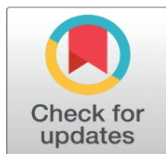
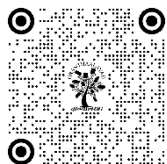


# GREAT HERITAGE OF LIVING MASK MAKING TRADITION IN ASSAM: A CASE STUDY ON SRI SRI BOR ALENGI BOGIAI SATRA, TITABOR, JORHAT DISTRICT, ASSAM

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## ABSTRACT

Masks are artificial faces or covering of partial and whole body for concealment, usually to assume and to create various emotions and states of mind as love, anger, hate, fury, joy, fear, disgust, humour, sorrow etc. Sometimes people use mask to hide feeling or as layers or covers to conceal or safety shield of the person. The tradition of creating and utilizing masks in medieval Assam is thought-provoking, particularly wooden and bamboo masks. Neo-Vaishnavism or worship of Lord Vishnu/ Krishna was spread throughout Assam by the great saint Srimanta Sankaradeva (1449–1568) as part of the resurrection of unwavering devotion that occurred over all of India (bhakti). Sri Sri Bor Alengi Bogiai Satra is a renowned Neo- Vaishnavite monastery of Jorhat district, near the river Kakodonga. The particular Satra has lengthy and gorgeous tradition of the bamboo split made mask- making and its significant uses at the Vaishnavite Bhaona/ theatre based on Bhagavata- Purana texts and written by Srimanta Sankaradevaa and his followers. It is relevant to note that Jorhat district including River Island Majuli (now a district) is the prime centre of Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam, where significant tradition of mask making is sustained in several Satras. The paper has examined the history of the Sri Sri Bor Alengi Bogiai Satra as well as the economic, social, cultural, and aesthetic relevance of the masks and its great heritage of living tradition.

**Keywords:** Mask- Making, Living Tradition, Art & Crafts, Srimanta Sankaradevaa, Satra/ Monastery and Sri Sri Bor Alengi Bogiai Satra

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Mask, primitive piece of human art, could be considered the first instance of art. In the guise of a mask, people are able to conceal their own identity and represent symbolically, humorously, fearfully, and by claiming to be larger than life, etc., certain anthropomorphic, aesthetical beings, although common facial or figurative movements are unable to imitate or communicate those particular characters correctly. Masks usually made of moulding, carving and even weaving which are put on the face or the body. The primary driving force behind mask-making was

undoubtedly to satisfy the magical, religious, and theatrical demands of the people. And over time, mask-making rose to prominence as a distinct art form.

In India among the various ethnic communities and cultural diversities mask has been taking a vast importance. Mask has regarded as integral part in all the states of India including Assam. Among these masks specifically mentionable use is *Chou* mask of Purulia, *Chou* Cheraikella, *Bhagavat mela* of Tamilnadu, Ramnagar's *Ramleela*, *Yakshagaan* of Karnataka, drama of Kuttiam, Kerala, bamboo strip mask used in the *Bhaona*/ act play performace at *Satra* or Vaishnavite monastery in Assam.

Since the ancient time, Assam has both used masks extensively. The desire to create masks can be seen in attempts to draw the outline of an ominous item on an earthen pitcher with lime marks next to a pumpkin creeper or on a straw effigy to frighten off birds and insects in a rice field. Among the ethnic communities of both hills and plain areas eastern Indian continents significant mask making tradition has been still exist in Assam, Bhutan, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim since ancient time in specific among *Monpa*, *Rava*, Assamese communities in whole North Eastern India.

The *Bhakti* movement started by Srimanta Sankaradeva (1449- 1568) helped to create the Assamese race through songs, plays, musical instruments, *Bhaonas*, and *Nam-Kirtan* or preaching songs/ performance among other things to the worship of Lord Vishnu. Eminent art historian Karl Khandelvala wrote as, "...The culmination of art in any area usually depends on some great religious upheaval and this also took place in Assam with the advent of a fervent movement or God-love inspired by the creed of absolute devotion to Vishnu in his incarnation. No account of Assamese art can afford to ignore the spread of this creed by the gopeller saint Sankaradeva." (Gupta 1982, p. vi)

