



A brief study on the unique form, representation and utility of masks in the Vaisnavite monasteries of Assam

NILANJANA GOGOI*

Department of History of Art, Kala Bhavan, Visva Bharti, Santiniketan, West Bengal, India

Abstract

Aim: This study draws from archival materials and theoretical perspectives. The Vaisnavite Masks are an attempt to find a voice in the conventional medium that pushes back against the kind of stereotyping, high/low art, or classical art that is so prevalent in contemporary urban culture.

Method: The present research uses a descriptive method to present its data. The information gathered was based on the papers written before now. The results were obtained by comparing various variables.

Findings: The audience's thought processes are altered by the combination of the elaborate costumes and make-up with the unique communicative language (Brajawali) spoken between the performers. It gives them a fantastical, exciting visual experience of the show. The audience members' minds are manipulated into experiencing an emotional investment and agitation as they watch the performance.

Implications/New Approach: The creation of masks is a significant form of medium that captures and gives us visual narrative representations of historical and current data. The occupation of galleries over the common people's visual psyche has been challenged by its distinctive forms, utility, and structural representations, which challenge the hierarchical practices of mainstream arts.

Key Words: Interactive, Mask, Representations, Resistance, Satra

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INTRODUCTION

The unique perspective of visual narratives in diverse art forms in India can be traced back to the country's rich cultural heritage, which is founded on a wide range of factors, including its varied geographical realm, numerous races, languages, religious beliefs, ritual practices, and complex accumulated social structure. Assam is in the far northeastern corner of India (Barua 2011). Northern Burma, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Arunachal Pradesh are encircled by the mighty Himalayan orbit of Tibet and Bhutan, while eastern Burma, southern China, and western Bangladesh are located on the other side of these mountains.

More than 2,000 years of history have been incorporated into the Assamese people's rich and complex cultural heritage. The great Pragjyotisha-Kamrupa dynasties of the first millennium AD are responsible for the development of Assamese culture (Barua 2011). "The province's more common name today", "Assam," is relatively new. It has to do with the Ahom people, who were actually Shan invaders who arrived in the Brahmaputra Valley at the turn of the thirteenth century (Barua 2011). It evolved due to the mingling and influence of numerous ethnic groups and cultures throughout history, as they lived and worked under various political and social regimes (Gait 2013).

"Hinduism is the dominant religion in Assam. The three popular forms of Hinduism, namely, Saivism, Saktism, and Vaisnavism, are prevalent here. Neo-Vaisnavism movement gained momentum in Assam in the 15th century" (Neog 1998; Kothari 1980).

The Vaisnavite cult that is still followed and practiced throughout India has been superseded by Assam Vaisnavism. "Visnu" is the Hindu religion's most worshipped deity. Not only is Visnu worshipped in dedicated temples, but he also has a significant presence in Saiva and Sakta places of worship (Barua 2011). At the end of the 15th century, a social, religious, and cultural movement led by Srimanta Sankardeva, a great Vaisnavite Saint,

* Corresponding author: Nilanjana Gogoi

† Email: gogoinilanjana8@gmail.com

swept through Assam. Beginning in the 15th century's final quarter, Assam's Vaisnavite period was at its peak in the following centuries (Datta 2012; Sarma and Dutta 2009). Saint Sankardeva traveled the length and breadth of Assam to spread his new religion, "Eka Saran Hari Naam Dharma" and established the Vaisnavite monasteries known as Satras as the Namghar or prayer hall.

Satras are distinct cultural and religious communities with a shared mission to advance the common good of their nation. Satras are Assam's heritage institutions founded in the 16th century to disseminate Bhakti ideals to the general populace. They are also a revolutionary force in the evolution and development of Assam's society. This brand-new sect of religion "The ancient Hindu scriptures", focusing on Vaisnavism, served as the inspiration for "Ek-Saran-Hari Naam Dharma" (Borkakoti 2005). The goal of the Bhakti religion is not salvation (Moksha or Nirvana) but rather the selfless devotion of the devotee (Bhakti) (Neog 2011). Deva (Deity), Nama (Prayers), Bhakats (Devotees), and Guru are the four pillars upon which Assam Vaisnavism is built (the mentor). Having their unique characteristics, specific organizational set-up, and ideological valor derived from the Bhakti movement, the Satras institutions are multidisciplinary powerhouses in socio-religious, cultural, artistic, and architectural fields (Borkakoti 2005; Richmond 1974).

