

# EXPLORING TECHNIQUES OF FACE-MASK PREPARATION: AN UNIQUE SOCIO- ETHNIC PRODUCT OF ODISHA & ASSAM

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## **Abstract:**

*Irrespective of integral components of material culture, the social scientist has not shown much inclination towards the scientific study of Face-mask preparation. Again whatever the study has done Adam (1942), Christensen (1955), Boas (1955), Neog (1959), Leiris and Delange (1968), Elwin (1969), Emigh (1981), Pani's book 'World of Other Faces: Indian Mask' (1986), Massey and Massey (1989), Mack (1994) s book 'Masks:The Art of Expression', Barbier (2000), Goswami (2001), Medhi's 'Mukha Sambandhe Jatkinchit'(2007), David Roy (2015) are all restricted to fundamental traits. Except the exclusiveness ethnicity value description, no cultural similarity campaign to technique of mask production has happen, and neither any state is yet single or jointly demanding its geographical tagging. This paper is trying to explore the technical repro steps followed in face-mask preparation at Assam and Odisha and is trying to cater the distinctiveness of masks and its ethnic market value in present context.*

**Key Words:** Face mask, Socio-ethnic product, Odisha, Assam, Jati-bamboo, paper, pulp

## **I. INTRODUCTION:**

Indian artisans have created a unique identity within the country and abroad. The country is rich in various traditional handicrafts of Indian artists. The artistry of the artisans of the two states of Odisha and Assam, rich in such art, reflects the social customs of the Odia and Assamese in the art of the artisans of Odisha and Assam, glorifying the traditional arts, culture and heritage of both the states. Attempts to keep such handicrafts alive today are mostly unique. Out of many handicraft items, different kind of traditional handicraft is 'Mukha', the face-mask.

A mask is a cover or partial cover for the face used for disguise to show entity of humans. Masks are used since inception of human civilization. We can trace its origin in the historical sites of various places. In this regard, we get example from France's 'CaremeduVolp', 'Attamire care' of Spain, 'Kundusi' of Tanzania. Apart from this, sites from Algeria, Libya, Sweden, Siberia, Canada, Peru, Egypt and Bhimbetka of India can be mentioned. (vaidhya,174)

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Two types of masks are used in the society. One is real mask, which is worn by a person on his face or on his body parts. The other type of mask is abstract. This type of mask is not permanent in nature. It is rather drawn on the face of a person by colors (Zaman,91) Earlier, artists used woods, metals, ivory, soil, horns, leather, feather etc. to make the masks and these were difficult to conserve for a long time.(Malik (ed),107-109.) Due to lack of conservation system, many masks were lost. The earliest prehistoric mask is found at the gallery named 'Bible et Terre Sainte' at Paris (1)

## II. LITERATURE SURVEY:

Philosophically the human body is like a mask. The Indian metaphysics believes that the living entity acts in different ways at different stages of life, carrying a body-like mask. As the death appears, all the acting ends the body as the mask becomes useless and mixes with the dust. Researchers have not yet come to a definite conclusion as to when and when the mask was created on Earth. It is alleged that the human of pre-historic period feel insecure, to protect himself from the clutches of animals and birds, asserted his power using the mask. So he took the mask as a means of invisible power, as well as a useful object for acting. The Mask-culture which dates back to the pre-historic rock-paintings of c.30,000 B.C has travelled down the ages and got expressed some time as 'magico-religion', "sacred enactments in Monasteries" or at folk theatrical levels and even through epic depictions, or in carnivals with a touch of festivity. (2)

The use of masks in dance has been practiced in India since ancient times. The theatrical writer Bharat Muni on 2nd century B.C. writes on his 'Natyashastra' about the rules of the use of face-masks as - "Nanabastha smasaadya shubhaasubhakrutastathaa / tathaa pratishiraschaapi kartyabyam naatakaashrayam". (Verse 135, Chapter 20) i.e. the play will focus on the decoration of head, condition and characters. Depending on the deity, man, country and race, the 'Pratishira' or 'Mukha' (the face-mask) will be used wherever necessary. Therefore 'Bharatmuni' categorized face-mask as the part of 'Aaharya'. The great eleventh-century theologian Abhinav Gupta went on to analyze the Natyashastra, detailing the rules of use of face-masks and also mentioning its application in the field of drama presentation. Therefore it is believed that a strong tradition of dance using face-masks has been practiced in India for the past 2,500 years even before the 2nd century BC. Till date, face-masks dance traditions have survived in various parts of the country, including Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, West Bengal, Odisha, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan.

