Bhaona masked culture of Majuli

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Abstract
Majuli Island is the cultural hub from the medieval period in Brahmaputra valley. The ideology of Neo-Vaisnavism and Bhakti cult was the driving force behind the cultural heritage. The performance of Bhaona and masked culture was developed under the direct patronization of Hindu monastery name as Satra. This movement has directed the society, reformed it through art and culture and most important with spiritual activities. Masks and the masked performance were developed, patronized by the Satra. It is one of the key elements to convey the spiritual feelings and identities of Srimanta Sankardeva to the common people. Spreading the ideology of Bhakti Cult among the society in medieval society is the main objective Bhaona performance. Thus this movement is no longer a cultural movement or spiritual beliefs but it has become the way of life.

Majuli Island is the cultural hub from the medieval period in Brahmaputra valley. The ideology of Neo-Vaisnavism and Bhakti cult is the driving force behind the cultural heritage. The performance of Bhaona and masked culture was developed under the direct patronization of Hindu monastery name as *Satra*.

The tradition of *Satra* institutions, established under the ideology of *Neo-Vaisnavism* and *Bhakti cult* has been thoroughly responsible for influencing stabilizing the local society for the last five hundred years and has been developed as the centre of the spiritual and cultural background of the whole society. These institutions represented the simpler, easier to achieve and less ritualistic forms of devotion compared to the existing complex Hindu ritualistic activities (as in *Sakit Cult*). It is more humanoid in character. Followers of the *Bhaki* cult are profoundly tender, passionate and have affection for another person or supreme Good which is the eternal feeling of the human mind. It was embedded on faith and devotion as there was no icon for worship or rituals. The prime objective behind the entire ideology and philosophy is the single God and humankind. The success lies on the ideology of selfless devotion and salvation. This is unique in mediaeval period throughout Eastern India. Thus, this Hindu movement becomes more a social reforming movement. It has helped to reform and created a democratic civil society based on the collective values of organization and groups, fairness, humanism and enlightenment through knowledge. It created a cultural environment for the upcoming generations. This movement has directed

the society, reformed it through art and culture and most important with spiritual activities. Here mask is one of the key elements to convey the spiritual feelings and identities of Srimanta Sankardeva to the people. The calculative selected stories of *Bhāgavata Purāna* and the epic of Ramayana depict the supremacy of the power of *Bhakti Cult* to achieve the goal of spiritual life. Mask is the bridge for depicting the story. Here also it not only the work of art but also has transformed into an object of Applied Art used in social reformations.

There are more than thousand *Satras* in the whole Brahmaputra Valley. The most well-known *Satras* are located in Majuli Island (Majuli is a river island situated in the Brahmaputra river in upper Assam, latitude of 26°45' North to 27°12' North and longitude of 93°39' East to 94°35' East, with mean height of 84.5m above sea level). *Vaishnavite* temples or *Satras* of Assam are the unique socio-religious and cultural institutions started in the 16th century under the influence of *Neo-Vaishnavism*. The *Satras* became one of the most influential structural forces in the socio-religious as well as cultural sector. It has a great impact on literature, music and in the field of Visual arts. It nourished a total movement in art and culture. This movement is based on the social reformation, spiritual up-liftment and cultural consolidation in all respect. The positive approach of the religious activities assists its formation. It carries the *Bhakti cult* to the people deeply and becomes multi-dimensional socio, religious cultural domain. These are the heritage institutions of Assam, and they form a very strong force of social constriction and development in this area. At its peak, this movement is no longer a cultural movement or spiritual beliefs but it has become the way of life. Sankardeva established his thoughts in religious as well as in cultural activities throughout Assam and founded *Vaishnavite* monasteries known as *Satras*. The achievement of Sankardeva is to provide justice and equality to the common men. 'The service to humanity is the service to god' - it has became the motto of *Neo-Vaishnavism*.

Assamese culture is a modification of individual groups of the different socio-cultural and religious population of an integrated character that roots more than two thousand years old and is traditionally a hybrid one. Here the fusion took place between the cultures of Aryan and Mongolians. As a result, different streams of Hinduism flourished here and became a melting point of cultural heritage. Acquiring the cultural elements from different ethno cultural groups under various socio-political systems in different periods of history is the key element of developing its character. Among these *Saivism, Saktism* and *Vaisnavism* are common since ancient period. The cultural development of this area started and flourished during the first millennium AD, under the great dynasties of Pragjyotisha Kamrupa; an ancient East Indian kingdom (first mentioned in the epics and later in literature). In the later period during 15th century, a changed religious and cultural movement was spread in the entire Assamese society, under the leadership of the great Vaishnavite Saint, Srimanta Sankardeva. This phase is known as the Vaishnavite period. It established in the last decades of the 15th century in today's Assam region. This movement achieved its peak during the 16th and 17th centuries. The influence of Vaisnavism patronized the theatrical performance called *Bhaona* (it is also called *Ankiya Bhaona*). This

performance is a narrative one like *Dhura Nat* (folk Performances) of upper Assam which is the predecessor of the classical *Ankia Nat*.

