

A STUDY OF THE ART OF MASK MAKING OF MAJULI AND ITS CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC PROSPECTS

Devajit Saikia (Correspondent Author)

Student, Dept. of Assamese

Dibrugarh University

Email- devajitsaikia417@gmail.com

Manash Protim Khanikor

Assistant Professor, Department of English

Panigaon OPD College, North Lakhimpur

Email- manashpkhanikor@gmail.com

Abstract:

The art of Mask is common to many cultures around the world. Masks are used for various purposes in different cultures such for performance, hunting, rituals etc. Like every other part of the world, Assam has its own tradition of mask making also known as 'Mukha' in Assam and Majuli is one of the important sites where the art is still thriving. The tradition of mask making is primarily related to the cultural aspects of Assamese Neovaishnavite movement of Sankardeva. Masks are extensively used in performances such as Ankiya Bhaona, to portray different mythological characters, non-human characters and objects. In this paper, we will try to shed light upon the cultural and economic significance of this tradition.

Keywords: Mask, Culture, Economic, Tradition, Performance, Majuli

1. INTRODUCTION:

A mask is a full or partial facial covering that is worn to conceal the human form. Since the dawn of human society, masks have been used. Its origin can be found in the historical sites of many regions. In this regard, the "Caremedu Volp" of France, "Attamire care" of Spain, and "Kundusi" of Tanzania, sites from Algeria, Libya, Sweden, Siberia, Canada, Peru, Egypt, and Bhimbetka in India can be mentioned. Masks are used by people for a variety of reasons, including defence, spirituality, culture, and sport. The word 'mask' appeared in English in the 1530s from Middle French masque which means covering to hide or guard the face. Man has made the masks in dance rituals, dramas, folk songs, temples and different socio-cultural context. Materials like bamboo, cane, cloth, clay etc. are used for making masks.

India has rich traditions of dance and theatrical performances. India has a huge range of decorative, festive and ceremonial masks related to the different kind of myths, legends and folklore. Masks of Siva and Shakti were considered extremely powerful iconic masks in the history of India. The three-eyed Shakti, Durga and Kali are very common characters in the eastern belt of India. Another extremely popular theme in India is the Hindu epic, Ramayana. Story of Ramlila is very popular in Indian

mask tradition. Even Mythological and real animals remain a powerful component of folk-religion and occupy a sacred space in Indian culture.

The art and tradition of mask making of Assam can be associated and traced back to the Neovaishnavite movement of Assam. Led and propagated by Sankardeva, the great saint, this movement brought revolutionary and unprecedented changes in the contemporary society and culture of Assam. This social and religious movement impacted upon every aspect of the contemporary society. The art of mukha or mask making is related to the cultural aspect of this movement. Sankardeva used Ankiya Bhaona, a form of dramatic performance, to popularize and educate people about his philosophy along with various other ways. The mukha or masks were extensively used in Ankiya Bhaona. Sankardeva magnificently added new dimension in mask art of Assam. Ramcharan Thakur has described in 'Charit Puthi' that Sankardeva himself made mask of Gaduda and Brahma for Bhaona (Vaidhya,174).

The art of mask making or mukha is patronized by the vaishnavite monasteries of Assam, known as satra. This tradition flourished under the wings of these satras. Currently, this tradition is still alive in a few satras of Assam. It is primarily limited to satras like Khatpar Satra of Sivasagar, Chamaguri satra, Bihimpur satra and Elangi Narasimha Satra of Majuli etc.

2. Objective and Importance of the Study:

: The main objectives of the research paper are-

- (i) To study about the tradition of mask making of Assam.
- (ii) To analyse the economic possibilities of the art of mask making of Assam.
- (iii) To study cultural importance and prospects of mask making of Assam.

Mask making is a traditional craft of Assam and is an integral part of Assamese culture. The artisans associated with this art has contributed immensely to the social, cultural and economic aspects of Assam. This art form has great potentials for creating employment opportunities and entrepreneurial activities for the youth. The objective of this research paper is to shed light on these aspects and therefore very much relevant for present time.

3. SCOPE OF STUDY:

This research paper is prepared with special reference to the mask making tradition of Samaguri Satra of Majuli. The primary source is based on direct interviews and discussions with the artisans and field visits and the secondary sources are various articles and research papers and books related to the topic.

4. Literature Review

In the paper, The Mukha: The Mask Tradition of Assam with Special Reference to Samaguri Satra, (Unindra ,page 20-26),2020,Saswati Bordoloi writes about the tradition of mask making of Assam.

In the paper titled as Masks of Assam (Special Reference with the Mask artform of Chamguri Satra, Majuli, Assam) Dr. Ambeswar Gogoi, B.D. Nisha, Bikash Chetia, and Minakshee Boruah (Journal of xi'am University of Architecture and Technology ,voll-xii, Issue -vii,2020,page no-142-147) write about the importance of mask making in Assamese culture.

In the paper, A brief study on the unique form, representation and utility of masks in the Vaisnavite monasteries of Assam, Nilanjana Gogoi (GOGOI, NILANJANA. "A brief study on the unique form, representation and utility of masks in the Vaisnavite monasteries of Assam." Journal of Advanced Research in Social Sciences and Humanities 1.1 (2016): 65-72.) talks about the visual experiences and artistic qualities of masks.

In the paper, Bhaona masked culture of Majuli,(Chanda, Surajit. "Bhaona masked culture of Majuli." Pratihwani the Echo A Peer-Reviewed International Journal of Humanities & Social Science 8 (2019): 279-298. Surajit Chanda writes about masks and Bhaona and how it becomes a way of life.