In India the face-masks was firstly used to demonstrate the entity of 'Devtas' and 'Asuras' of Hindu mythology. The mask culture in India is also used for dramas, cultural and religious festivals. The Indian state, Karnataka has contributed towards the enrichment of mask tradition in India. Masks are made of wood in Karnataka and Kerela. It is used in 'Kathakali' dance by artists called 'Kirtam'(Pande, 110). The 'Ramleela' festival of North India has special relation with masks. Masks are used for the characters like 'Ravan', 'Hanuman', 'Jambavant' etc. Likewise, in the festival of 'Dushera', a ten headed 'Ravan' masks are also used. In South India also, a mask called 'Bhuta (the ghost)' is used for religious ceremonies. Moreover 'Hanuman Mask' and the masks of 'Chhau dance' of Odisha are the best manifestations of mask traditions. The mask trading of Purulia district of West Bengal is also very famous. In Buddhist tradition, a special masked named 'Sam musk' is used in Tibet region by the Buddhist monks to pay respect to their religion. (Chatterjee,3)

Ramlila's role in the performance of folk dramas in Odisha is very important. Since the use of face-masks in Ramlila is an integral part, the appearance of dances using face-masks in Odisha can be traced back to the 15th century before the period of Chaitanya. Even today, the use of facemasks in many parts of Odisha, such as Ganjam, Kandhamal, Nayagarh, Puri, Bhadrak and Cuttack districts, including Ramlila in Golamundla, Krishnalila in Pankalbadi, Lankapodi Yatra in Bishipada, and Prahlad Natak in Ganjam district has the unique popularity.

As the Odisha, Bengal and Assam falls under a single cultural belt with the separate uniqueness, the north-eastern region is known for variety of mask tradition, especially in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. Tribes like Cherdukpeng, Khamba and Monpool – Arunachal Pradesh use the masks. One critic namely Elwin stated that mask tradition of Arunachal has distinctive features. The holes and structure of the masks are made of wood. They are painted with colors which are brought from Tibet and Assam. Only male persons wore mask, females are not allowed to wear mask (Vidyarathi, 91)

Irrespective of panoramic face-mask traditions in Assam, the people of the state due to their shy nature hide this talent of mask making. They mainly use mask to express the emotions, mood of human life which human face are unable to convey. In the meantime, this process turned into an art.

In sixteenth century, Sankardeva magnificently added new dimension in mask art of Assam. Masks were used in his outstanding creation 'AnkiaBhaona', Ramcharan Thakur has described in 'CharitPuthi' that Sankardeva himself made mask of Gaduda and Brahma for Bhaona play (Vaidhya,174). This tradition got accolades in the 'Bhaonas' that were being played in the state. Due to the support of 'Satras', the mask art had flourished rapidly.

The main epicenters of mask art in Assam are Majuli, Sibsagar, Goalpara and Darrang region. In Goalpara and Darrang area, drama programme called 'Khulia Bhaoriya' has usage of mask and that is supported by KhatpuraSatra of Sibsagar. The masks used in this programmes are safely conserved in 'Srimanta Sankardeva Kalakshetra' of Guwahati. The mask art forms of Majuli are sponsored by Chamuguri Satra, Bihimpur Satra and Elangi Narasimha Satra. At present, Kamalabari Satra of Majuli also maintained the tradition. The wooden mask tradition found in Ramdiya Banshi Gopal Satra and Kaljirapar Satra of Kamrup also indicates that mask art form is prevalent in this region also. (Phukan,Picture no,4,7,11)

### III. TYPES OF MASKS:

Depending upon the primary materials used in facemask preparation, the masks can be divided to a number of categories such as wooden mask, paper mask, Bamboo masks and Jau-masks etc.

**Wooden Face-mask:** Wooden face masks are generally prepared from Light weight woods such as PaaLadhuaa, Phaasi and Gambhari. At first, the wood is first sized and the drawing on it is drawn and the wood is engraved on the inside. Once the artwork is made, it is polished. The artwork of traditional wooden face-mask carpenters can be seen in Chitrakar Sahi, Khandapada, Nayagarh district of Odisha.

**Paper Face-masks:** Paper, sawdust, tamarind glue, chalk-lime and various colors are used as the raw materials in the manufacture of paper face-masks. Before making a sheet of paper, the artisans first sprinkle the tamarind seeds and grind them. Then these powders are put on the fire to boil with water as to make glue out of them. Then this liquid is further filtered and put them to be cooled. Later in the form of various artwork frames, putting the

paper and there upon the saw dusts and glue and further putting the inner paper cover, the whole things put on the sun to become dry. After the face-masks dried it becomes harder and the artist further put a coat of white chalk-lime upon it to be prepared plain mask to be colored as desired in further. This type of masks are generally now prepared at the Karadagadia village of Khurdha district of Odisha. Except this, the Raghurajpur art village of Puri, Khandapada, Tigitria villagers are also preparing such type of face masks at Odisha.