To spread the name and words of Sankardeva two types of religious institute were introduced: *Namghar* (the village-level player home), and *Satra* (the *Vaishnavite* monastery). The neo-Vaishnavism was institutionalized in *Namghar* at village level in this area very effectively. The *Namghar* is the combination of two rooms; one is the small dedicated to the decorative wooden structures of *Kirtana, Dasama, Namghosa*, etc. The hall is used for occasional prayers and performance. *Satra* is the monastery of this movement. Each *Namghar* is affiliated to a *Satra*. The word is *Satra* derived from Sanskrit word *'Sattra'* means alms-house or the sense of a sacrifice lasting form a few days to a year or more. The term *Satra* literally means *Abhivesena* (an assembly), *Homa* or *Yogya* (sacred fire), or *Nivasa* (adobe)[1] . From the very initial stage of this movement, *Satra* works towards the up-liftment and betterment of the backward classes and indigenous communities of Assam. Sankardeva, from the very beginning of his missionary life, led a battle to restore the intercommunity balance and harmony to its perfect glory. This movement is innovative in all fields of socio-cultural activities and the renaissance in Assam. Upon the influence of these cultural and socio-economical activities in this area, several centers called *Satras* were established. *Satras* are the centers for religious practices. This practice patronized art, craft, painting, literature, music and dance. However, it is not only simple religious activities, but also socio-cultural activities in aspects of their art and literary value. (Fig. 1)

Fig. 1. Studio of Kosh Kanta Deb Goswami Shamaguri *Satra*

Satras were established as institutions in Assam. The S*atras* preach the neo-Vaisnavism that placed among the different *Bhakti cults*. This *Bhakti cult* has a unique and innovative character that shared values of an organization, equity, humanism and democracy to create a classless civil society which was unique in medieval society in a country like India. The cultural aspects of the *Satras* through the art of mask and masked performance evolved from the visual statements that create an interactive dialogue among the varied statements of an aesthetic field. The *Satras* exclusively believe in single God-Vishnu and have rejected

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[1]Zaman .Arifur.(2015) ,*'The Traditional Masks of Indian Culture'*, New Delhi, Aryan books International and Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya (Bhopal) , Page-. 21.

other Gods of Hinduism. *Satra* institutions are reachable to the highest as well as the lowest part of the society. It was against the age-old hierarchy of the Brahminical Hinduism and the caste system. The *Satras* are guiding the religious life of the people as well as teaching moral values. These are the centers of the religious, intellectual and cultural life of the villagers. The *Satras* are serving as the centers of religious learning as well as residential schools like monasteries in Buddhism. The young students stay here under the guardianship of the *Burha Bhakats* in extreme care. *Burha Bhakats* are responsible for their whole development of body, mind, and spirit and community life. The *Satras* are the centers for all sorts of cultural and performing arts and scriptural studies in this area. It has preserved and developed the *Sattriya* dance and music which is regarded as an Indian classical dance and music. Besides these, students have to learn various cultural activities. For the need of their daily life, many other forms of arts and crafts are being practiced by the students. Painting, boat making, mat and fan making, embroidery work, bamboo work various cultural activities related to visual culture. Besides these other art forms like wall and panel painting, manuscript painting and wood curving were developed simultaneously with the movement and lot of other minute and major creative forms that have also been developed. These include stage decoration, backdrop painting, costume designing, and most importantly the masks making. The various types of masks are developed for the performances under the direct patronization of this movement. Large variations of masked characters can be found here - divine representations, demons, king, sub-humans. Along with these masks, several animal characters like elephants, horses, deer, bear, goat etc. are also represented through the mask. (Fig. 2)

Fig. 2. Secular type masks

The mask performance in *Satra* culture known as *Ankiya Naat* usually takes place in the *Namghar* or the prayer hall. This is a huge hall that preserves the *Manikut* and the Holy Scriptures and also acts as a theatrical hall for *Bhaona*. This prayer hall is the house of the sacred throne of the deity, Guru Ashana and the sacred text.

Masks in the *Bhaona* are mostly used for the religious and ritualistic practices but they are also used in secular performances for social reformation in *Satras.* The origin of the masked performance and mask traces back since the evolution of dramatic narratives appeared in various ritual and social activities in this area during the ancient period. There are historical evidences of the existence of various indigenous dramatic or semi-dramatic

performances that existed in earlier Assam. These are *Kusan Gan, Bhdri Gan, Dhuliya Bhaona, Khuliya Bhaona, Putala-ndc* (Puppetry), *Deodhani* performance and *Nat-nati* etc. *Putala Nach, Deodhani Nritya* and *Oja-Pali* evolved with the course of time. Today, *Oja-Pali* is the most popular in this area. This is an ancient folk performance of Assam where the *Oja* is the leader who narrates the story and *Palis* are his assistants. Structurally and aesthetically this performance has many similarities with the *Bhaona*. This is a narrative, lyrical, musical dramatized performance. It carries its dramatic sequence through several intervals that depict the tales of the Vaishnavite Holy Scripture. This is semi dramatic lyrical performance. This style of traditional performance in Assamese folk culture was introduced by Sankardeva by the 15th century in a new context. The plays are written in Brajawali language. Thus, the dramatic performance organized by the Vaishnavite Saint is recognized as *Cihna-Yatra*. This stylization in performance was developed at a later period. This lyrical-rhythmic, dance and dramatized performance is known *as Ankiya Naat* or *Bhaona*. This activity achieved unique lyrical-rhythmic style in dance and dramatic performance that creates a unique visual narrative language in *Bhaona*.