Sankaradeva's Neo *Vaishnavite* preaching has been amalgamated with earlier indigenous traditions of this region during his lifetime and later days. One such tradition that eagerly arises to thoughts is still living among some of the Buddhist communities, particularly the *Monpas*, the *Serdukpens* and the *Bhutyas* living north of Assam proper. Painting and wooden mask- making are living traditions with the *Monpas* and *Sherdukpens* community who have linked with Tibet and Bhutan. There are reasons to believe that the bamboo split mask- making, wood carving and manuscript painting in *Satriya* style or monastery origin led by Srimanta Sankaradeva and his followers, has some sort of connections with that earlier style and its technique. (Dutta 1998, p. 22) The dragon-like forms, expressionistic elements of some *Satriya*/ monastic mask making, wood- carving and also manuscript paintings models and designs speak out in favour of this assumption. The creation of masks has also been elevated to the rank of a unique art form. The novel creation of Sankaradeva to spread his *Bhakti* dharma, *Bhaona*, gives the mask a physical form. (Neog 2000, p. 6) Another source of inspiration to artistic activities was the *Satra* or neo- *Vaishnavite* monastery initiated by Simanta Sankaradeva during his lifetime which has deep penetration deep into the life of the people since its inception. Worth to mention as *Satriya* dance of Assam has been confirmed as classical dance among eight dances of India by prime organization Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi on 15<sup>th</sup> November 2000.

## 2. OBJECTIVES

To study methodically on both the technical and aesthetics module of mask making traditions in the context of folk art and crafts of Assam

- To study mask making tradition in Assam with reference to Neo Vaishnavite Bhakti movement initiated by Srimanta Sankaradeva in 15-16<sup>th</sup> Century A. D.
- To focus the mask making tradition of Sri Sri Bor Alengi Bogiai Satra, Titabor, Jorhat District, Assam

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Both primary and secondary sources are incorporated into the data set. Primary sources include numerous mask-making artefacts, literature by artists who make masks, still images and video, etc. Books, journals, articles, reviews, research papers, literary works, the internet resource, etc. are examples of secondary sources.

The study is qualitative research, and since the secondary sources are not much available except in the allied archive materials, literature this study is descriptive in nature. It is based on primary sources like still images, videos of those mask making tradition and secondary sources of relative literature.

### 4. INCREDIBLE MASK- MAKING TRADITION IN ASSAM

Srimanta Sankaradeva became pioneer a cultural renaissance in Assam during 15-16<sup>th</sup> Century as his total concern with the life and society of his times. The 'Satra' as an institution was the vehicle of his movement, it provided the venue; it provided the venue and atmosphere for religious, social, and artistic activity. A *Satra* / monastery comprises of *Namghara*, a *Manikuta* and *hatis*. The *Namghara* is the assembly prayer hall cum venue for theatrical performance and the *Manikuta* the sanctum or *simhasana* of the 'Satra' at the extreme end of the *namghara*; the *hatis* are living quarters built for the monks. (Vatsyayan 2007, p. 96) For the purpose of worshipping Lord Vishnu through music, song, dance, and stories from the *Bhagavata Purana* especially birth, childhood and youth age of Lord Krishna, the Ramayana, and the Mahabharata, each *Satra* or monastery or institution engages in distinctive creative and spiritual forms of expression. In addition to serving as educational institutions, these establishments serve as historical archives for Assam, housing collections of royal and holy artefacts along with antiques, household items, weaponry, and jewellery. The *Bhaona* and *Ankiya Naats* or theatres are seen as having a reputational emblem in Majuli's *Satras*. These dramatic performances, started by the great Srimanta Sankaradeva, had a crucial element: the use of *mukha*, or masks, which played a crucial part in conflating the spectacular with the theatrical. (Phukan 2010, p.10)