One of the Bhakti cults in India, Vaisnavism, is preached in the Satras. It is distinguished by its unique and progressive nature, which upholds the ideals of brotherhood, equality, humanism, and democracy to establish a just and egalitarian society.

It is in Visnu alone that the Satras put their faith and hope for salvation. Regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, caste, or creed, Satra organizations are open to all people. The Satra and its brotherhood do not adhere to strict practices or concrete theocratic norms. Satra's Institutional Domain Does Not Practice Idol Worship or Sacrifice (Neog 1998).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Barua (1996) presents a lucid panorama of the early 15th century, when the Bhakti movement spread all over the country like a wild forest fire, also enamoring the north-easterners to liberate the breadth, dignity and meaning of life. The Vaisnava saint Sankardeva in the north-eastern took the stronghold in spreading the fragrance of the Bhakti movement, which he coined as "Ek-Saran-Hari-Naam Dharma". The author highlights that Sankardeva did not confine himself only to preaching the Vaisnavite cult but at the same time he took part as an upholder of the norms and virtues to a refined concealed society. Lastly, the author also focuses on the reformed and regenerated Assamese socio-cultural sphere with a new outlook full of literature, drama, dance, music and other artistic creations.

Barua (2011) gives a sketchy background regarding the evolution and development of early geographical locations, socio-economic conditions, political arena, religious beliefs, rituals as well as the art and architecture part of ancient Assam. Here we are going to mainly focus on the aesthetic spheres of religion and of fine arts. In the religious sphere we find the worship of Vishnu was deeply piled up in Assam since ancient times with other certain deity ramifications: introduction of brahmanical creeds, Saivism, Saktism, Buddhism, and their iconography. The study presents a distinctive feature of orthodox Hindu society in the series of rites, rituals and blood sacrifices, and how the neo-Vaishnavism grew prosperous and progressed to put an end to these superstitious beliefs. Other than religion, Assam has also excelled in the field of fine arts also known as "charu kaal", numerous temples, shrines, Satras or Vaisnavite monasteries were erected and dedicated to the supreme deities. The author finally points out the present prejudice that we find few architectural and sculptural specimens because no such systematic excavation, special measures or any exploration work was taken for the preservation of these ancient aesthetics. The book itself is an exquisite guide to narrate and define the cultural development of ancient Assam in different phases.

Borkakoti (2005) presents a complete hagiography on the cultural contributions of the 15th century Vaisnava Saint and social reformer Srimanta Sankardeva of Assam. Under his leadership a renewed religious and cultural movement swept the entire Assamese society, known as Vaisnavite movement. The movement did not rest on a discursive reasoning and abstract thinking but it laid emphasis on ethnic integration, social reform and spiritual welfare through an innovative mode of religious conduct based on indigenous elements of the region. He founded the Satra culture, along with the Vaisnavite Monasteries or Satras, comprising of dance, music, plays, arts and crafts which went on to become the mainstream Assamese culture. The author highlights the major life events of

Sankardevas transition to a preceptor, the socio-historical religious context, the Chihna-Yatra, the great pilgrimage, the reason of incorporating visual arts in the Satras, the obstacles faced by the saint and the fraternity, and ultimately the book concludes with his final days. The Satra culture preaches Vaisnavism that stands out amongst the different Bhakti cults of India, in terms of its unique and innovative character which found expression in the move to create an equalitarian civil society based on the shared values of fraternity, equality, humanism and democracy.

Datta (2012) focuses and explores the various aspects of concept and perspective of the north-eastern culture and traditions related to the performing and visual arts of different states of Assam. The study covers all the aspects of arts and crafts, painting traditions, performing arts, architecture, sculpture, religious cults and movements of the region.