Like the *Oja-Pali* the Sutradhar here narrates the whole story. The only difference is that it is a one-act play. As this play is devoid of any sections or divisions, it is considered as one act. *Sutradhar* has a major significance in Assamese *Bhaona.* The *Sutradhar* remains throughout the performance and repeats, even forecasts the tale before it is performed, along with introducing characters in the performance, providing them directions. He also announces the entry and the exit of the performers. The appearance of Sutradhar in *Bhaona* is unique. But in ancient Sanskrit dramas, the *Sutradhar* disappeared just after introduction. The subject matter of *Bhaona* is largely based on the Holy Scripture. Limited number of characters performed the *Bhaona.* As this performance is also a lyrical-musical dramatized performance like *Oja-Pali*, the characters dance in a rhythmic way from the very beginning till the end. This rhythmic gesture follows certain norms known as *mudra.*

The subject of *Bhaona* performance is based on the tales from *Bhāgavata Purāna* and epic of Ramayana. These dramas were composed by Sankardeva in the 16th century. These stories were consciously selected only to propagate *Neo-Vaisnavism*. The secondary goal of these stories is to familiarize people with the greatness and the behavior of Lord Krishna.

i.   Kaliya-damana tells the story of child Krishna who killed the serpent character Kaliyanaga because he was poisoning the Jamuna River with his venom. By killing the serpent character *Kaliya,* child Krishna became the protector of the livestock. This story depicts the first proof of child Krishna's superior powers.
     The mask of *Kaliya* is quite different than other masks. It is a *Bor Mukha*, large enough about four feet covering up to the waist. The base colour of the frontal side is white and the back side is black. Red and green organic motif with black outline decoration is unique. In the lower part of the mask frilled black fabric is attached that gives it a bigger appearance.

ii. *Vipra Patni-prasada* is the tale of the Brahmins who fail to achieve religious up-liftment by the performance of elaborate sacrifices and worship. But their wives are devoted to the child Krishna. By this devotion, they achieve religious up-liftment instant their husbands

failed to achieve. This performance thus depicts the power of the love of the divine over mere sacrifices. This is the main theme of the *Bhakti cult.*

iii. *Keli-Gopala* depicts the story of dalliance of Krishna with the *Gopis-* milkmaids of Brindavan. This performance is known as *Raslila*. It narrates his love story with Radha. The Gopis leave their households behind and come to Brindavan to play with Krishna as they gain religious satisfaction. This performance depicts the *Arath-* material achievement; Kama -desires and finally *Moksha -* salvation or the meeting of *Atma* and supreme power in the presence of Lord Krishna. The *Bhakti cult* has been derived from this central idea.

iv. *Rama-vijaya-nat* is the tale of Prince Rama of *Ayodhya.* This is the only *Bhaona* from the epic of Ramayana. Rama here is regarded as a living form of Lord *Visnu*. This story from the Ramayana depicts the victory of good over evil, i.c., This story depicts Rama's victory over the *Rakshasa, Parashuram*-the follower of Lord Shiva. It highlights the devotion and loyalty of a disciple to his teacher too.

v. *Parijat- harana* recounts how Krishna forcibly replanted the *Parijat* tree in his kingdom at *Dwarka.* The heavenly *Parijat* flower has a magical power and remains forever and as its fragrance remains for a long period. It is also said that the woman who decorate themselves with the *Parijat* flower will earn luck and fortune, and her husband's love will always be with her. Chief Queen, Rukmini, asks Krishna for the flower due to her foremost position among his consorts and he lovingly puts it in her hair. When his other queen Satyabhama learnt of it, she became jealous and apprehensive of losing Krisna, whereupon Krishna promised to fetch some flowers from heaven for her. However, when Krishna requested Indra for some flowers, the latter was forced to turn down his request at the behest of his queen Sachi who claimed that the *Parijat* flowers were not for mere mortals. To pacify Satyabhama Krishna waged war against Indra, uprooted the *Parijat* tree and planted it in Satyabhama's courtyard. Values: love and devotion; ultimate power of the Almighty.

vi. Rukmini-*harana* is the story of Krishna's kidnap of Rukmini, princess of Vidarbha. According to local (Assamese) legends King Bhismaka, father of Rukmini ruled over Bhismakanagara or Kundilnagara situated in the *Sadiya* region. Her brother Rukma convinces their father Bhismaka to give Rukmini's hand in marriage to his friend Sisupala, king of Chedi. However, Rukmini falls in love with the Yadava Krisna after learning about his heroic deeds and secretly communicates with him, through Bedanidhi, to rescue her. Krishna comes all the way from Dwarka and takes her away on his chariot, breaking all social norms, under the noses of her brother and suitor Sisupala, to fulfill the desire of his devotee (Rukmini). A battle was fought in which Rukma and Sisupala were defeated and with the intercession of Krishna's elder brother Balarama peace is restored as Rukmini's parents too are partial to Krisna.

Apart from this, six *Ankiyaa Naat* that have been, narrated above, Sankardeva wrote three more plays which have not been found by scholars. These were *Cihna Yatra, Janma-Jatra* and *Kangsa-badha*. Masks in the *Satras* are mainly used in religious performances. They are also used in ritualistic performances of the *Bhaonaor Ankiya Naat*, the *Vaishnavite* theatre. These performances are widely practiced in this area of Assam. Among them Bagi

Aai Alengi Satra of Titabar, Khatpar Satra of Sivasagar, Natun Chamaguri Satra (or Samaguri Satra) and Narasimha Alengi Satra of Majuli are famous. Out of theses, Khatpar Satra and Natun Chamaguri Satra hold the continuing the four hundred years old traditions of making masks and mask performance.