5. Research Methodology:

In this research work, the following methods are to be followed:

A) Analytical method: Analytical method means a technique used qualitatively or quantitatively to determine the composition of a sample or a microbial contamination of a sample. Use of the Analytical Method is critical to solving the sustainability problem because it appears that current processes are inadequate. They are intuitive, simple, and based on how activists approach everyday problems. It's paper's all topics will be analysis with analytical method.

B) Questionnaire Method: A Questionnaire will be made consisting of the series of question arranged in some definite order related with the topic which will be presented to the mask maker of Majuli district to gather the data. For this research, a questionnaire will be made with both open questions and questionnaire in the field.

C) Field Study Method:

Field research is defined as a qualitative method of data collection that aims to observe, interact and understand people while they are in a natural environment. In the same way, social scientists conducting field research may conduct observe people or interviews from a distance to understand how they behave in a social environment and how they react to situations around them. The method of original analysis of this paper is Field Study.

6. THE PROCESS OF MASK MAKING:

Previously, the art of making masks was mostly transmitted from one generation to the next. Nowadays, anyone can now learn the art of mask making. Typically, they receive free training from the master artisan. Mask-making in Assam is primarily related to the bhoana – a vaisnavite theatrical performance. Clay or papier-mâché is applied over structures of bamboo and wood to make such masks

which are painted with locally-made colours. The masks are traditionally made from naturally sourced materials such as bamboo, potter's clay, handmade clothes, herbal and mineral colours such as hengul, haital, neel, dhol mati and angar. Although, bamboo is extensively used due to its availability but wood, clothes etc. are also used for this purpose. At first, mature bamboo (Jati banh) is cut into segments measuring approximately three feet in length by a dao (bill-hook) with one or two nodes in between. The kathi is made from bamboo divided into splints. This piece is divided into four or five sections, with each section being divided into a number of splints (kathis). The basic structure for the mask is created of six thin splints that have been placed in a specific order. The base is made according to the characters to be played. In the second stage, the bamboo structures are covered with strips of normal cotton cloth soaked in potter's clay. Once the base is complete, mud is mixed with cow dung to shape the chin, nose, cheek, etc. carefully. In the final stage, different colours are used to give the masks to suit characteristic attributes and other ornaments are also made and added for the complete effect.

7. Cultural Significance:

There are many rituals associated with the masks that reflect the society and its belief system. Masks are considered as having magical powers that transform the performers into another realm. The masks are respected according to the character they portray. The masks are not just objects but a part of the society. The masks are part of many social and cultural events. Bhaona and Ankiya Bhaona are lyrical dramatic performances performed in Satras and Naamghars of Assam where masks are used. Raas, a dramatic tradition and festival of Assam also uses masks. The Khulia-bhaorriya prevailing in the Darrang district has retained the element of masks particularly representing the demonic figures like Ravana; sub-human figures like Hanumana and Sugriva etc. Masks are an integral part of these festivals and events. Moreover, it is a continuation of a more than five hundred years old tradition and a cultural heritage.

8. Economic Significance:

Coming to the economic aspect, mask making is traditionally considered as a prestigious job and a continuation of a century old tradition/vocation. Although it is primarily practised inside the satras, many people are earning their livelihood through mask making. As mentioned above, many cultural events and festivals use masks for their performance; it naturally creates demand for masks. These dramatic forms are being performed both within and outside the state and abroad giving exposure to the art of mask making. Exhibitions of masks are also being held at different levels attracting both domestic and foreign tourists to the state. Throughout the past few decades, the masks have gained popularity for decoration purposes as well. Many masks are only made for decorative purposes. The majority of these masks are smaller in size. This is a major shift in the art form, making it more popular and sustainable as a vocational art.

In the present competitive economic policy, the art of mask making can solve the unemployment problem to a large extent. Apart from the masks used in the Bhaonas, masks of Saraswati, Durga, Biswakarma are widely used in festivals. Till now idols of these Gods and Goddesses are made outside Assam. In this regard, if idols and masks of Gods and Goddesses made by the youths of Assam in an indigenous way can be used, the economic growth would be stable to a large extent and at the same time the variegated vaishnavite culture propagated by the two saints would be preserved and a niche in the international arena would be created. Known as the abode of the Mahantas and the centre of vaishnavite culture, Majuli should attract the younger generation to this art form and the call

of the hour is to devise new methods of production and attract national and international market. For this, different workshops and training programs should be initiated. We can hope that the Government and other organisations would take positive steps to give a new direction to this exquisite art form of Assam. Many workshops are being organized to teach the young interested folks the art of mask making. Recently, Majuli University of Culture started a course in mask making to encourage the young artisans to adopt and enhance this traditional craft. This homespun craft of mask making can be promoted as a major source of ecotourism.

9. Findings

- a) The art of mask making is an integral part of cultural heritage of Assam
- b) It is an age-old tradition primarily centred around the vaishnavite monasteries or satras of Assam.
- c) The artisans or makers of masks have contributed immensely to the Assamese culture, society and economy.
- d) The art of mask making has great potentials for self-employment of the youth of the state.

10. Conclusion:

To conclude, mask making of Assam is not just an art form but a part of the state's cultural heritage. The origin of this form can be traced back to neo-vaishnavite movement of Assam and flourished under the patronisation of the satras. It is a tradition passed down from one generation to the next. In the era of rapid changes and modernisation, this art form is also being adaptive to the transitions happening around. It can be seen as a suitable vocation for the youth looking self-employment opportunities. But proper government policy and incentives are essential to create such opportunities and facilities.

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