traditions are maintained intact by its predecessors. The renowned Satradhikar Koshakanta Dev Goswami received "Sangeet Natak Akademi Award" in the year 2002 for his contribution in the field of mask art.

Rudrakanta Dev Goswami had three sons – Dharmakanta Dev Goswami, Hemchandra Dev Goswami and Krishna Goswami. Amongst them, Hemchandra Goswami is considered as 'Living Vishwakarma' (Vishwakarma-god of craftsmen). (Saikia, 36) His works of mask, doorways, temple wall paintings are very famous. In the year 1980, Hemchandra Goswami established a training center called 'Sukumar Kola Pith' for the learning and upskilling of neophytes mask makers.

Hemchandra Goswami tried to make the mask artform modernized and scientific. Goswami himself said that without creation, aesthetics will lose its significance, therefore, efforts need to be made for adding creativity to our traditions. In accordance with traditional values, mask for characters of The Ramayana, The Mahabharata, The Bhagwat Puran etc. are made to diversify the performing art. (Goswami,) Since 2000, he tried to add expression to his mask. So that, performers who wore mask can also give expression through his face, eyes etc. to enrich the performances of 'Bhaona'. It makes performances more vibrant and enjoyable experience.

Hemchandra also endeavored for expanding the scope of mask art across India. He has organized many workshops for promoting the artform. It is a matter of pride that our mask works are conserved in the British Museum of London. The coordinator of the British Museum Richard Blurton visited Chamuguri Satra in 2014 to witness 'Rasleela'. He was amused by the performance and got fascinated by the mask art. He requested to make masks of 'Gaduda', 'Putona', 'Chakrabak', 'Baghasur', 'Kaliya Nag' so that these masks can be placed alongwith 'Vrindabani Bastra'. Accepting the request, Hemchandra Goswami made the masks and then these were exhibited in a programme called 'Krishna in the Garden of Assam' at British Museum London during 21st January to 15 August 2016. This was the first instance where Assamese mask art was showcased in a foreign country. Moreover, his masks are also kept in Indira Gandhi National Museum, Vishwa Bharati University, Shantiniketan Art Gallery, Srimanta Sankardeva Kalakshetra, Guwahati State Museum etc.

b. *Economic Benefit of Mask Art –*

The mask art culture also has an economic aspect. Through this work, many people are earning their livelihood. Young learners who are indulging in this work through workshops are earning their bread and butter. Many cultural ceremonies like 'Barechariya Bhaona', 'Rasleela', 'Ankiya Bhaona' etc. have extensive use of mask and therefore, it creates huge demand for this mask artforms. The exhibitions of masks in Satras and other platforms also attract foreign and domestic tourist. We can see exchange of these items in many foreign countries also. Masks are also used on various functions, ceremonies as well as kept for household showpieces. It had created

demand in the market for masks. But, the mask art has not been able to make a separate identity in the market. Many young people are also reluctant to pursue this artform as their career as it requires so much of effort. In order to encourage the youth and spread the awareness about the artform, government incentives are needed. The government must create opportunities for the youth to learn the art and make it cost benefit. Without government intervention only individual effort cannot sustain the artform in the market for a very long time.

V. CONCLUSION

Masks are manifestation of the untold unexpressed human emotions. This tradition is continuing its legacy in Assam. The youth is trying to make the artform more vibrant and attractive by their experimentation and hardwork. Assam's mask are has got appreciation at domestic and also at international level. To keep the sanctity and genuiness of the artform, serious efforts are need to be made by people as well as government. So that it receives its due appreciation at every level.

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 Jar Jiba Bahana Tahanko Xajilanta
 Mukha Bandha Kari tar Chaou nilanta | 1475
 (Make vehicles of gods accordingly make sure, it matches every single bit)
 Gadudar Mukha Sarbayak Dilanto
 Ketia Khaiye Khol Dohare Dharilanto | 1481
 (The mask of Gaduda is presented before everyone)
 Brahmar Mukhak Santoraio Pindhi Hoila |
 Ram Ram Gurur Prabesh Jebe Bhoila ||
 Harar Mukha pindhi Rango Dhwaja Goila |
 Abaro Baikuntha Niya Tanka Thapi Thoila || 1497
 (Brahma wore his mask, Shiva wore his mask to visit Vaikuntha (abode of Vishnu) to Ranjan kumar vaidhya, Art Approaches of majuli an analytical study of illustrated manuscripts mask making and woodcarvings, department of Fine Art, Assam University, 2015, p.174 \

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