Painted masks are used in performing arts of the *Satras* of Majuli. The religion *'Ek-Saran-Hari Naam Dharma'* at the *Satras* continues to flourish and patronizes this heritage even today. Masks in the *Satra* are used in the rituals and festivals which have social and religious importance, and are also used in the secular performances of dance and drama.

Masks have been used in *Satras* from the very beginning of the *Neo-Vaishnavism* period in 16th century. It was a tradition in this area that only the masked performer could represent the king. As a result, several readymade masks with their names were preserved in the *Satras.*

Sanskrit drama was popular among the aristocrat people. In the 16th century, Sankardeva's *Ankiya Naat* became popular in common people. The plot was derived from the Sanskrit dramas glorifying the hero, Krishna and Ram. Simple stories are selected to communicate with the common people easily. The sequence of the tragedy was bypassed in *Ankia Nat*. All the plays of *Sankardeva* are from the *Puarana,* the *Bhagavata*, and the victory of Ram over Ravana. Like the classical Sanskrit drama mask performance is an integrated part of *Purba Ranga*, which literally means before performance.

During the time of Sankaradeva, 65 *Satras* were established [2], but at present, there are only twenty-two *Satras*. Among these only four have the magnificent custom of mask making. These are Alengi Narasinha *Satra*, Bihimpur *Satra*, Chamaguri *Satra* or Shamaguri *Satra* and Natun Chamaguri *Satra*. Masks of the *Satras* have been designed in countless varieties (Fig. 4).
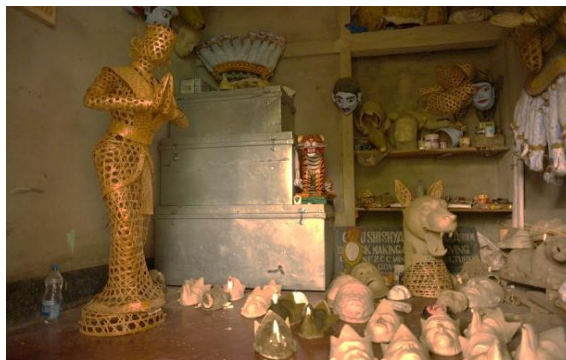

Fig. 4. Studio of Hem Chandra Goswami Shamaguri *Satra*

The masks are usually made for theatrical performance which is ritualistic in nature and are used for a few continuous years until they are destroyed by weather or insects. There is a continuous process of making new masks and replacing the damaged one. Traditionally no

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[2] Medhi .Birinchi K., Zaman .Arifur *'Tradition of Mask Making in a Vaishnavite Monastery of Assam India*, https://www.mecon.nomadit.co.uk/pub/conference_epaper_dawnload.php5? PaperID=14099&MIMEType=application/pdf, Viewed on 16/01/2017

attempt has been taken to preserve the masks. As a result, considerably older masks cannot be found in these *Satras*. Masks are kept in hanging from the walls of the *Satra* or in houses of the craftsmen. Nowadays, a little consciousness has been developed to preserve the mask at their preparing stage. The artisan adds a small quantity of kerosene to the paste of *'kumarmati'* – the potter-clay used in mask making. It acts as pesticides and gives the mask durability.

Traditionally only the males are involved in mask making. Only a few family members, integrally related to the *Satra* management are the artisan group. This knowledge of mask making is being handed down from one generation to the next generation. The skill is essentially related to the *Satra* organization, and no outsider of a *Satra* is known for making it, though there is no restriction. It is a taboo and followed throughout the area for countless generations. Though, nowadays it is not followed strictly. Some artisan voluntarily shares the knowledge of mask making to the outsiders.

Mask making is not the primary occupation here. All the mask makers belong to the *Kayastha* caste. The mask maker or an idol maker is referred to as *Khanikar* by the Assamese society. The icon *(murti)* making is also not practiced by any Assamese caste as their conventional profession. Previously the idol was primarily made from wood and clay. The knowledge of mask making also changed the process of idol making. Till the recent past, a mask making was a voluntary job. The artisan did not accept any wage for making mask except wages and status for his skill. They mostly serve the *Satra* as well as the community freely. But now this scenario is changing due to urbanization and globalization. The change of socio-economical structure is one of the causes behind it. Now an artisan earns money for his skill; however, it is not sufficient to maintain his livelihood. These commercial activities sometimes patronize new subject in mask making which is not commonly used in *Satra*. In spite of these commercial activities, mask making is still not the primary occupation of an artisan in this area.
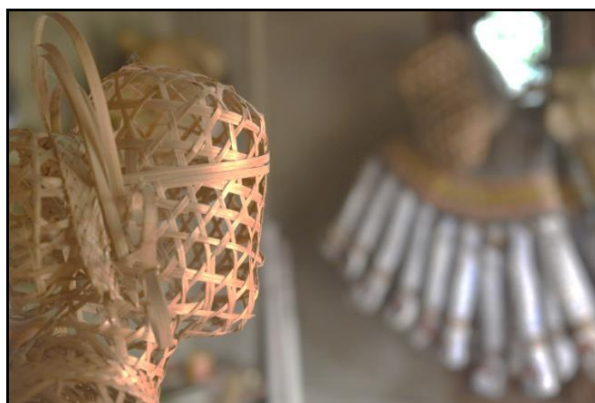

