

Project Report on

Mukha Shilpa

The art of mask making at Majuli, Assam

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Interaction Design

This project was done as a part of Pl, at Samaguri Satra, Majuli, Assam under the supervision of Dr. Hemchandra Goswami, for a period of four weeks.



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সুকুমাৰ কলা পীঠ

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To whom it may concern

This is to certify that Supriya Dutta, a student of 2nd Semester, M.Des, IDC School of Design, IIT Bombay, successfully completed a project on Traditional Mask making in our institution from 15 May to 20 June, 2018. She continued her work with all her sincere and painstaking efforts.

I wish her success in life.

Hem Ch. Goswami

Principal
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Hem Chandra Goswami

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Introduction

Mukha or masks are the expression of mythological characters of the epics, Mahabharata and Ramayana. The art of mask making in Assam was conceptualised by Srimanta Shankardev, a Neo Vaishnavait saint during the mediaeval period. He, also known by the name “*Mahapurusha*” was the pioneer who brought about revolutionary changes in literature as well as in socio-cultural life of the region. He established a new era of educating the common people through Bhakti movement. He created dramas, composed songs, poetry and paintings based on the great epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata.

The dramas composed by Shankardeva, called *Ankiya Bhaona* were based on the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata. According to

Birinchi Kumar Barua, a renowned Assamese writer, “*Shankardeva realized that the appeal of his kavyas is oracular rather than visual. So with a master-stroke he transformed and elevated this rudimentary play into a kind of drama built on classical concept and grandeur.*”

Bhaona is a unique style of drama, composed by the saint to educate common people through their active participation in portraying the different characters of the epics. The performers in *bhaona*(drama) were called *bhaoriya*.

Certain characters such as Lord Shiva, Lord Brahma, Jatayu, etc. were difficult to portray using make-up or clothes. To accentuate such characters Srimanta



A mask made at Samaguri Satra by Dr. Hemchandra Goswami, Majuli, Assam

Shankardev created their images through masks (*Mukha*).

Since antiquity the tradition of mask making has been traditionally carried out by the *satras*, the institutional centres of Vaishnavism. Masks are observed to have different forms and colours making them easily noticeable from the other characters of the *bhaonas*. These *satras* in Assam are religious schools where people of different caste, creed or community can join and

practice the religion. Started by Srimanta Shankardeva, *satras* became popular centres of education for religion, culture and lifestyle; and Vaishnavism took a revolutionary turn among all sections of people.

At present only a few *satras* are involved with the making of masks - ***Samaguri satra*** and ***Kamalabari satra***. The masks of Samaguri satra, are renowned for their creativity in the art form.

Samaguri *satra* was established in 1663 by Sri Sri Chakrapani, grandson of Srimanta Shankardeva. This artform has been passed down through generations of *satriya bhakats* (priests). This unique piece of art has been able to attract the interest of millions and has recently made its way to the British Museum for the same.

Mukha Shilpa

Majuli district (27.0016° N, 94.2243° E) is a river island in Assam, surrounded by the river Brahmaputra. The island is a beautiful landscape of nature with land and aquatic flora and fauna, inhabited by different tribal and non tribal communities. The river island was influenced by the then Vaishnavait movement of Assam with the establishment of a satra at Dhuwahat by the saint Shankardeva.

The art of Mask making has been an exquisite culture of Majuli satras. Masks are designed to bring out the character being enacted in bhaonas and raas utsavs at Majuli. Masks accentuate different features of the characters which is otherwise difficult to portray.

The mask making process is an elaborate process and requires time. It can take as long as two weeks. Since the entire shape of the mask is dependent on the cow-dung mixture, main concern of the mask makers are involved

with the amount of sunlight and warmth available in a day. The entire mask is made on a woven frame of bamboo. As pointed out by the craftsmen, this is the most important step that one should concentrate on while making the mask. It is recommended that one tweaks the bamboo frame in areas which needs volume, e.g. areas near the cheeks, nose or the forehead of the, depending on the facial features of the character.

Mukha silpa of Majuli is a traditional art now known at national as well international level. The mask made by Dr Hemchandra Goswami, Samaguri satra is now being displayed at British museum. Dr Goswami has modified the masks so as to be more interactive to the audience. He redesigned the rigid form of masks into one where jaws can be moved while delivering speech in drama.

He has trained different craftsman at Majuli to make masks of different sizes for commercial purposes. At present two types



Picture taken at the Studio of Dr. Hemchandra Goswami, Samaguri Satra, Majuli, Assam

of masks are prepared at Samaguri Satra, one is masks for religious performances and another for commercial purposes. Prices of these decorative masks ranges from 500 to several thousands. The prices vary depending on the embellishments and characters. Hence, the mask making culture in the river island

may be brought up to a new potential area of livelihood of the craftsman.

Mukhas are now both made for religious and commercial purposes. Now, Along with bhakats(traditional priests), craftsmen are also engaged with mask making.

Different types of Masks

The traditional Mukha made in the satras of Majuli are divided into three categories based on their size and structure.

- *Su-mukha* or *Bor mukha*
- *Lutukai-mukha* or *Suti mukha*
- *Mukh mukha*

Su mukha is largest among all the masks. It can range from 8-10fts of heights. The face and the body of the mask are made separately, and are attached to the wearer, during the *bhaona*. Characters such as Ravana, Narasimha, are typically adorned with this type of masks.

Lutukai mukha looks similar to *Su mukha*, however differs in structure. *Lutukai mukha* is designed in a way to allow more movement of the hands and head of the mask.

Mukh mukha is the face mask. This mask is designed only for the face. Along with the mask, the performer also wears colourful dresses and jewellery for his act.



