

Satriya Mukha of Assam

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Introduction

Mukha (Mask) is the oldest folk art that is invented with the development of civilization. It has been reported that the introduction of mask is found throughout the culture of most of the countries. In Assam as well as in India, it has been widely used for performing regional folk dance and also as a medium of recreation. Masks are also used by the exorcist to shoo away of evil spirit. Mask is also considered as the base of a particular culture and tradition. Different people have different culture and tradition but the most common thing among these people is that all of them use the mask for different purposes; it may be for hunting or self-defense or for recreation.

If we want to know about the root of the mask we have to learn about the history of the world. From the very ancient age the people use the mask. It has been reported that the mask are used even before the development of our civilization. During that time the safety of life is most important and the burning question of the day. The ancient people feed fruits and the meat of wild animals as their major food item. As a result of this hunting of wild different animals has become necessary to them for their survival as well as for their occupation.

And for that they develop new ideas and processes of hunting. They use the mask as their major medium for hunting of wild animals. The ancient people not only ate the meat of the wild animals but also used the leather of those animals for their garments. The main theme behind the using of mask during hunting is to self-defense and to conceal the own identity to others. It has also been reported that they not only use the mask during the hunting or recreation time but also use during their leisure hours.

Actually mask is the covering of face which is used to conceal the identity of a people and their personality to an individual unknown to him. Mask represent the Ghost, local Gods, Goddess,

horses, popular personalities, transport system, ideal characters of ancient epics which includes Mahabharata, Ramayana or some other important historical figures.

Since ancient ages, these masks have been considered as the centre of each and every cultural event in the state Assam. The traditional Assam's masks are made from a variety of materials ranging from terracotta, bamboo, wood, pith and metals.

The size of Assamese masks may vary from those that usual ones that cover the whole body. Depending on the size, the masks are divided in to three types such as Cho mask, Lotokai mask, and Mukh mask. Among them Cho mask is the biggest in size and usually includes two parts, head and body. Lotokai mask is a smaller version of the Cho mask and Mukh mask only covers the face.

In Assam, Majuli are very popular and made up of clay, bamboo, or clothes are light in weight, which masks them unique. During the last decade, Majuli, the repository of Vaishnava cultural heritage and art form in Assam has become a major attraction for foreign tourists. The mask portrays the different characters of Ravana, Putana, Bali, Jatayu, etc. among the Ramayana. Even the masks have a quality to depict the variety of various roles for a particular character for different epics of India.

The normal time required for completing a mask is around 10- 11 days and that involves the splitting of bamboo strips from the frame, pasting layers of cloths, dipped in to clay, drying them under the sun and finally colouring of the masks.

The mask making industry is a major means of livelihood for the rural and tribal people of Assam. The skill of making masks is generally passed down either from one generation to the next, or under the guidance of the teacher (Head of Satra of a particular religion).

In Assamese masks, the most common colour being used for colouring the masks are yellow, red and green. However, now-a-days chemical dyes are also being used to give better effect. Now-a-day, masks are widely used by the modern day people as decorative items in their drawing rooms. This provides great opportunities of self-employment to the traditional mask- makers, thus improving their standard of living.

Preparations of the Mask

The materials used for the preparation of masks are- wood, bamboo, bamboo canes, cloth, cow dung of calf, clay and natural colour. But in present days the use of wood and natural colour has been greatly reduced. The natural colour uses in colouring of masks are hengul, haital, Neel, bogamati (white clay) and glue of wood apple. The black colour is prepared by gathering the smoke of light lamp or by some other means. In present days the cow dung of calf and kerosene oil are mixed together during mask preparation for long lasting of masks.

On the basis of preparation the masks are mainly of four types and these processes have been discussed on the following ways.