Fig. 5 The basic bamboo structure of *Bhaona* masks

The masks of *Satras* are made from perishable materials which are locally available and are rarely preserved. Bamboo is the most important material for the structural part of the mask. There are several species of bamboo found in Assam but only two kinds of bamboos

namely *jati bah* and *bijuli bah* are suitable for the traditional mask making (Fig. 5). A bamboo ages between two to three years is used to cut out thin strips. It is impotent to acquire the exact flexibility, durability and the strength of the strips. Primarily the bamboo is cut into pieces of about 2 to 2.5 meter in length by machete locally known as *da*. These bamboo pieces are dipped in the water of a pond for 5 to 7 days to give it the desired flexibility. Then with the machete, tubes are vertically divided into pieces from which splits are made with the help of a sharp knife known as *Katari*. These strips or the *Kathis* are the basic materials for the structural part. Primarily the strips are precisely woven into a hexagonal pattern using six individual *Kathis*. This is called *Tomur Mou* and *Lakhmi Mou* and *Viswakarma Mou*.

This process of woven in hexagon pattern structure of basket by bamboo strips is locally known as tom. This basket is used to preserve rice for the next year cultivation. This hexagon pattern basket is only woven in this area. Mask making has a huge impact on the cultural and social life of these areas as the main economy is based on agriculture - more profoundly it is based on paddy. The process of woven continues by acquiring more *Kathis* to give a primary shape to them (Fig 5). The larger mask consists of a large number of *Kathis*. It is a laborious and skilful process of twisting and turning the strips. It gives them the in the desired shape along with the three-dimensional quality of the mask. Banana fiber is used to seal the age of the frame to prevent the performer from getting hurt by the sharp ages of the bamboo strips. For tiding the banana fiver traditionally, the artisans used the flexible cane, but nowadays the artisans use synthetic material like plastic thread widely. This structure is called *Hoja* or the inner skeleton of the mask. Ears are attached separately. These are made by the same process of weaving strips. Some times to achieve the desired effect, wood or thermocol is also used.

Fig. 6. Mask of Ganesha

The next process is to cover the mask with small pieces of cotton and paper (Fig. 6). The cloth is dipped in a solution of mud (black clay) and cow dung mixed with a small amount of water (Fig. 7). One-third of the mixture is contains cow dung and the rest two third is mud. This layer acts as the initial covering on the bamboo skeleton. This step is known as

Chehera dia, means 'giving the appearance'. Then cow dung is mixed with limestone powder or kerosene properly to form a fine paste that is to be applied on the skin of the bamboo skeleton. This layer prevents the mask from fungus and pest. The use of the cow dung has an adhesive in nature. It prevents the cracks on the mud surface. In contemporary time some artisans use paper pulp instead of cow dung. After this, the mask is let carefully in the sun for drying. In this way, the basic layer of the mask gets completed. Eyes, nose, ears are shaped in this stage. The final facial characteristics are shaped by specified tools and techniques. These are called *Kam Kathi*. In this phase of the mask is coarsely made. After drying, second layer of clay is applied to achieve the desired smoothness. This process finally helps to achieve the facial characteristics of the mask. During this process holes, nose and eyes are made for breathing and seeing. The mask is left to dry completely for two or three days.

In the final stage, the second layer of cotton cloth dipped in mud and cow dung mixed with water is applied to strengthen the structure. To avoid crease on the surface, no continuous piece of cotton cloth is used here. To achieve the perfect facial expression several small pieces are used. Finally, the artisan gives a finishing touch with local handmade tools by scrubbing and polishing the mask. After this, the mask is dried in the sun completely.

Fig. 7. Mask of Demon stage four. Applied layer of mud and cow dung.

Previously most of the masks were made in a monolithic structure. One specific facial expression was fixed for a character. Rudrakanta Dev Goswami associated with Chamaguri *Satra* in Majuli Island introduced a new technique in mask making. Some masks are built in a manner so that the eyes, lips and lower jaw can be moved. Primarily the eyes and jaws are made separately. At the final stage of mask making these parts are assembled. The special mechanism is applied to for the proper movement. This movement helps to introduce the facial expressions of the character and makes throughout the entire performance. Now, most of the artisans associated with other *Satras* of Majuli Island and adjoining and Sivasagar also follow this.

During base coat, a layer of white opaque colour is applied. Previously locally available chalk and vegetable glue were used. Presently zinc oxide and synthetic adhesive have

replaced the old ingredients. After the complete drying of the base coat the final colour is applied. In early times natural dyes were used such as *Hengul, Haital, Khori mati*, etc. But, nowadays synthetic opaque paints are used as they are easy to get. Generally bright red, blue and black are used for demon characters. Devine and good characters are coloured with skin or light yellow. The honest characters are coloured with light blue or white. For example, the mask of *Narshingha* is always painted with white and the masks of the Ravana - representative of the demon character, is always painted with blue. This norm of using colours in specified character is unique in the mask of the *Satras* and the artisans mostly follow these norms. After the skin colour eyes, nose and other facial parts are painted with continuous black outline. This black outline is also unique in these masks (Fig. 9).

Fig. 9. Mask of Jotayu made by Pradip Goswami Shamaguri *Satra*

Fig. 10. Mask of *Khar* (Demon) made by Pradip Goswami Shamaguri *Satra*

Sometimes ornaments are also added to the head (Fig. 10). These are added in a manner so that the ornaments can move freely. It adds gorgeousness to the mask. Sometimes horn is added to the demon characters. Now-a-day many modern synthetic materials are used to make the masks lighter and durable. Thermocol is used instead of the paste of *Kumarmati* now. Adding of thermocol made the mask lighter and the actors feel easy and free during the performance. Besides the traditional masks, they also make small masks for market demand. These are mainly used for interior decoration.