As eminent litterateur and critic Hiren Gohain writes, "The Neo-Vaishnava tradition of the 15th century is the foundation of cultural heritage in Assam, which is centred on *Satras* or religious institutions. This religious movement, which was headed by the saint and social reformer Srimanta Sankaradeva and his disciple Madhavdeva, sparked a cultural renaissance through music and the arts with the establishment of *Satras* (monastic centres) in Assam. Due to the unceasing work of the *Satras* of Assam, Vishnu one of the gods worshipped among Hindus in early medieval Assam and his highest incarnation Sri Krishna had been regarded as the supreme deity. *Satras* are a kind of monasteries where the Guru or the preceptor with his monk-disciples lived, devoting their lives to prayer and works of piety, including practice of devotional music and staging of plays on religious myths. Some

of the *Satras* also specialized in exquisite craftsmanship in bamboo, rattan, ivory, and wood.” (Gohain and Tamuly 2013, p.13)

Since 17<sup>th</sup> Century onwards, Sri Sri Bor Alengi Bogiai *Satra* of Jorhat district in Assam, Sri Sri Samaguri *Satra*, situated at heart in the island of Majuli in Assam, and Si Sri Khatpar *Satra* near Sibsagar town are distinctive centres of living mask-making tradition and performance in Assam. (Tamuly 2013, p.2) The *Bhakti* movement has deeply influenced many forms of traditional performing arts prevalent all over country and in Assam it inspired the superb *Ankianaat*. In fact, all the plays in the repertoire of this theatre are one act plays and they are called *Ankianats*. Most of the plays in the repertoire of *Ankia-naat* (drama in episode) are based on episodes drawn from mostly Krishna legend and few from *Rama* legend with significant using of various masks. (Goswami 2016, p.13) Three types of masks, usually made or perform in *Rasleela* and *Bhaona* dramas are *Mukh-mukha* or face mask, *Lotokoi* or spate mask for head and body part and *Bor mukha* / big masks or Masks in enormous size. *Mukh Mukha* or face masks cover the face for example Brahma, Panchani, Maris, Subahu, Chakrabat, Upananda and masks of bird and animal as Aghasur, Bakasur, Dhenukasur etc., *Lotokoi* masks are a little larger, head and body parts of this mask are made separately as demon Putana, Taraka, Sankhachur Yaksha) whereas enormous size. *Bor Mukha* or Big masks usually comprise of two portions – face and the upper body of demonic icon as instance *Ravana*, King *Bana*, *Kumbh-karna*, *Mur Danav*, *Narakasur*, *Narasimha* etc. (Mazinder, 2017, pp.33-43) Some eminent mask-making artists of three above mentioned *Satra* are Gopikanta Mahanta, Rebakanta Mahanta of Khatpar *Satra*, Rudrakanta Dev Goswami & Hemchandra Goswami of Natun Samaguri *Satra*, Majuli and Jadov Mahanta of Sri Sri Bor Alengi Bogiai *Satra*. (Lahkar 2016, p.53)

## 5. GREAT HERITAGE OF SRI SRI BOR ALENGI BOGIAI SATRA AND ITS LIVING MASK-MAKING TRADITION

Sri Sri Bor Alengi Bogiai *Satra* was established in Majuli island (presently Majuli, a district) of river Brahmaputa near Jorhat of Upper Assam, established in the year 1610 A. D. by its first *Satradhikar* or monastery head Bapukrishna Deb.(Mahanta 2011, p.2) Later due to flood erosion of the land of monastery it was shifted to Melamati, a revenue grazing land in the bank of Mondal of Kakodonga River, near Dafalating of Titabor, Jorhat District of Upper Assam in the year 1965-66 by Government of Assam. (Report 2004, p. 5) Since then Sri Sri Bor Alengi Bogiai *Satra* becomes a major centre of both practices of living traditions in art, culture, and religion of neo- Vaishnavite doctrine initiated by Srimanta Sankaradeva.