**Bamboo Face-mask:** Rather than the Odisha, the bamboo facemasks are more prominent at Assam region. The paper aims to discuss the repro steps of the making of this type of face-masks in later stage paper.

**Cow dung Face-mask:** Cow dung face-masks primary raw material is cow dung. At first the dung smashed properly and then the mask is prepared. After preparation it put under the sun to dry. Thereafter, it is polished and the paper is coated with pulp. And after it has been colored with as per desired.

#### **IV. EXCLUSIVENESS OF MASKS AT ODISHA AND ASSAM:**

Most of the face-masks of Odisha are associated with folk dances of religion and tradition. Sahijata is a special style folk dance of lord Jagannathdham, Puri. The face-masks used in Sahijata and animal-bird dance are huge. Wearing these masks in different colors, the artists dance in front of Lords Bimana (the procession of lords) to the beat of folk music.

With this, the Bhanjanagar Mukha of Gunjam has a separate identity across Odisha. The Raja-Rani dance in the Bhanjanagar sub-division is very beautiful and world-famous. King and queen are two huge dolls eight feet high. The whole body is full of various carvings. From the waist to the feet, a langa' is beautifully covered. In addition, the tiger-like features of the face-mask used in the animal-faced dance of Ganjam are different. The face-mask used in this dance are huge and full of various carvings. The head of the face is made of light wood, or paste of thick papers and is painted in various shades.

In contrast, on the basis of size of Assamese mask artforms, masks can be divided into two categories – folk and supernatural or miracle.(Saikia,33) Masks of human, animals, birds etc. are known as folk mask and masks of 'Asuras', 'Rakshaks' (demon) are known as miracle masks. There are mainly three types of mask prevalent in Assam – 'Chu'mask(a big mask), 'Lutukai' mask(a small mask) and 'Mukh'mask ( face mask).(Goswami,34-35)

The big masks are big in size. The face part and body part of mask are made separately. The artists of 'Bhaona' use this mask. These are 8-10 feet tall. The big masks are made for characters like 'Ravan', 'Banaraja', 'Kumbhakarna', 'Narsimha' 'Murdanava' etc.,small mask are similar to big masks except its size. The face and body part of the mask is made separately. The body parts like hand, head can be operational during the possession of this mask. This mask is used for characters like 'Putuna', 'Taraka', 'Trishira', 'Sankhashur' 'Dunduvi' etc.

Face masks are the most extensive used mask. Artist portraying special character wear the mask clothes. This mask is used for characters like 'Marish', 'Subahu', 'Surpanakha', 'Bakasur' etc. Also, on the basis of the shape of face masks, it can be further divided into three categories – Neckless face mask, head face mask and half face mask. Half face masks are not used for 'Bhaona'. They called as 'High relief-sculpture' and are made for showpiece purposes. (Goswami, 37-38)

## V. TECHNIQUE OF MASK PREPARATION

There are differences in the preparation of Face-masks on a regional basis. Traditional religious rituals are observed in both the preparation and preservation of the face-masks both at Assam & Odisha. At every level of the collection of raw materials to the construction of masks, in every step the masks-makers dedicate themselves to a very holy and virtuous mind. After the formation of the mask, the village festival begins with the giving of life, and the completion of the face formation takes place after the sighting or the opening of eyes. The face-mask is usually considered a moving idol. Specifically the face of the monster nature plays a key role at the time of offering to god.

Both in Assam and Odisha, the face-Mask preparation follow a number of traditional steps, such as (A) Raw materials collection, (b) design, (c) frame preparation, (d) first coating, (e) second coating, and (c) coloring. There is also a slight change in the overall steps depending on the type of face-masks.

**(a) Collection of raw materials:** The items used in face-masks are mainly collected from forests and rural areas. These are, mainly clay, wood, bamboo, tree bark, animal skin, paper pulp, thick paper, brass and copper plating, cow dung, shredding, and various colors.

**(b) Designing:** The designing of the face masks generally happened keeping in the mind that in what folk dance it is going to be used. So the mask-maker designs the face-mask in such a way that it become moveable with the head of the artist who it wears. Therefore, the artist who wears the mask is completely familiar with its movements.

**(c) Framing:** After designing the most vital step is the internal framing of masks. And this framing generally used for clay masks, paper masks, and bamboo masks etc. In the case of Bamboo masks, the artist prepares the internal frame of the masks with small and thinned, lightweight bamboo plates.

