

# Mask Making Tradition in Majuli

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Mask is a unique traditional art, which is available only in Majuli in the state of Assam. Masks are artificial faces worn for disguise, generally to assume and to frighten. According to new Encyclopedia Britannica, Mask type of disguise, commonly an object worn over on in front of the face to hide the identity of the wearer. Although a mask is generally worn over the face, sometimes it covers almost the whole body of the wearer. It hides the identity of a person and with the help of its integral features, projects the wearer as another being. This indispensable characteristic of hiding and revealing modes of personalities is integral to all masks. The oldest evidence of the use of masks was encountered in the wall of cave and rock shelters during the upper Paleolithic period. Most of those were the paintings of hunters who wear seen to cover their faces with animal masks. The principle aim of the people is to get strength and prosperity by wearing masks. It is believed that by wearing animal mask, one can acquire the strength of that animal.

Majuli is situated in the midst of the river Brahmaputra. The island itself extends for a length of about 80km and for about 10-15 km north to south direction with a total area of about 875sq. km. it is 85-90 m above the sea level. The island is bounded by the river Subansiri and her tributaries Ranganadi, Dikrong, Dubla, Chici and Tuni etc. on the northwest, the kherkatia suti (a small channel of the river Brahmaputra) in the northeast and the main Brahmaputra river on the south and the south east. The majulians are a mixed community of various ethno cultural groups who have migrated to the island over centuries. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), Ministry Of Culture, Government of India (GOI) has nominated the region of Majuli to UNESCO for world heritage list as a cultural landscape for its unique natural environment and for the social system of the island.

The primary occupation of the people of Majuli is agriculture and they are all bound to the wheel of agricultural works. The other works like basketry, boat making, domestication of animals

etc are more or less an obligation to them. The mask in Majuli is used primarily during the enactment of religious stories in the form of Bhawona or Drama in the Vaishnavite institutions. The great saint Srimanta Sankardeva met Madhavdeva in Majuli and since then Majuli had been the home of about sixty Satras established with the patronage of Vaishnava gurus. The Satras were the centers of spiritual, cultural and literary excellence for the last five hundred years and contributed to make Majuli the abode of the unique and liberal religious cultural environment with peaceful co existence among the people. The Natun(New) Chamaguri satra is a renowned Vaishnavite monastery of Majuli, which has a long and rich tradition of mask making. There are three other satras in Majuli, viz Prachin Chamaguri Satra, Alengi Narasimha and Bihimpur Satra is also well known for their mask making tradition.

## MAKING OF MASKS

Masks have been designed in innumerable varieties from a good number of materials available in the environment. Mask makers have shown great resourcefulness in selecting and combining the available materials used to make masks. Bamboo, can, clay, cloth, paper, metal, pith plant (*Aeschynomena Indica*), stone, shall, wood etc. are very common. The craftsman used a local variety of bamboo known as jatibanh, which is neither immature nor very mature. At first the bamboo cut into a piece and kept in pond water or pool for a period of 5 to 7 days. This bamboo cut into a few pieces and woven in open hexagonal pattern to make the base of mask. The woven base of a mask is covered with one or more pieces of old cotton fabrics, which wiped with a special type of clay (kumarmati) and water before covering the masks.

In olden days, the craftsman used natural colours for beautification of a mask which were extracted from various natural objects. Hangul (red color), Haital (the yellow color) are extracted from natural ones. The black color is prepared from the ashes of the working pots or from the smoke of kerosene lamps, green color is derived from

crushing different leaves and white colours extracted from a kind of soil(dhal mati), generally found at a depth of 1 and 1/2m from the surface of the earth. Hair and moustaches were generally prepared for water hyacinth, locally known as pani meteka or from jute fiber, locally known as marapat.

### TYPES OF MASKS

There are three types of masks at Majuli. This are- Mukh Mukha, Cho Mukha and Lotokai Mukha. Mukh Mukha is worn over the face; cho mukha is very big in size and covers almost the whole body of a person. Lotokai Mukha is akin to Cho Mukha except its small size. Due to its small size, the wearer can easily control it. The Bhaona masks were made of fine bamboo strips and then covered with a past of cow dung mixed with soil. The khuliya-bhaoriya of Darrang district for instance while retaining the essence of the bhaona, specialized in small wooden masks while discarding the bigger ones. In Goalpara and Dhuburi districts the rich traditions of folk paintings on solpith has also found reflection in a variety of painted masks.

### II. CONCLUSION

With the tribal art and folk elements forming a dominant factor in Assamese culture, masks found an important place in the cultural activities of the people. Made from a variety of articles such as terracotta, pith, metal, bamboo and wood, masks were extensively used in bhawnas and jattras(folk theatre). The use of masks was varied and widespread but the thematic content of masked performance was generally drawn from the vast corpus of legends and revolved round mythological character. The masks, with their manifold form of guises, were a very significant form of cultural expression. Apart from use in cultural performances, masks have a ritualistic significance for certain communities. The Tiwa community of Assam, for example use masks of birds, animals and lord Siva while performing the rites of the Barat Puja.

The Ankia Nat, the theatre form created by Sankardeva(1449A.D-1568A.D) to spread the message of vaishnavism, were one act plays characterized by glittering costumes and fanciful effigies of demons and monsters. These huge effigies, made out of bamboo and covered with paint and papir Mache, were sometimes as tall as 15feet and needed several actors to manipulate them. Animal masks were also worn. The action in this masked performance dances to the rhythm of music which obviously meant that the masks had

to be light weight unlike masks in many other dance forms. Masks making in Assam has always been a male dominated profession. In course of time as the importance of bhaonas and jattras declined, mask making also lost its importance.

### PICTURE OF DIFFERENT TYPES OF MASKS IN MAJULI





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