At present Sri. Bapukanta Mahanta is *Satradhikar* or Head of monastery of Sri Sri Bor Alengi Bogiai *Satra*. Some name of eminence regarding living, distinctive mask making tradition of the *Satra* are Nabin Krishna Mahanta, Jadov Mahanta and Akhai Jyoti Mahanta. A particular folk and evocative of mask making of religious character has been made and practice at the *Satra* in following utmost devotion, perfect iconography, and religious essence. At Sri Sri Bor Alengi Bogiai *Satra* masks are generally made of locally available materials. These materials are – bamboo, used cloth, locally available colour, cow dung, cane, soil, and cloth. As Jadov Mahanta writes, “actors in concealing own identity, wears mask to express different personality of worldly and strange being. According to the characters there are two types of masks are used in the play as *Loukik* and *Aloukik*. *Loukik* masks are made of normal face mask as various demons, *behuwa* or buffoon characters. *Aloukik* masks are made in strange features as example *Narasimha*, *Brahma*, *Ravana*, etc. It has been described about the *Aloukik* features in the Holy text as,

*Odvut dekhiya Daityapati bhoila chupa*

*Nuhi Simha nuhi etu Manushya Rupa*

(As seeing strange entity of Lord *Vishnu* in the guise of *Narasimha* Demon king *Hiranyakashipur* became silent, neither lion nor human being....).” (Mahanta 2011, p.16)

The method of mask making in Assam is very old, though it is complex in execution. First, a star-form lattice or *Lakhimi Sutra* as similar to traditional bamboo basketry of finely stripped bamboo has been developed to a skeletal framework of whole mask. (Goswami 2016, p.12) After weaving the inner skeleton with bamboo strips then mask is covered with mud lapped cloth and after drying a mixture of cow dung of calf and sticky soil is applied on the cloth-covered mask to give the proper shape of a character. After drying the mask is again covered with another layer of mud lapped cloth and kept in the sunshine to dry. Then masks are given shape using locally available earth, vegetable, and mineral colours source from *Hengul* or red, *Haitaal* / yellow, *Dhalmati*/ white, blue from indigo plant, black from ashes of dried vegetable gourd or smoke of earthen lamp. Hair of mask characters is made of jute.

**Figure 1**



**Figure 1** Artists' Family of Sri Sri Bor Alengi Bogiai Satra, Titabor, Assam

**Figure 2**



**Figure 2** Eminent Mask Making Artist Jadov Mahanta



**Figure 3**



**Figure 3** Demon Masks, Sri Sri Bor Alengi Bogiai Satra, Titabor

**Figure 4**



**Figure 4** Brahma, Face Mask, Sri Sri Bor Alengi Bogiai Satra, Titabor

These masks, used in *raas-leela* or mythical ritual of youth Lord Krishna at Vrindavana and *bhaona*/ act-play or drama, a primeval form of performance/drama cult in Assam, are the unique skill-based ability of and Khatpar Satra of Sibsagar, Natun Samaguri Satra of Majuli. A distinctive name among Neo *Vaishnavite* monasteries and followers of Srimanta Sankaradeva, Sri Sri Bor Alengi Bogiai Satra becomes a prime place in the hands of its artists' communities (Figure 1). Some of ancestors/ monks of the Satra, whose hereditary vocation it is, are in special charge of preparing masks or making painted manuscript of Holy texts and are called *Khanikar*/ Creators. They engaged ritualistically in studying, learning and later teaching all Holy texts of *Vaishnavite* religious doctrine, Sankaradeva's teaching and as well as practices whole heartedly with music, dance, and performances since their childhood. *Rass leela* of Lord Krishna during November month or *Bhaona* performance during Srimanta Sankaradeva Birthday and any auspicious day combines harmoniously diverse elements of culture as classical of dances/music, indigenous mixture of Assamese and *Vraja boli* dialect and dramatic use of expressions, gesture, and masks in the narratives to evoke spirituality among viewers/ performers both. Altogether mixtures of all these, it has a distinct personality of its own, which is unquestionably indigenous origin, coherent and unique. Distinguished Jnanpith awarded poet Prof. Nilmani Phookan praised its unique mask-making tradition as its prospering also keeping intact of its folk vigour over the years in the crafty hands of Late Nabin Krishna Goswami, Nityananda