**(d) First Coating:** As soon as the frame is prepared, the masks maker puts its first coat to cover up the frame with the clay, or paper pulp, or saw powders depending upon the nature of the mask. And in each mask preparation, the first coating completes with sun dry. The pulp mostly prepares from Paper, waste cloth and different kinds of natural fibers.

**(e) Second Coating:** The second layer carries the uniqueness of the artist's artistic sample. After drying the figure is polished with sandpaper for a sleek and lustrous finish. In it, the artist carefully connects the face, ears, nose, mouth, etc. to the mask, and then the face-mask gradually comes to life.

**(f) Coloring:** In the past, mask makers were known as painters in society. In the past, the four colors used on the face, such as red, blue, yellow and white, were collected from products available in rural areas. However, presently, with the development of civilization, mask makers are using the chemical dyes available in the market to keep the faces alive and entertaining.

For the better understanding of above steps, the practical making technique of Bamboo masks of Assam can be explained here.

There are four types of processes of mask making. Wooden mask, Bamboo mask, Cloth mask and Sanchi mask. But mainly Bamboo masks are used extensively. (Saikia, 34) Bamboo mask is used very much due to

availability of bamboo and it is economically cheaper. The main ingredients required for making bamboo stick mask are bamboo, soil, cloth, cane, dung etc.(Goswami,18)

Firstly, Jati bamboo which is premature should be cut into a particular size and it must be soaked in water for some days. Then, sticks must be drawn from it to prepare the skeleton of the mask (Fig No. 1). The skeleton must be shaped according to the character it is going to be portrayed. It needs to be tightened by small ropes of cane.



Then paper and cloth is mixed in water with soil in desired proportion to shapes the skeleton (Fig.No 2). After it is dried up, then mixture of soft soil are placed into the structure to add nose, ears, and eyes shapes to the mask (Fig No.3).



Fig. No3: Soft soils are put upon frame to put it in shape of different design

After this one more layer of net clay made of dung are placed to add finishing. Then colors are placed to beautify the mask. (Fig.No.4). Earlier, colors were made naturally but now, artificial colors are used (Goswami's Personal Interview).



Fig No. 4: The colored mask of lord Ganesha

Paper is not necessary for mask making but it has a value. Sometimes, instead of bamboo sticks, papers are used. To add nose, ears, teeth, tongue, nails etc. into the mask skeletons, thick papers are used for the same. To lessen the weight of the masks nose, eyes, and forehead parts of the face-mask is made of 'Kuhila' (a kind of plant growing on marshy ground). The ornaments of the mask are also made of 'Kuhila' (Goswami, 29).

## **VI. THE EXPANSION OF MASK ART FORMS BOTH AT ODISHA AND ASSAM & ITS BRANDING:**

In 1663 AD, Chakrapani Aata established Chamuguri Satra near a Cham tree. Since its establishment, Ankiya Bhaona, Sattriya dance as well as mask artforms are prevalent in the Satra. Earliest spiritual leaders of the satra like Tankeshwar Dev, Mokheshwar Dev, Rasheshwar Dev Goswami Aata continued the legacy of mask art forms in the sattriya atmosphere.

In the new Chamuguri Satra, late Rudrakanta Dev Goswami put efforts to enrich the mask tradition and he also got pension in the year 1988. Famous Art Critic Nilamani Phukan wrote an article about Rudrakanta Dev Goswami at 'Prantik' (2<sup>nd</sup> year, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition) that – "The traditional mask art-form of Chamuguri Satra got a new dimension in the hands of Rudrakanta Dev Goswami." (Mahanta(ed.),163) The 352 years old traditions are maintained intact by its predecessors. The renowned Satradhikar Koshakanta Dev Goswami received "Sangeet Natak Akademi Award" in the year 2002 for his contribution in the field of mask art.

Rudrakanta Dev Goswami had three sons – Dharmakanta Dev Goswami, Hemchandra Dev Goswami and Krishna Goswami. Amongst them, Hemchandra Goswami is considered as 'Living Vishwakarma' (Vishwakarma-god of craftsmen). (Saikia, 36) His works of mask, doorways, and temple wall paintings are very famous. In the year 1980, Hemchandra Goswami established a training center called 'Sukumar Kola Pith' for the learning and up skilling of neophytes mask makers.

Hemchandra Goswami tried to make the mask art-form modernized and scientific. Goswami himself said that without creation, aesthetics will lose its significance. Therefore, efforts need to be made for adding creativity to our traditions. In accordance with traditional values, mask for characters of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the

Bhagwat Puran etc. are made to diversify the performing art.(Goswami,) Since 2000, he tried to add expression to his mask. So that, performers who wore mask can also give expression through his face, eyes etc. to enrich the performances of 'Bhaona'. It makes performances more vibrant and enjoyable experience.

