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## The *Mukha*: The Mask Tradition of Assam with Special Reference to *Samaguri Sattra*

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# The *Mukha*: The Mask Tradition of Assam with Special Reference to *Samaguri Sattr*

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**Abstract.** The *Sattras Assam* or Vaisnavite Monasteries is a beautiful socio-religious and cultural institution and complex founded in the 16th century by the Saint Vaisnavite, Srimanta Sankaradeva. *Sattras* is a unique heritage institution with multidisciplinary socio-religious, cultural and creative fields with different characteristics. The *Mukha* as a mask tradition in Assam has traditionally, a unique shape due to the *Mukha*'s representation of spiritual beliefs. The *Mukha* has a contribution in the socio-cultural, socio-religious fields. By using a methodology of fieldwork, data was collected and taken by observation and interview. These observations and interviews are explained in this article. This article finds evidence that the mukha tradition still exist nowadays, eventhough have a little change in performing art .This article aims to present traditional culture in Assam especially in Samaguri Sattr.

**Keywords:** sattr, mukha, tradition, heritage, culture

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## Introduction

The impact of Cultural heritage has been known to influence every aspect of life. Cultural heritage is any legacy or knowledge that is considered important enough to be passed on to the future generations. Cultural heritage refers to the cultural aspects like heritage sites, monuments, folklore, traditional activities and practices, language etc. that are considered vital to be preserved for the future generations. It gives people a connection to certain social values, beliefs, religions and customs. Cultural heritage can provide an automatic sense of unity and belonging within a group and allows a community to better understand previous generations and the history of where we come

from. Both tangible and intangible heritage are important to society. Both reflect the identity of a community, a place or a nation. To know more about the community or the place and the traditional practices it is crucially important to undertake research on it.

Cultural heritage sites are mostly owned and managed as per the governance system of their local contexts ([Bleibleh and Awad](#)). The mukha or mask in Assamese as a cultural heritage. The mukha always present and used in rituals or ceremony, they are worn mostly in Bhaona. Bhaonas used to be a nightlong performance during auspicious occasions inside the prayer halls. Now it is reduced to few hours ([Sharma and Singh](#)).

### Mask as Art Form

A mask is an object which is normally worn on the face for protection, disguise and to perform. Masks are artefacts which have been used since antiquity for both ceremonial and practical purposes. 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.

*Samaguri Sattra* is a place of conservation and retention of vanishing art form of mukha. Sankardeva's philosophies had transcended the boundaries of religion and culture and thus inherently, Majuli is one place where devotion has mingled with art in a unique way. Majuli is situated at the eastern part of Assam and it is known as world's largest river island in the Brahmaputra river. Majuli is known for its bio-diversity, ethnic practices of the tribal communities, extensive network of social cultural institutions, Satras. These Satras are structures representing Vaishnavism tradition, which is culturally precious with various forms of dance, music, handloom and crafts ([Bleibleh and Awad](#)). The distribution pattern of the Satra institution is interesting. These are located on the bank of the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries ([Sahariah et al.](#)).

Majuli is an important place of Assam. It has distinct historical and cultural background. This place has a good name of all the folklore resources. But there is a special place for Sattra, Namghar (prayer hall), oral literature or tradition, performing art (*Bhaona*) and mask tradition (*Mukha shilpa*). In the state of Assam, Majuli, a river island and a newly declared district, is known to be the seat of Vaishnavite culture with its unique contribution to evolution of a subculture in the region ([Sharma and Singh](#)).

Majuli is a sacred island comprising religion-based cultural artistic and ritual practices. During the fifteenth century, Assamese saint and social reformer Srimanta Sankardeva started spreading the Vaishnavite culture ([Borborah et al.](#)). The mask tradition has preserved here, especially in samaguri sattra from the period of Saint Sankardeva. The study found how this material culture is alive in Samaguri Sattra.

## Methods

Preservation is one of the pathways to restore, maintain and preserve a culture. Preserving focuses on efforts to protect specific traditions that today are in rapid decline

and in danger of becoming lost. The aim of preservation is to protect the original tradition as a whole, without any changes ([Nugraha](#)). This article aims to describe the mask artifacts which are cultural objects that still exist today. In line with normative understandings of the term “culture,” we can say that culturally significant artifacts are those that embody, express, and help sustain the beliefs, knowledge, and activities of a particular social group ([Walker](#)). During field work the researcher did interview, observation, photography, videography and recording method. Here, most of the data are primary in nature. For collecting primary data, a field work was conducted to collect the process of mask making. Secondary data was collected from various published sources including websites.