All the demon characters have large exaggerated eyes and open-up mouth with large teeth (Fig. 11, 12, 13, 16). Sometimes two elongated teeth are projected from either side of the mouth to show the demonic appearance. The human characters mostly have a happy or friendly expression in their face. They use to have a smile in their faces which is created by curving up the mouth. (Fig. 14).

Fig. 11. Mask of Demon made by Hem Chandra Goswami Shamaguri *Satra*

Fig. 12. Mask of Ravana made by made by Pradip Goswami Shamaguri *Satra*

The visual approach of Ravana mask is unique in *Bhaona*. Like other masked culture in Eastern India, it is largely built. The main difference of this mask is in its structure. In other masked culture, the auxiliary heads have attached either side of the mask in two rows. Most of the time, this can be detached from the main head. Here the main masks act as the hub and the auxiliary heads attached like the spokes. It is a monolithic structure. The colour of the mask is bright blue (Fig. 12)

Bhaona masks are usually made in two forms - tangible or rigid mask and flexible mask. The Tangible masks are normal in size like other masks of eastern India. In contrast, flexible masks are large. The masks of Ravana *Narasingha, Kalia, Varaha, Putana, Hiranyakasipu* etc. are the example of this type, measuring from six to ten feet high. Both anthropomorphic and theomorphic are used in various rituals. All these masks are worn by the performer for religious performance. The masked performance takes place in the open ground inside the *Namghar* in a *Satra*. There are certain plays like the *Krishna-kanda* or *Valia-vadha, Syamanta Harana* where several masks are used. The mask representing the demon characters are grotesque. The masks of the superhuman figures are usually large in size. These masks are aesthetically the fusion of style and cultural sensitivity. The mask of *Narasimha* and *Garura,* (Fig. 15) the mythical birds are always largely built and have a highly stylized motif. This mask contains the manifestation of the total *Bhaona* movement of this area.

Fig. 13. Mask of *Danava* (Demon), made by Pradip Goswami Shamaguri *Satra*

Fig. 14. Mask of Satyabrata Raja made by Pradip Goswami Shamaguri *Satra*

According to the usages and structure, *Satra* masks are grouped in three main divisions.

i)   *Mukh Mukha* covers the head only. It is the smallest verity of the mask here and is widely used in performance (Fig. 14).

Fig. 15. Mask of Garuda made by Pradip Goswami Shamaguri *Satra*

Fig. 16. Mask of Trichira, made by Pradip Goswami Shamaguri *Satra*

ii) *Cho-Mukha* or *Bor-Mukha* is very big in size and is covers the entire body or sometimes the upper body only. These masks are not flexible. No moveable parts are there in these masks. Often this mask is made two to five feet in height. The huge structure of such a mask portrays the character enormously. In spite of the huge structure of such masks, they are very light due to the raw materials that are used. Due to its huge structure, *Cho-Mukha* is generally tied to the body of the wearer with ropes.

ii) *Lutukori Mukha* covers the full body with flexible body parts representing hands, beaks, eyes, jaws, wings, etc. This mask is not tied to the body of the wearer. (Fig.17)

Fig. 17. Mask of Narasiongha *(Lutukori Mukha)* made by made by Padip Goswami Shamaguri *Satra*

Fig. 18. Mask of *Baraho Avtar* made by Pradip Goswami Shamaguri *Satra*

The masks of many divine characters like *Varaha*, the Boar *Avtar* and even Ravana and *Kaliya* are often largely built (Fig. 18.). The large size and awe fullness are associated in their appearance. This awe fullness is reflected in the total performance. The performers, who wear these largely built masks, seek divine blessings for their performance. It is possible for them to use such a large mask in the performance because these masks are considerably lighter and durable. The technical knowledge of the artisan evolved the unique technique of making masks of *Bhaona*. The innovation came in the used material and in the making the process according to the need of the subject matter finally for the needs of the society. The facial expressions of *Bhaona* masks are significant. The identification of specific sentiments and emotions in the facial expression of a mask are directed by the cultural elements of society. Assamese society consists of age-old values to regulate the facial expression according to the different social context. The facial expressions which are not accepted in a society are depicted through the masks of the demon characters. The facial expression of the mask does not represent a specific emotion of a character at a particular moment. It is rather an eternal symbol of fear, war, death and other woeful situations of life. The facial expressions of deity and good characters are very calm and quite in appearances. The masks of *Garuda* (the huge Hindu mythological bird and mount of Lord Vishnu), etc. produce mentionable peace and kindness. In contrast, the facial expression of *Narasimha* (an incarnation of Vishnu) and demon *Surpanakha* (sister of Ravana) shows cruelty and un-holiness. The artisan carefully imposes this expression to these masks. These facial expressions of the mythological characters have uniqueness in their own. Here also the cultural understanding of the society directs the visual approach. From a close view *Narasimha* (man-lion mythological character) looks like a horse rather than a lion. The approach of a specified expression of a character, whether it is fear, sorrow, calm, quite or divineness reflects the universal experiences and feelings. This internal facial expression overcomes the barrier of time and space, although its effects are relative to the contemporary society.