Masks made up of wood:

For the preparation of wood masks the soft woods are used. These are usually used for the preparation of eye, face, nose- ear - etc. The instrument used for the preparation of wood masks is humble, chopper, saw, axe etc. Due to the over weight of masks that are prepared from the wood the 'Bhaoria' (the actor or actress that cover their face with masks) are very difficult to use. As a result, the uses of wood to make the masks are lesser than the other type of masks.

Masks made up of clothes:

The masks that are made up of clothes are made up of depending on the size and shape of the face that is to be covered. The necessary things are used in this type of masks preparation are cotton, paper of different colours and jute. Depending on the necessity the glue and colour were used during the preparation of masks. These involve lesser weight than the wooden masks and it is very easy to use in comparison with the wood masks.

Masks made up of clay:

These types of masks are prepared by using moulding made up of wood and then fixed the paper on to them. In this type the paper are usually used in more than one layer to make the masks strong. After fixing the paper the masks are dried in the sunlight and then separated from the mould. And in this way the preparation of masks are completed. The other materials used for these types of mask are jute, fibers of banana trees etc. These types of mask are also lighter in use and thus suitable for the use. Another important characteristics feature of these type masks is very soft and thus the 'Bhaoria' prefer these types of mask.

Mask made up of bamboo:

Usually the bamboo masks are prepared by covering the strips of bamboo with the cow- dung or clay. For this at first the immature bamboos were selected and cut into pieces of 5 – 6 feet and then dipped into either water or clay for 5 -7 days to protect the bamboo from certain destroying agents such as certain insects and for long lasting. Then the bamboo strips joined together into desired shape of the face. Then the clay collected from different well was coated over the bamboo strip and took them to direct sunlight for drying. When half dry, a mixture of clay and cow- dung paste is used to shape the eyes and other features while the ears are usually made of bamboo pieces, which are then stuck on and the bark of trees or jute is used for hair, eye brows and other accessories. After this the mask were coloured. For this hengul, haital, deep blue, khari mati (boga mati) etc. are used. In early day cucumber bark were used for the preparation of black colour by burning then dry bark of the cucumber. For preparation other colour leaves of plants, bark, fruits etc. are severally used. The preparation natural colour is very long and time consuming procedure. The colour from hengul, haital, deep blue (Neel), Khari mati (boga mati) are prepared by crushing them using mortar and pestle. The brightness of colour depends on the crushing of the raw materials used as a source of colour. It was reported that previously it took about one month for the preparation of colour to some artists. For good colouring the glue extracted from the wood apple was mixed with the colour to be used in masks.

Uses of colour in Mask

The colours of mask were prepared by using oldest method; they use elements such as hengul, haital, khari mati or boga mati and some natural resources of colour such as ash of calabash, seed of outanga (a kind of round acid fruit), glue extracted from wood apple are used very conventionally from the very beginning. It is very tough and time consuming process and therefore the mask makers prefer to use synthetic colour available in market at low cost over the conventional method.

Red colour is produced from hengul, yellow colour make from haital, Kharimati or bogamati gives white colour, Neel is used for blue appearance of masks, black colour is derived from smoke of lamp and ash of calabash. The egg of duck is mixed with colour to improve the quality and brightness of the colour that are used in colouring masks.

Now - a - days the previous procedures were replaced by synthetic colours. Glue extracted from the wood apple is not used in place of that the synthetic glues are used. In early day the feather of pigeon or wool of other animals are fixed with the bamboo strips and used as a colouring brush for colouring the masks. Some colouring brushes are made up of jute.

On the basis of Mukha Bhaona (mask theatre):

On the basis of mukha Bhaona (mask theatre) three types of mask are reported from the Assam and all these three types of masks are also reported in present days also.

The mask that covers only the face is known as Murr mask. During acting time this type of mask is used that cover only the face and rest part of the body are covered with different colour clothes. This is smaller in size in comparison with the other type of masks. Usually this type of mask is used for performing the role of the characters of Kangsha, Marish, Shubahu, Chakrawat, and Upananda in theatre.