The author lucidly describes the importance of social, political, economic, and environmental factors in the formation of culture and traditions as well as the current historiography and social scenario. To the final chapters the author has clearly highlighted the history and evidence of the performing arts of Assam, along with the Vaisnava influence and other folk performance arts. The author also presented an overview on the history of performance art of Assam along with its Vaisnava influence. The author remarked on performance art of Assam as “a highly refined form of dance form called Satriya dance, as well as a rich dramatic tradition” Among the traditional arts and crafts of Assam, the author specially took into account the art of wood carving, manuscript painting, mask making etc.

Gait (2013) presents a detailed account of the growth and development of the prehistoric and the traditional rulers of Assam. The author Sir Edward Gait of the book is indeed a treasure house or “manikut” of information on the various socio-political events, cultural scenarios, religious beliefs, customs, rituals, literature and fine arts of the people of Assam. The language in which this classical history is written is elegant and elevated in nature, and perfectly befits the dignity of the narration. Towards the final chapters the author focused on the Burmese invasion, the British Raj domination over Assam, till the important events of recent times.

Neog (1998) focuses at the early history and growth of the Vaisnavite faith and the Vaisnavite monasteries or Satras led by the Vaisnavite Saint Srimanta Sankardeva in Assam. The Vaisnava faith influenced at the growth and development of the Assamese culture and society. To preach his new religion Ek Saran Hari Naam Dharma the Saint travelled through the entire length and breadth of Assam and founded the Satra culture. The rigid monotheistic doctrine and interdiction of idol worship of that time and Sankardeva stood firm against blood sacrifice. The four fundamental elements of Satra culture are: Deva, Guru, the Bhakats (fraternity) and Naam (devotional songs). The Saint popularized the scriptures and connected the Assamese culture with Vaisnavism.

The doctrine of Bhakti or love is traced back to great antiquity and is to be connected with Lord Vishnu. Finally, the author concludes the Vaisnavite faith as unique in nature and revolutionary in terms of its impact. It is revolutionary in the sense that Vaisnavism in Assam meant not only a religious faith but a way of life. Along with the hagiography of the Vaisnavite Saint, the literary works and philosophical views, dramatic art and techniques, music and dance, art of manuscripts, neo-Vaisnava institutions and practices and the social implications of the Bhakti movement are the main themes of this valuable study.

Neog (2011) highlights the life history of the Vaisnavite Saint Srimanta Sankardeva but with a new outlook and great dimension, as the great integrator of Assam. The author remarks the contribution of the Sankardeva Movement to the culture and civilization of India. To the final chapters the author has presented a crystal clear picture on the Vaisnavite theatre, known as Bhaona, its religious acts, the Bhaona stage, green room (cho), the actors (Natuwa or Bhawariya), Sutradhars performance, Masks, costumes, cosmetics, paint, makeup and its various facets. The author remarks, “Bhaona is considered a great act of piety, it is not mere entertainment for the Vaishnavas. It is a sadhana or exercise of the bhakti religion.” Bhaona is such an illusionistic performance that creates a temporal atmosphere in the psycho-cognitive process of human that evokes the sentiments of both the performers as well as the audience. Thus the village audience is wholeheartedly united in its pious endeavor.

Growth and Development of the Mask Artistry in the Vaisnavite Monasteries of Assam

The aesthetical forms of art represented and acted as the visual narratives of the Satra institutions. The Bhakti movement led to up rise of the new faith “Ek-Saran-Hari-Nam Dharma” in the Vaisnavite Monasteries or

Satras of Assam, rooted with the evolution and development of socio-cultural and spiritual blossoming in a new domain (Barua 1996). “It should be noted that the satras work both as seats of religious learning and residential schools. Besides religious education and monastic practices, the bhakats are engaged in secular learning such as cultivation of arts and crafts. Since converts are drawn mainly from the villages, they naturally bring with them the skill and technique of their village crafts” (Barua 1996).