The masks of *Bhaona* are the stylish form of an art turned into an important object of the visual narrative in the masked performance. Here mask has metamorphosed itself into an object of utility from an object of art. The utility of masks can be found in socio-religious activities, theatrical performance, and decorative purpose. The masks of *Bhaona* are used for all these purposes. In performance, it expresses every emotion of human as well as of the animals. The emotion of the demonized characters is also a human emotion. Masks are the key tools to carry these emotions form the side of the performer to the ultimate viewer. It creates the virtual ambience of the reality of emotion to the spectators.

There are mainly two specific types of masks developed. The features of the mask are derived from natural forms. Masks which possess human features are known as anthropomorphic and those with animal features are known as theomorphic[3]. Some of the

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[3] Medhi .Birinchi K., Zaman .Arifur *'Tradition of Mask Making in a Vaishnavite Monastery of Assam*

masks are realistic and some others are based on imagination. The humanoid characters are realistic in nature. The realistic character is observed in most of the birds and animals mask. In contrast, the demon characters are mostly based on imagination. The main characteristic of humanoid *Bhaona* mask is the facial expression. This *Bhakit cult* is based on attachment, devotion, fondness, homage, faith or love, worship, piety to something as a spiritual, religious principle or means of salvation.[4] This movement is also based on love and devotion to religious concepts built around one or more gods and goddesses. A mask representing god or heavenly character is identified with their facial expression. In contrast, the demon characters are also identified with their facial expression. In every society there is a significant meaning for each specified facial expressions. Some of the facial expressions represent the sign of bad manner or even vulgarity. The facial expression is a taboo for a society of cultural heritage. As masks are the allegoric representation of different characters of the society, the facial expression of a specified character is important. In a society, mask is made by the members of that society according to their understanding of specified facial expressions. Masks are the medium of expression and feelings of a character. An artisan creates a mask within the traditional framework and according to the understanding of his society. The spectators can recognize every feature of the mask as they are aware of the norms and values of their society. The viewer of a particular society can easily identify the different masked characters as their culture is same. It can create feelings of pleasure, fun, fears, suffering even death. For example, the demon characters appropriately create the feelings of suffering, death and fears on the viewers as well as on the performer. It is believed in all that primitive culture during the masked performance, the spirit of mask transfers itself to the performer. This magical transformation has a deep impact on the viewers mind. Some of the masks of deity character are greatly respected by society and the only religious and good man is allowed to wear such masks. This custom is strictly followed in *Bhaona*. Often this transformation of a performer is only a psychic change and he starts behaving like the demon or a divine character. Mask is the key element of this transformation.

   Satras are the main hub for making of the *Bhaona* masks even today. It is practiced in a handful of *Satras*. Among these *Natun Chamaguri Satra* is the most important (former *Chamaguri Satra;* founded by *Ahom king Chakradhwaj Singha* built this *Satra* in 1663 C.E.) The Goswami family has been continuing the tradition of mask-making since the mid-17th century. Late Naren Goswami, Late Prasanna Goswami, Pradip Goswami, Late Dhiren Goswami, Late Dharma Kanta Goswami were from this Goswami family. Two other *Satras- Khatpaar Satra* in Sivasagar and *Bor Elangi Satra* (which moved from Salmora Mouza in Majuli to Titabar in Jorhat district), have also a mask making tradition. These masks are used in the *Raas Leela* festival and for *Bhaona* in this *Satra*. The mask making

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India,https://www.mecon.nomadit.co.uk/pub/conference_epaper_dawnload.php5?PaperID=14099& MIMEType=application/pdf, Viewed on 16/01/2017

[4] '*Bhakti movement*', Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhakti_movement, Viewed on 16/01/2017

continued from one generation to next. The present master craftsman Hem Chandra Goswami is also from this Goswami family. Other artists are Pradip Goswami (Fig. 20), Kushakanta Deva Goswami (Fig. 19), Dharmakanta Goswami, Krishna Goswami, Haren Goswami are continuing the mask making tradition. Moreover, artisans associated with Chamaguri *Satra* and *Amulya Kalita* of Bengenati *Satra*, are also continuing this mask making.

Primarily the mask making technique was handed over from one generation to next. Now, anyone can join the mask making the profession. Generally, the master craftsman trains them free of cost. Even several camps on mask making are being organized Govt. or other cultural institutions. These activities help to create social awareness on masked culture in this area.

Fig. 19. Kushakanta Deva Goswami received Pranab Barua Art Award in the year 2003

Fig. 20. Pradip Goswami with his mask

Previously the mask making for *Satra* was a prestigious job. The artisan made masks for the *Satra* as a social duty. The entire society took responsibility for the daily needs of the artist. For these, *Bhaona* mask has no commercial value and is made only for the religious performances organized by the *Satra.* In contemporary time this scenario has been changed. Now, these masks are becoming collectable items among the tourist and local people. The artisan has started to make special types of the masks which cannot be used at the performances. These masks are used as wall hangings to decorate rooms. Even miniature types of masks are also introduced for the cheaper alternative of the huge masks. This adaption was introduced for the sake of market demand and made the artisan community economic solvent.

There are several rituals associated with the mask. Like many ancient cultures, these masks are also considered as a living creature. No mask is left in the dark at night in Satra. One lamp or *Chaki* is always placed at night in front of the masks at night. Masks get respect according to its character. In the *Natun Chamaguri Satra* some of the masks like the mask of *Narasimha*, Ravana, etc. are respected much more than the others. A common belief among the dwellers in this area is that all masks have a magical power and it transforms the performer during the performance. After the performance, these masks are

preserved in a clean place. Old masks of *Narasimha*, Ravana, etc. are immersed respectfully in the nearby river through special rituals. Thus, an object of art has transformed into an object of Applied Art and finally, a part of a society which is unique in its way. However, mask making of *Bhaona* does not provide any economic feasibility to the artisan but has a deep impact on the rural society in these areas for several centuries. Thus, the masked culture in this area helps the people to maintain their cultural activities and community life even inspite of the present day's enormous impact of globalization.