## Result and Discussion

### Tradition of mask in Indian Culture

India is rich for its own culture. The name of India is notable in the traditions of Indian dance and dance dramas are among the most perplexingly complex and varied theatrical cultures of the world. 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, Narasimha (Avatara of of Lord Vishnu) character is very popular in Indian mask tradition.



**Figure 1** Narasimha masks (used in Ankiya naat in Assam)  
Source by author

Figure 1 presents the Narasimha masks which are used in different places of India like Andhra Pradesh (Bhagavata-mala), Tamil Nadu (Bhagavat Mela Natakam), Orissa

(Prahlada Natakam) and Karnataka (Bayalatta theatre). Even Narasimha masks have been used in Ankiya Naat or Bhaona (one act play) in Assam.

Mythological and real animals remain a powerful component of folk-religion and occupy a sacred space in Indian culture. The lion mask of *Purulia* and the Jackal mask from *Gambhira* are prominent examples of mask depictions of animals. The *Mukhada*, the masks of tribal people of Madhya Pradesh, wear during festivals and ritual dances. *Mukhadas* are made using the most inexpensive and readily available material like pumpkin hollows, waste paper, cardboard and wood. Animal Mask Dances are prevalent in villages of south Orissa, especially in the district of Ganjam. During the *Thankurani Yatra* (a religious festival marked by a huge procession), when the idols are taken out on the streets, the animal mask dancers dance in front of the procession.



**Figure 2** Masks used in the *Chaau* dance  
Source photo by author

Figure 2 show the masks used in Chaau. Eastern India is famous for the Chhau mask dances. The tribal belt where the tribals and other common people perform Chhau dances is distributed into three adjoining states West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. All the three Chhau dance forms are practised by males. In West Bengal, the performer wears mask of Goddess Kali purified by *mantras*; dances with a sword and makes prophetic proclamations.

In the past, the devotees painted their face and body with colours. During the *Vaishanava* period, the dance soon evolved to use wooden masks, which were considered for ritualistic performances. Later on, the masks began to be prepared with a mixture of paper, pulp, mud and cloth, which made them lighter than the wooden versions.



Figure 3 Masks using in Kerala  
Source by author

Figure 3 presents the particular mask used in Kerala. Padayani or Padeni, is one of the most colourful and spectacular folk arts associated with the festivals of certain temples in southern Kerala. This folk art mainly involves a series of divine and semi-divine impersonations wearing huge masks or kolams of different shapes, colours and designs, painted on the stalks of areca nut fronds. The most important of the kolams usually presented in a Padayani performance are *Bhairavi (Kali)*, *Kalan (god of death)*, *Yakshi (fairy)* and *Pakshi (bird)*, among others.



Figure 4 Mask using in Kamakhya Temple in Assam (during Ambubachi mela)  
Source by author



Figure 5 Mask using in Monastery dance of Sikkim  
Source by author

Figure 4 show the mask using in Kamakhya Temple in Assam, meanwhile figure 5 show the mask using in Monastery dance of Sikkim. Masks related to Monasteries are considered very sacred. Mask dances are the part of religious and cultural traditions in the Himalayan range encompassing Tibet, Ladakh, Bhutan and Sikkim.

#### Tradition of mask in Assam Culture

The Mask, or *mukha*, reflects the essential base of the Assamese culture and tradition. They are used in Ankiya Naat (one act play) or mukha bhaona (play with mask characters only) performed in Naamghar (Neo-Vashnava temple or prayer hall) in Assam. This craft tradition is continuing from 16th century A.D. Sankardeva (1449-1569), an immensely gifted genius, blessed this pristine land of Assam in the 15th and 16th Centuries with his theological teachings, blended with various colours of social and cultural elements ([Satyajit](#)).



Figure 6 Srimanta Sankardeva  
(Source: [Chakraborty](#))



Figure 7 Ankia Naat or Bhaona  
Source by author

Figure 6 show the Srimanta Sankardeva illustration, while figure 7 presents the *Ankia Naat or Bhaona* which was introduced by Sankardeva. It was *Sankardeva* who introduced Ankiya Naat or Bhaona and initiated the mask culture in the theatrical tradition of Assam. *Sankardeva* learned the art of mask making from the available sources of ethnic mask culture which was flourishing in almost all parts of the country at his time ([Sarma](#)). 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 become the motto of Neo-Vaishnavism ([Chanda](#)). There is record in one of the Assamese manuscripts about the first mask made by Srimanta Sankardeva himself was that of Chaturmukhi Brahma. It is mentioned in *Guru Charita* as follows:

*Garudara mukha Sarbajayaka dilanta  
Ketaikhaye khol dhorilonta  
Sarbajaya atoi mukhapindhiya goilonta  
Lampha diya Sankare upare uthilanta*



Figure 8 Ankia Naat (Mukha Bhaona) in stage modern context  
Source by author





Figure 9 The costumes of character (Ankiya Naat)  
Source by author

Figure 8 shows the Ankiya Naat (*Mukha Bhaona*) on the stage in a modern context, meanwhile figure 9 shows the costumes of character (*Ankiya Naat*). The mask of Sankarian theatre (*Ankiya Naat Bhaona*) can be divided in two major categories i.e. the 'Earthly' and the 'Unearthly'. In the first category, all sorts of earthly things such as human beings, animals, serpents, living and non-living worldly things are counted and in the next category divine characters such as Vishnu, Brahma, Shiva, gods and goddesses along with evil spirits and demonical characters are counted. From the structural viewpoint, the masks are again divided into three classes.



(a). *Mukh mukha* (Face mask)

(b). *Lotokari mukha*

(c). *Cho mukha*

Figure 10 Three types of Mukha (source photo : author)

Figure 10 shows the three types of *Mukha* traditionally, as three types of masks which are being prepared: (1). *Mukh mukha* (Face mask) – which covers the whole face. Example of face mask is *Hanumana*, *Gadura*; (2). *Lotokari mukha* (Big mask) - which are also treated as gigantic and movable and it is covered till neck. Example of lotokori

mukha is Jatayu; (3). *Cho mukha* or *Bor mukha* (Full body mask) which covers the full body with head and face and the actor hides inside the mask during acting. Example of the *Cho mukha* or *Bor mukha* is the Narasingha or Nrisingha, Ravana.

### The mask making tradition of *Samaguri Sattra*

The world's largest river island Majuli is famous for the Neo-Vaishnavism culture that had spread its roots during the 15th century. It became a tradition of every village in Majuli to hold the annual Bhaona performances and these become part of having the mask tradition, within which the use of masks is considered to be indispensable. The contribution of Majuli in mask making is unique and different from the other parts of Assam. The tradition of mask is mainly practiced by the Sattras. Samaguri Sattra has a name in making exquisite masks. It has been practiced by the Bhakats of this Sattra from the time of Sankardeva. Many cultural colorful treasures such as sattriya dance, "Onkia Bhaona" (a form of devotional drama), and "*Mukha Xilpo*" (masks to be used in devotional dramas) are a part of the day-to-day life of the people in Majuli ([Borborah et al.](#)).

### Preparation of mask

The materials used for mask construction are mostly sourced from natural products such as bamboo, potters clay, handmade cloth, sola pith, herbal and mineral colours such hengul (red), haital (yellow), neel (blue), dhol mati (white) and engar(black). These masks are made in three different stages.

#### *Preparation of basic frame of the mask*

Mature bamboo (Jati banh) is cut into segments measuring approximately three feet in length in the first instance by a dao (bill-hook) with one or two nodes in between. Bamboo and cane products of Assam, in the form of furniture and other domestic implements and decorative objects are of acclaimed quality. The japi or the hat made of bamboo strips and dry palm leaves, a common trait of the south Asian region, is another eye-catching item of Assamese material culture ([Dutta "Physical Folklife of Assam"](#)).



Figure 11 Author with Dr. Hem Chandra Goswami  
Source by author

Figure 11 show the author with Dr. Hem Chandra Goswami as an artisan. He had acquired the art of Mask Making at an early age of 10 years. He is an eminent mask artist of Natun Samaguri Satra who is leading a last concerted effort to keep this age-old tradition alive ([Saikia](#)).



Figure 12 Kathi  
Source by author

Figure 12 show the kathi is a bamboo segment is cut into splints. This segment is cut into four or five sections and each section is then sliced into several splints (kathis). Six thin and pliable splints are arranged in such a manner as to form the basic structure.



Figure 13 Khang  
Source by author

Figure 13 show the Khang a shape of facial mask. These splints bamboos are gradually woven in open-hexagonal technique obtaining the required shape of the facial masks called 'khang'. Kuhila (sola pith) is used for certain facial features like teeth, nose, beak ([Dutta "A Catalogue of Traditional Craft Objects of North East India"](#))

*Covering and filling the facial space to give it desired shape*

In the second stage, pieces of ordinary cotton fabric soaked in potter clay are placed over the bamboo frame part by part and as soon as the base is ready, mud mixed cow dung is meticulously used for giving the shape of chin, nose, cheek etc.