There are various facets of art forms developed and practiced in the Satras, notably the art of mask making, mask performance, manuscript paintings, wood carving, and many more. The Satras unique art forms and their exquisite detailed account captivated and delighted the mind of the Kings, nobles, and devotees as well. In the art forms there are numerous stylistic features, unique motifs, highly decorative, precisely arranged compositions, particularized characters, varied ranges of color, secular and religious themes (Neog 1998). Accordingly, the development of art forms began in the Satras in order to preach Vaisnavite religious cults education and ethics. These religious institutions also acted as residential school for the learning and welfare of the common people (Barua 1996). Among the varied art practices in the Satras, the art of mask making is most remarkable and it has acclaimed national as well as international acknowledgements.

Mask culture is found in all over the world. The art of mask making is as old as the evolution and development of the human civilization. The masks hold a remarkable significance in the socio-cultural and religious domain. The art of masks holds deep significance in the socio-cultural and cognitive perspective since the primitive period masks were used as disguise in stalking prey, to ward off evils and to ensure a good harvest. It transforms the natural phenomenon to that of culture phenomenon. A mask can create each and every concerned emotion. Masks have complex existence in the socio-cultural as well as religious domain of different societies and have been used for different purposes. Masks used in the socio-religious ramifications are quite intricate.

In India towards the Northeastern part, i.e., Assam the mask artistry known as “Mukha Silpa” has evolved and developed at the Satras with the evolution and development of the Vaisnavite cult. The establishment of Satras at different places of the state led to the growth and development of the facets of various art forms (Neog 1998). The Satras art of mask making is based on peculiar traditional Assamese domestic hub. However, the Satras creative art of mask making has developed with its own symbolism and icon with a twosome of religious discourses in the background, supported by its unique style, decorative details, different motifs and unique structural representation formed as a part of these discourses.

At present in Assam the Mask Artistry is noteworthy in Khatpar Satra of Sivasagar and Natun Samaguri Satra of Majuli and holds much acknowledgements of carrying the hundred and hundred years old traditions of Assam’s unique art of creating masks. The art of mask making of Assam differs in every sphere of its form, expression and representation. These Satras have earned the credentials in both the national as well as in the international backgrounds by dint of the art of mask making and mask performance.

The Traditional Process of Creating the Unique Form of the Vaisnavite Masks

Masks in the Satras have been designed in innumerable varieties from a good number of materials available in the environment. The materials used include items such as bamboo, cow dung, potters mud (black clay), cane, wood, cotton cloth, natural dyes and natural gum from trees to create the masks (Neog 1998). Masks are generally worn as a costume in the mask performance and the costume covers up the entire body of the performer. Masks in the Satras are mostly used for religious as well as ritualistic practices of the Ankiya Naat or Mukha Bhaona, the Neo-Vaisnava theatre (Neog 1998). The Vaisnavite Satras of Assam holds the credit of carrying the years old Assamese traditional art of mask making and has attained the credentials in both the national as well as in the international levels by dint of mask making and mask performance.

- Firstly, the base of the mask is formed with bamboo strips, known as kathis precisely woven into a hexagonal pattern. Then this pattern is continued to form into a three dimensional sculptural mask base or skeleton of the mask.
- Secondly, the base form of the mask is covered with small pieces of cotton cloth dipped in a muddy solution (potters clay) which creates the skin of the mask.
- Thirdly, a fine paste is applied on the skin of the bamboo skeleton of the mask in order to clearly define the

physical features. The facial characteristics are carefully shaped with some local handmade tools prepared at the Satras. Then it is carefully dried in the sun and again worked on, finally to give it a finishing touch. Later on it is completely dried up and holes are made with a heated iron rode, in order to see through eyes and nose to breathe.

- Lastly, once again, a second layer of cotton cloth is dipped in muddy solution and is applied to strengthen and captivate the strongly shaped facial characteristics with correct gestures. Finally giving a finishing touch with the local handmade tools and is dried in the sun. In ancient times organic dyes were used, such as Hengul (red), Haital (yellow), Khorimati, etc.