Bhaona is colourful presentation of lyrical performance. The singers and the instrumentalists are dressed in perfect white. In contrast, the dresses of the masked characters are colourful. The demons and animals are in the form of extraordinary colourful model. The actors representing kings and queens wear elaborate glittering costumes. Masks are an integral part of the performance of *Bhaona*. The traditional craftsmen create giant masks and models to be used by actors while portraying demons and animals in the stories concerned with Lord Vishnu's incarnations. Like other masks, in this area, this body covering masks are made of lightweight bamboo covered with painted cloth and paper. Only the mouth and the both arms are movable. The large and colourful appearance of this mask gives a magnificent look to the performance. Here mask covers almost the whole body of the performer. A mask hides the identity of the performer and creates a visual reality which is quite unique. Hiding facial individuality and highlighting moods, pose and posture acts as the vital in all masked performances found in this area. Masks are generally worn with a costume. Sometimes such costumes cover the entire body of the performer. These masks often need several actors to control them. Appropriate and rhythmic posture of the dancer and movements of the masks, depict the character. Here also masks are one of the main communicating tools with the audience. The *Sutradhar* continues to explain the story along with the musical orchestra in-between the play. This activity helps the mask to present the whole story so that it can be easily understood by the ultimate audience. These presentations are worthy for direct learning moral of behaviors. Moral values may be built up by distinguishing the hero or superior characters and the anti-hero or evil characters and their destiny. This performance of *Bhaona* touches all the fields of performing and visual art form to convey its ideology to the society in the context of social reformation since the medieval period. The impact of this performance is still present in today's society in this area.

Raas festival is the main festival celebrated in all *Satras* in Majuli Island and in adjoining area. This festival is continues for three days in the month of November. Masked performance of *Bhaona* during this festival is organized by various *Satra*s like Natun-Kamalabari *Satra*, Bengenati *Satra*, Dakhinpat *Satra*, Chamaguri *Satra*, Aadi-Bihimpur *Satra*, Bhogpur *Satra*, Auniati *Satra,* Uttar-Kamalabari *Satra*, Garamur *Satra*, Garamur Saru *Satra* and also by the other fifty-four *Satras* throughout the island. These masked performances are based on several popular Hindu mythological stories. The local people take active participation in this performance. The mask and masked performance plays a distinctive role in the *Raas* of Majuli. It is the main attraction for the common people.

Masked characters like *'Basuki'* in the story of *Ananta Sajja* of Lord Vishnu, *'Aghasur Bodh'*, *'Bakasur Bodh'*, *'Palambasur Bodh'* etc. are the most important performances. Most of the masks are supplied from Chamaguri *Satra*. Not only that, this *Chamaguri Satra* supplies most of the *Bhaona* mask throughout Assam

The *Khulia-bhaorriya* provides another form of mask used is *Bhaona*.[5] 'In the course of time, *Khulia-bhaorriya* raised some other offshoots in different parts of Assam which now stand as independent forms with the fusion of elements from the *Bhaona* as well as those of the surrounding traditions. 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. The large life-size masks are not used here. And the masks are wooden ones.'

The use of the large masks has been reduced because of their size and weight. Along with the time, these masks are becoming larger in size for the need of religious activity. The *Neo-Vaisnavism* movement had a huge impact on socio-cultural and religious status in this area for the last five hundred years and still exists; today no secular performance or masked performance is introduced in *Bhaona*. As all the masked characters of *Bhaona* are Hindu Mythological characters, they have a little scope to be used in secular performances. These *Bhaona* masked performances are performed only in the annual ritual performance organized by a handful of *Satras* in Majuli Island and Sivasagar.

Now, this traditional mask draws attention of both the local people and the in govt. sectors. Previously these masks had a single and specified expression only made for the masked performance. Now, some masks are built in a manner so that the eyes and lips can be moved. Even some masked characters artificially move this portion during the performance. For larger *(Lutukori Mukha)* masks, the head and hands are also separately built. This activity adds a dramatic feature to the performance. The performance becomes more realistic and energetic. This phenomenon of mask making is new and has become popular among the common people. Both the Natun Chamaguri *Satra* in Majuli and Khatpaar *Satra* in Sivasagar have adopted this method to satisfy the public demand. Thus, the masks of Bhaona were introduced to serve the society. It has modified its visual and structural elements according to the contemporary public needs. In that context, *Bhaona* masks are primarily are social masks.

The masks of *Bhaona* are light and durable. For this reason, these masks are becoming popular for decorating purpose also for the last couple of decades. Several masks are made for decorating purpose only. These masks are mainly smaller in size. The artisan pays special interest in making these types of masks. This feature of changing from one specified use to another, directed by society, with the course of time is one of the key features of the survival of the object of Applied Art.

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[5] Mahanta. Pradip. Mahanta (2001), (Viewing the World through the mask of Assam', Mind, Man and Mask in Prehistoric Art, in Malik S.C. (ed.) *Rupa-Pratirupa: Mind, Man and Mask*, Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts, New Delhi., page-173

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