Hemchandra also endeavored for expanding the scope of mask art across India. He has organized many workshops for promoting the art-form. It is a matter of pride that our mask works are conserved in the British Museum of London. The coordinator of the British Museum Richard Blurton visited Chamuguri Satra in 2014 to witness 'Rasleela'. He was amused by the performance and got fascinated by the mask art. He requested to make masks of 'Gaduda', 'Putona', 'Chakrabak', 'Baghasur', 'Kaliya Nag' so that these masks can be placed along with 'Vrindabani Bastra'. Accepting the request, Hemchandra Goswami made the masks and then these were exhibitioner in a programme called 'Krishna in the Garden of Assam' at British Museum London during 21<sup>st</sup> January to 15 August 2016. This was the first instance where Assamese mask art was showcased in a foreign country. Moreover, his masks are also kept in Indira Gandhi National Museum, Vishwa Bharati University, Shantiniketan Art Gallery, Srimanta Sankardeva Kalakshetra, Guwahati State Museum etc.

In contrast, the face-mask of Odisha is naturally branded with its culture and folk art from. When it comes to making face-masks in Odisha, the first to come to our attention is the village of 'Kardagadia' in the Begunia block of Khordha district. In this village, seven families are still preparing masks from generation to generation. According to Divakar Mohapatra, a craftsman, this is his paternal profession. Similarly, Shilpi Bharat Mohapatra of the same village did not give up even though he had reached the age of 87, which he had learned as a craftsman from the age of 15. (3) But ironically, these masked artisans did not receive government encouragement. There is not having any dedicated market for sale of face-masks. Along with, there is also no such government system to train the new generation. Similarly, more than 25 families from Belguntha village in Bhanjanagar are still preparing masks from cow dung and getting their livelihood. Presently a number of masks have been preserved at Odisha museum collecting from different region of Odisha. Presently the Govt. of Odisha museum prepares a mask gallery and displaying as many as 40 masks with different size and colour for visitors. Out of them, the paper masks mainly used in "Desiya Nata" by Tribals, collected from Jeypore in Koraput district have been painted in bright colors. Overall this face-mask art-form is not yet institutionalized from the direction of revenue generation both at Assam & Odisha.

## **VII. ECONOMIC BENEFIT OF MASK ART:**

The mask art culture also has an economic aspect. Through this work, many people are earning their livelihood. Young learners who are indulging in this work through workshops are earning their bread and butter. Many cultural ceremonies like 'Barechariya Bhaona', 'Rasleela', 'Ankiya Bhaona' etc. have extensive use of mask and therefore, it creates huge demand for these mask art-forms. The exhibitions of masks in Satras and other platforms also attract foreign and domestic tourist. We can see exchange of these items in many foreign countries also. Masks are also used on various functions, ceremonies as well as kept for household showpieces. It had created demand in the market for masks. But, the mask art has not been able to make a separate identity in the market. Many young people are also reluctant to pursue this art-form as their career as it requires so much of effort. In order to encourage the youth and spread the awareness about the art-form, government incentives are needed. The government must create opportunities



for the youth to learn the art and make it cost benefit. Without government intervention only individual effort cannot sustain the art-form in the market for a very long time.

## VIII. CONCLUSION:

From the very ancient period to till date the Assamese and Odia mask-makers have been preparing and exhibiting 'Face-masks' as the most ethnic and fascinating product of cultures. It bears the manifestation of the untold unexpressed human emotions. This tradition is continuing its legacy to both Assam and Odisha as to their unique traditional cultural sphere & value. However in present modernization and technological context, the mask making technique are yet to be modernized and dedicated markets with skill artist should be created with proper training, certification and institutionalization. The youth is trying to make the art form more vibrant and attractive by their experimentation and hard work. To keep the sanctity and genuine of the art-form, serious efforts are need to be made by people as well as government. So that it receives its due appreciation at every level.

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(Make vehicles of gods accordingly make sure, it matches every single bit)

GadudarMukhaSarbayakDilanto|KetiaKhaiyeKholDohareDharilanto|1481

(The mask of Gaduda is presented before everyone)

BrahmarMukhakSantoraioPindhiHoila | Ram RamGururPrabeshJebeBhoila ||

HararMukhapindhiRangoDhwajaGoila|Abaro Baikuntha Niya Tanka Thapi Thoila || 1497

(Brahma wore his mask, Shiva wore his mask to visit Vaikuntha, the abode of lord Vishnu to Ranjankumar vaidhya,

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