Figure 14 Cover the bamboo frame by potter clay with the help of cotton cloth  
Source by author



Figure 15 Using cow dung to shape properly  
Source by author

*Application of colour to bring out facial detail*

In the final stage, entire mask is painted in white ochre initially and then as per the requirement of the character. Each character is painted as per mythical attributes. Hengul, haital, neel, dhalmati etc are powdered on a brass plate with stone and they are applied for colour. The brush used is made of cat's hair stuck on a pointed bamboo. The colours and dyes are stored in small bamboo nodes.



Figure 16 Kuhila (sola pith) is being used to shape of the beak of Garuda  
Source by author



Figure 17 Craft man is busy to shape the Garuda (final stage)  
Source by author

The masks that are made for the characters of Brahma, Hansa, Ganesha, Gaduda, Jatayu, ten headed Ravana, Kumbhakarna, Taraka, Maricha, Putana, Chakravat, Kaliya Naag, Bakasura, Aghasura, Dhenukasura, Batsasura, Hanuman, Jambuban, Baraha, Narasingha etc.

Movement of lips and eyes are new introduction in some masks of Samaguri Sattra. This new feature has been introduced by Sangeet Natak Academy Award winner Dr. Hem Chandra Goswami, master craft man of Samaguri Sattra. Gauhati University, Assam has awarded PhD degree to Goswami for his work on mukha shilpa (mask making tradition). This new introduction definitely has enhanced facial dynamics of the masks and creates a more dramatic expression in Bhaona performance. 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 ([Chanda](#)).

### Conservation and retention of cultural heritage of mask making at Samaguri Sattrra

Mask making is one of most well-known craft forms of Majuli in present day. However, the craft is not practiced by all the Sattras. Samaguri Sattrra is famous for making masks in the region; Bhakats of this Sattrra are known to make beautiful masks which are used for religious dance and drama, specially for Ankiya Naat or Bhaona.



Figure 18 Characters of Mukha Bhaona (performing art form of Assam)

Source by author

Award winner Hemchandra Goswami practices daily to conserve this art form. He has introduced Mukha Bhaona in 2000 to preserve this art form. Mukha is basically used in Ankiya Naat or Bhaona only for those characters like Narasingha avatara, Jatayu, Hanumana, Garuda, Putana etc., which was difficult to explain through act in front of the audience. But in mukha bhaona all the characters wear mukha. According to Dr. Goswami this is one kind of technique to preserve the material culture. This is the way of Samaguri sattrra to preserve both performing art (Ankiya Naat Bhaona) and material culture (mukha shilpa) together. Along with him the entire family practices this craft. They practised the tradition of mask making since the mid-17th century, making the effort to retain this increasingly lost art form by giving training to their children and future generations who has shown a keen interest on this tradition.

### Conclusion

Most nations all over the world have a cultural past, which is inseparably linked to their artisanal traditions, including those traditions with masks, thus making them a universal phenomenon. Masks from all over the world converge on the universality of the human mind and the power of the human imagination. The Mask essentially forms a silent language which is universally understood to the community and civilization, and thus which defines the essence of human expressions and embody essential human emotions at various levels of 'being' i.e. spiritual, religious, cultural and material.

It is known that the Sankardeva had innovated the traditional mask in his theatre to dramatize the character of his plays to the extreme. Having expressed the path of salvation he used the mask to show the public the result of good and bad deeds, where the mask in particular characters made a tremendous impact on audience psychology. But comparing our theatrical mask culture with others, it is observed that a depressed environment has occurred. Because, the tradition of theatrical mask culture which was introduced by Sankardeva has not been well nourished by the people of concerned field. In comparison with the global mask making developments and its application in theatrical performances it can be said that the tradition of Assamese theatrical mask making and its application is in a deplorable position because of lack of adequate attention and education on the subject.

Though the *Sattras* of Majuli and other places had continued a tradition of mask making and its application and preservation but unfortunately it has lost its zeal in continuing its effort to the present period. Deepak Bhuyan mentioned the reason of this obliteration of broad masses may be counted as: (1). People's attraction for western culture and interest of earning easy money; (2). Lack of nationalist feelings and relinquishment of tradition; (3). Everyone is tended to introduce with modern culture in the name of modernity; (4). Folk base functions lose its grandeur in the new colourful lights of western culture which has been back upped by the capitalist economy ([Bhuyan](#)).

The tradition of making masks is presently according to the interest and different aesthetic requirements of present-day audiences cannot be denied. Yet these suggest that it is a critical time to think about this disappearing heritage and undertake a bold step on the subject. The Samaguri Sattras is an exemplary tradition that shows how a community takes a good initiative to conserve and retain their cultural heritage through preservation and practicing the tradition on a daily basis and giving training to others.

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