Classification of the Vaisnavite Masks

Masks in the Satras are mostly used for religious as well as ritualistic practices of the Bhaona or Ankiya Naat, the Vaisnavite theatre (Barua 1996). The traditional process of masks is to create it from natural ingredients provided by nature. Based on the usability, the masks are classified into three classifications:

(i) Mukh Mukha (Plate-1,2): It literally means “Face mask” that covers the face along with the head. It generally stands up to 3 to 4 feet high.

(ii) Bor Mukha (Plate-3): It literally means “Big Mask”. It covers the entire body or sometimes upper portion of the body. These masks are not at all flexible in character and there are no moveable parts included.

(iii) Lutukori Mukha (Plate-4): It covers the full body of the performer and is very flexible in nature. Its body parts representing hands, beaks, eyes, jaws, wings, etc. are quite moveable. These masks are opposite to Bor Mukha. Both the Bor Mukha and Lutukori Mukha stand above 13 to 15 feet high.

The Unique Form, Representation and Utility of the Vaisnavite Masks

The Vaisnavite Masks have a unique form, utility and an exquisite structural representation in the form of Mask performance known as “Mukha Bhaona” (Plate-5). The Mask, which is generally an elegant form of craft becomes an important object of art in narrating the ideas of visual arts of the Mask performance. Mask or Mukha metamorphosed itself into an object of utility, ethnicity, sociological as well as a psychological factor. The evolution and origin of the representation of mask itself provoke the evolution of human being. Since the ancient times the masks transform the natural aspect into sociological aspect and in turn transform into cultural aspect. The utility of masks can be classified into socio-religious sphere, theatrical performance, decorative realm, as well as festive and funerary purpose. The form and structural representation of masks cover a wide range of frameworks compiling universal emotions. The form and utility of masks reflect an immense reaction, emotion and present idea to the spectators while visualizing it in the structural representation of mask performance. It ensures the spectators of the reality of emotion. Masks in the Satras are mostly used for religious as well as ritualistic practices of the Bhaona (when performed by wearing masks known as Mukha Bhaona) or Ankiya Naat. Masks are generally worn as a costume in the mask performance and the costume covers up the entire body of the performer.

The origin of the Vaisnavite theatre or Bhaona traces its roots since the creation of dramatic narratives of Deodhani Nritya, Putala Nach and Oja-Pali in ancient Assam (Barua 1996). The Vaisnavite Saint organized the dramatic performance known as Cihna-Yatra, which later on developed into lyrical-rhythmic, dance and drama performance Ankiya Naat or Bhaona. He then transformed, metamorphosed and constituted this concept of Oja-Pali into an innovative and exquisite lyrical-rhythmic, dance and drama form of visual narrative in the Ankiya Naat or Bhaona. The plays of Bhaona are written with a mode of religious conduct and motive rather than secular entertainment.

They are hosted in the prayer hall or the Namghar, facing the Manikut, where the main deity resides. The Bhaonas are infrequently held on auspicious occasions like Jamnastami, Rasa-purnima, Dol-yatra, Nandotsava and also on Vaisnavite Saints divine accounts. “Ankiya Naat is a generic term in Assamese and means dramatic compositions in a single act depicting the articles of Vaisnava faith” (Barua 1996). The thematic review of Mukha Bhaona is mostly derived from the Ancient Holy Scripture, like Ramayana, Bhagavata-gita, etc. The characters performed in the Mukha Bhaona are limited; they are confined to certain limits. In Mukha Bhaona, the characters play at a rhythmic space from the very beginning to the end, with special mudras or gestures, following certain norms of appropriate dance steps (Barua 1996). Another remarkable feature of Mukha Bhaona is its lyrical

expression that is magnificent in nature. “In these plays through a plethora of songs and verses the playwrights underline the message of the play with more of passion than of logic. Many situations and incidents are suggested by mere machinery of descriptive verses uttered by the Sutradhar instead of being represented through action and character” (Barua 1996).