Mahanta, and Jadov Mahanta (Figure 2). Worth to mention that Late Nabin Krishna became celebrity as his creation of masks on Lord Vishnu's *Anantaxayan* or Cosmic Sleep of Lord Vishnu in the year 1973 and people came from distant places to purchase his masks for drama performance as instance Soneswar *Raas* Theatre, Kamrup district as recalled by Jadov Mahanta. As continuing the inheritance and also expert of *Satriya* singing and dancing since his childhood, Jadov Mahanta learned basic knowledge of mask making from Late *Satradhikar* Nabin Krishna Goswami and has been associated since then in mask making and its integral decoration during *Raas* festival and *Bhaona*/ act play performance. During these festival people from other *Satra* and drama group from distant places has come to collect his masks from the *Satra*. Sri Sri Bor Alengi Bogiai *Satra*'s mask-making tradition consists of Mukha bhaona or drama with masks of various types as instance demon masks (Figure 3), face masks of various character, *Brahma* face mask (Figure 4), *Narsimha* (Figure 5) & decorative masks (Figure 6) and also display of masks takes limelight among these and it becomes an industry of making a mask. Keeping in mind the spiritual component, Lord Krishna's *Raas* Festival narrative takes place inside of its Naam Ghar (prayer hall), with melas (fairs) being organized outside. People visit the Krishna *Leela* mask play during the *Raas* festival and also gather miniature masks for modern house décor.

Figure 5



Figure 5 Narasimha, Face Mask, Sri Sri Bor Alengi Bogiai Satra, Titabor

Figure 6



Figure 6 Decorative masks, Sri Sri Bor Alengi Bogiai Satra, Titabor

## 6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Sri Sri Bor Alengi Bogiai *Satra*, situated at Melamati, Titabor, Jorhat district of Upper Assam, has a living, distinctive mask making tradition among *Satras* or Neo Vaishnavite monasteries as Sri Sri Samaguri *Satra*, situated at heart in the island of Majuli in Assam, and Si Sri Khatpar *Satra* near Sibsagar town, Assam. A particular folk and evocative of mask making of religious character has been made and practice at the *Satra* in utmost devotion, family tradition, perfect iconography, and religious essence over the years. It's also a great example of entrepreneurship and apprentice for younger generation of Sri Sri Bor Alengi Bogiai *Satra* as their masks are generally made of locally available materials as bamboo, cow dung, cane, soil, and cloth. People from distant places usually come in large numbers to see and collect those masks for performance at their own place and also for home decoration during *Raas* Festival in November month.

## 7. CONCLUSION

In this way, the research paper examined the history of the Sri Sri Bor Alengi Bogiai *Satra* as well as the economic, social, cultural, and aesthetic value of masks as a superb inventory of the local masks that are currently on hand. Also, the place has an immense possibility of skill-based craft/ entrepreneurs of indigenous origin and inheritance importance. The artist who creates masks does so in accordance with the canon established by the scriptures, the requirements of the character, and how the artist brings forth the various emotions or bhavas. It is therefore important for the artist to have a complete knowledge of the scriptures. The visualisation is in the discretion of the gifted artist hereditary who is able to bring out the emotion and give the final shape and substance to the mask. Even though the local kids are hesitant to learn this skill because the seasonality of *raas* theatrical ritual performance is cited as an unsustainable income, smaller portable masks are now being made as ornamental pieces for houses to lend economic value to the craft. *Raas* festival celebrated in *Satras* is a massive attraction among tourists. It is held in about two hundred different areas in all over Assam. *Raas* festivals in *Satras* are almost 200 years old, organising annually for two or three days during full moon day in the November. It is an auspicious, festive occasion for all inhabitant of Assam to welcome devotees from outside and integrated all communities and people. Research is necessary for the historical, methodical details of nourishing mask making tradition in Assam and the accomplishments of these underappreciated creators.

## NOTES

As seen my interest on folk art heritage in Assam, Prof. Nilmani Phookan informed me regarding on distinctive tradition of this particular Neo Vaishnavite monastery Sri Sri Bor Alengi Bogiai *Satra* at Melamati, Titabor, Jorhat district, Assam. Since 2008 onwards I have been doing field work at the *Satra* both collecting primary data as photographs of bamboo masks, detail mask making process, mask making artist's interview and related literatures as secondary data.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.



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Prof. Nilmani Phookan, eminent poet and art critic

Sri Jadav Mahanta, mask making artist, Sri Sri Bor Alengi Bogiai *Satra* at Melamati, Titabor, Jorhat district, Assam

Tridib Dutta, sculptor, writer/researcher, Jorhat.

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