Mukh Mukha/Murr Mukha

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Cho Mukh/Bar Mukha

Cho mask usually covers the entire body part. It is larger in size than the Murr Mukha or Mukh Mukha. The head part and body part of this type of mask are prepared separately. During acting in the theatre the actor and actress wearing this masks separately i.e. they first wear the masks for face and then for rest of the body parts. This mask is about 6 – 8 ft. long. This type of mask is used for performing the role of Ravana, Narakasura, Narashigha, Kumbhakarna and other characters of historical interest in theatre.

Lotokai Mukha/Lotokori Mukha

This type of mask is comparatively smaller than the Barr Mukhas. But there are several similarities between the Barr Mukha and Lotokori Mukha. It is slightly different from that of Barr Mukha. The head and body parts of the masks are prepared separately as in case of Barr Mukha. In this type of mask the head portion is not bound to the rest of the body parts but is bound to the actor or actress body. This type of masks are usually used when the actor or actress are performing the role of the characters such as Putana Rakshashi, Taraka Rakshashi, Sankhachur etc. Some other characters such as Bakasura, Arghasura, Dhenukasur, Ananta Naga and several other types of animals are decorated by using such type of masks.

Functions of the Mask:

Function of masks in human and social life can be highlighted in the following ways. It is directly and indirectly played important role in relation to the social and economic status of the society and nation. Mask has played significant role in different religion and society. Many mask play different role at a time. For example, some ancient mask at the same time represents political control, social critics, rituals of crops cultivation, healing, upanayan, recovery from disease, funerals, etc. In some auspicious occasion certain exclusive masks are used. In such occasions people with masks are considered as a very special or sacred one. These masks are stored very carefully with devotion when these are not in use. These masks are considered as a media that can cure persons from diseases even when they are at the way of their death. On the other hand different types of mask are used for funeral and its associated works. Mask is also used as a mark of health and good fate. Different type of masks are gained interest in the field of occasion and worship. On the basis of need different masks are getting priority in religious occasion, social occasion etc. the major reason behind the development of a mask is the self-defense. Different types of masks are used in theatre for playing different characters of historical interest. There is an evident that at the ancient time the face of deceased person was covered by some special type of mask which is made up of metals.

Conclusion:

Mukha is the oldest folk arts that is invented with the development of our civilization and are widely distributed throughout the Assam as well as in India. Different people use masks for different purposes, some use it as a media of recreation, and others use it as a media for defense or conceal their identity. But the major use of masks in ancient time is that the people use it as a medium of hunting of animals for their survival and occupation. The materials used for the preparation of masks are- wood, bamboo, bamboo cane, clothes, cow dung of calf, clay and natural colour. The natural colour used in mask are hengul, haital, neel, bogamati (white clay) and glue of wood apple and black colour is prepared by gather the smoke of light lamp. On the basis of characters of mukha- Bhaona (Mask theatre) masks are of three types, namely - Murr Mukha or Mukh Mukha; Barr Mukha or Cho mukha; Lotokai Mukha or Lotokori mukha. The mask that cover only the face is known as Murr mask. During acting time this type of mask is

used that cover only the face and rest part of the body are covered with different colour clothes. Cho mask usually covers the entire body part. It is larger in size than the Murr Mukha or Mukh Mukha. The head part and body part of this type of mask are prepared separately. Lotokai mask is comparatively smaller than the Barr Mukhas. Although the masks are look like inanimate but when the actor or actress wore the masks the masks become alive. At present throughout the Assam different types of masks are conserved in State Museum that is situated in Guwahati, Assam, Kolong Kola Kendra and their respective Satra and Namghar. But these are not enough for the preservation of masks. Masks not only can be used by the common people as their media for livelihood but also represents the tradition of Assam as well as the nation and to keep this tradition alive and brighter masks should be preserved. I think public awareness is the most important weapon than the others for the preservation of masks and this can be obtained by organizing public seminar or by other public awareness programs, different initiatives from Government level regarding the conservation of masks are also readily acceptable.

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