“These are generally meant to represent such unusual appearances as the ten heads of Ravana, the four heads of Brahma, the bird-like face of Garuda, and so on. Ravana sometimes has to put on a large mask with ten heads and twenty or even a hundred hands. Other Raksasas, such as Subahu and Marica in the Rama-vijaya, put on similarly grotesque masks. In some monastic circles up till recent times, nobody without a mask could represent kings: and rows of ready-made masks with names attached to them were kept in store-rooms of Sattras” (Neog 1998). The three different categories of Masks are used in the Mask performance. “To make them light in weight and make movements easy with them on, life-sizes or huge masks are made out of bamboo splinter-bars and cloth. The buffoons wear small masks prepared from clay, cloth, rough paper and bark of trees; bark of plaintain tree is also used to serve temporary purpose. Head-dress and upper masks, i.e. masks for head and face, are carved out of wood and of hard bark-sheet” (Barua 1996).

Besides the theatrical part, the performers wear a special type of costume. These costumes are preserved in the custody of Khanikar or the artist / painter in charge of creating these creative artifacts. He even prepares the different types of masks used in the performance. Earlier organic dyes such as Hengul, Haital, Khorimati were used but now are replaced by enamel paints available in the market place. He provides arrangements for the inevitable costumes required in different performances, also along with that he prepares necessary equipment used in the performance by the actors such as sword, shield, bow, arrow, discs, spear etc. (Barua 1996).

CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The universe of the mask associated with the Satra institutions is the world of imagination. Masks in the Satra are included in the ceremonies and festivals which have social and religious significance, and also are used in the plays of dance and drama. The present research is based on both historical records as well as analytical views. The intention of the Vaisnavite Masks: unique form, representation and utility are to search in conventional medium against such stereotype, high/low art or classical art which is generally practiced in the urban culture. The traditional practice of masks stands as a critique to the norms of the so-called cultural stereotypes and rigid spiritual facet by making performance beyond the structure of religion and enhancing the benefaction of humanism.

The Vaisnavite renaissance contributed a lot towards the prosperity of the Assamese society and has concealed the socio-cultural as well as the spiritual orbit. The Bhaona is generally performed in the Namghar or the prayer hall, an arena resembling a stage. It is surrounded by the huge mass of audience almost from all the sides. It has a unique representation, character, appeal and exhilarate of a kind. At the stage the performers are transformed into divine dimensions in the cognitive, psychological and imaginal process of the audience. The aesthetical unique form, representation and utility of the visual narratives performed by wearing mask show the values of religious beliefs externally, but it carries an internal resistance specially to the elite art practices through its direct communication with the regional folk performance.

The performer’s exquisite costume and make-up representation with a special communicative language (Brajawali) spoken with other performers affect the cognitive process of the audience. It provides the audience illusory ideas and exhilarate pictorial view of the performance. An emotional involvement and agitation are developed psychologically in the audience’s mind in the arena of the performance. The audiences are swayed emotionally by the evoked sentiments of the performers. Thus, Bhakti (devotion) is reflected from the surrounded audiences who have experienced the historic as well as divine enlightenment. The Satra and its art forms are the worthy ancient treasures of socio-cultural and religious domains that should be treasured. The art of mask making is confined to the walls of Satra culture. It is not academically explored and there are lots of aesthetical and philosophical realms of this art form that are yet to be acquired and explored.

The art of mask making can be considered as an important form of medium that records and provides us the visual narrative representations of data gathered from the past and present. Its unique forms, utility and structural representations resist the hierarchical practices of mainstream arts and have challenged the occupation of galleries

over the visual psyche of the common people. Above all, the visual narratives of masks are based on constituents of socio-cultural aspects of the Vaisnavite Satras and they should be preserved and protected.

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APPENDIX



Plate-1 Boraha, Mukha Mukha



Plate- 3 Narasimha, Bor Mukha



Plate-2 Brahma, Mukh Mukha



Plate- 4 Putana, Lutukori Mukha



Plate- 5 Mukha Bhaona or Mask performance