Lutukai-mukha. Image courtesy: Krishna Knata Borah



Mukh mukha made by the members of Samaguri Satra, Majuli, Assam



A performer adorning with *Su-mukha*.
Image courtesy: Krishna Knata Borah



Dr. Hemchandra Goswami, Samaguri Satra, Majuli, Assam

Tools and Materials for mask making

Raw materials used for mask making are obtained from locally available materials. The mask makers take pride in their use of eco-friendly materials. The mask makers use their hands for most of the work supplemented with a few tools like:

- knives, both to split the bamboo and for making it into strips
- spatula to sculpt the mask, both bamboo and metal spatulas are used.

The materials and tools used by a mask maker are as follows

- Bamboo, among the locally available bamboos *Jati* bamboo (*Bambusa tulda*) is considered suitable for the making the frame of the mask
 - Cow Dung
 - Cotton cloth
 - Clay

- Brushes
- Kerosene
- *Kuhila*(*Aeschynonene indica*), a locally available shrub species.
- Colours



Bamboo strips arranged in patterns for the bamboo frame



Craftsman weaving bamboo frames



Woven bamboo frames, ready for subsequent processes.



Bamboo frames after covered in strips of cotton clothes and clay-water mixture

The Process

The process of mask making involves three stages:

Stage 1:

The process starts with the splitting of bamboos. Jati bamboo is cut into required sizes depending on the size of the mask made, e.g. for a face mask or mukh mukha, two internodes of bamboo is required and for a su mukha or lutukai mukha, four nodes. These pieces are then split into fine strips and woven into a frame. Strips are the building blocks of the mask. Making of bamboo strips to the required thickness is one of the vital steps of mask making. Since the process is done manually with knives, attaining the perfect thickness for the masks takes a period of time to learn. A specific pattern is followed during the weaving process, called as “Lakhimi sutra”. The name Lakhimi sutra is a locally given name associated with baskets used to grow

rice. The patterns of bamboo weaving that is followed while making masks is similar to the one used in making of these baskets. Rice is associated with goddess Lakshmi, and hence the name Lakhimi sutra where sutra means formula or pattern. Strips of cotton clothes, dipped in clay-water mixture is used to cover the frame and sun dried for the subsequent stages. This process can take one or half a day depending upon the amount of sunlight available for the mask to dry.

Stage 2:

Cow-dung and clay is mixed together to prepare mixture of ratio 4:1. This mixture is used to sculpt the mask. Addition of kerosene to the dung-clay mixture is a very crucial for the protection of this mixture against bugs and worms. Kerosene, 3%-4% of weight of the mixture should be added. Mixture is then applied to the dried frame using hands and bamboo spatulas to give the mask its desired shape. Once it dries up, the mask is again coated with another layer of cotton cloth for a smoother finish. It is necessary for the mask to dry up perfectly before proceeding to the next steps, therefore a good amount of sunlight or any other heat source is required. This stage usually takes one or two days.

During the rainy season when there is no sufficient sunlight, it is highly likely for the cow dung to catch worms and bugs. When this happens, the cow dung tends to come off of the mask. No immediate cure is used to overcome the problem, and is not resolved unless the affected area is cleaned and a fresh batch of dung-clay mixture is made and applied.



Preparation of cow-dung and clay mixture



The mixture is applied using a bamboo or metal spatula



Thermocol or *kuhila* is used to add volume to certain areas of the mask



When there is no sufficient sunlight, it is highly likely for the cow dung to catch worms and bugs. When this happens, the cow dung tends to come off of the mask.



Final touches to the applied mixture.



Masks ready to be coloured.

Stage 3:

Colouring of the mask is the most awaited process and brings the masks to life. The colours used are organic and naturally occurring and obtained from plants and minerals listed below.

- Indigo,
- Gerua mati(yellow ochre),
- Hengul (vermillion),
- Haital (yellow arsenic),
- Lamp black.

Preparation of these colours is an elaborate process which is known to take as long as a seven days. The colours are mixed with Gondh gum or gum from the seeds of Bhel(golden apple) fruit, to make a paste that would stick better on the surface of the mask.

The masks then created are either sold to be used for decorative purposes, ritualistic or for performances.



Craftsman colouring masks. Image courtesy: Krishna Kanta Borah



Masks that i made during my stay at Samaguri Satra, Majuli

Reflections

Mask making is an exquisite art form. This strong tradition for making characters of the epics has unique styles. Every generations of these craftsman have given their own touch of creativity into the art. Working with them helped me to get closer to the Vaishnavait culture and get a glimpse of how is it like working with them. It was remarkable how they were using simple organic materials to make massive sculptures up to 5fts and more.

Weather conditions play a very important role in making of these traditional crafts. During the monsoon season, continuous rainfall in north-east region is no stranger. The craft suffers since it depends highly on the sun for its separate layers to dry. Even when they have heaters capable of heating multiple masks at once, they are reluctant to use them for they run on LPG; an area where design interventions are possible.

Satras have *namghars*. *Namghars* are the prayer halls, a place for socio-cultural

exhibition and function and also a reservoir of religious scriptures. People here are constantly exposed to these scriptures, through prayers, discussions and dramas which help them in better understanding of mythical figures. Places like these can be sources of inspiration for character developers. Creativity is affected due to the lack of financial resources. The lack of availability of a constant market has its affect on these craftsmen. Connectivity to Majuli also has had its effect on the craftW. Contrary to the quality of the craft produced, the craftsmen lead a very marginal lifestyle.

A lot of elements used in such traditional practices has scientific and design interventions made through out generations which remain hidden. It would be a mash-up to look for, if we are someday able to combine both these worlds

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