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The Culture of Mukha Bhaona in the Sattras of Majuli

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Abstract: The North-Eastern region of India is marked by diverse cultural roots, multiple belief systems, and rare sub-species of flora and fauna. Majuli is the center of medieval culture of the Brahmaputra Valley. The ideology of Neo-Vaisnavism and the sect of Bhakti was the driving force behind the culture. Inheritance Direct support of a Hindu monastery as a Sattras name led to the development of the Bhaona performance and the mask culture. This movement led society, renewed it through art and culture and most importantly through spiritual activity. Masks and the mask performance was developed under the patronage of Sattras. This is one of the key elements that convey the spiritual feelings and identity of Srimanta Sankaradeva for the people. Spreading the Bhakti Cult Ideology in medieval society is the main goal of Bhaona's activity. So this movement is no longer a cultural movement or spiritual beliefs, but it has become a way of life. This paper investigates the distinctiveness of using Mukha (masks) to bridge the gap between the visible world and the world of materialism.

Key words: culture, spiritual, Srimanta Sankaradeva, mask, mukha, bhaona, sattras, majuli

Introduction:

Culture, as usually understood, is art and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement. These manifestations take the form of food; art, drama, music; attitudes; beliefs; language; It was in Majuli, the repository of Vaishnav cultural heritage and art forms in Assam, the masks are not merely visible things; they discourse entire epic stories like Ramayana or the Mahabharata and inject life into the process of deriving meaning from them, giving their narration a subjective gloss. Assamese culture is a variation of various socio-cultural individual groups and a religious population whose roots go back more than two thousand years old

and traditionally hybrid. A fusion between cultures took place here Aryans and Mongoloids. As a result, different currents of Hinduism flourished here, it has become a melting point of cultural heritage. Acquiring cultural elements from various sources ethnocultural groups under different socio-political systems in different historical periods, a key factor in the development of its character. Among them Saivism, Saktism and Vaishnavism has been common since ancient times. The cultural development of this region began and flourished in the first millennium AD, during the great dynasties of Pragjyotisha Kamrupa; ancient East Indian kingdom. Later, during the 15th century, religious and cultural change, the movement spread throughout the Assamese society under the leadership of the Vaishnavite saint, Srimanta Sankaradeva. This period was known as the Vaishnavite period. This founded in the last decades of the 15th century in what is now Assam. This move peaked in the 16th and 17th centuries. The influence of Vaisnavism was patronized a theater play called Bhaona also known as Ankiya Bhaona.

The Assamese vaishnavite monasteries, or sattra, are patrons of the mask-making skill known as mukha. Under the protection of these sattras, this custom flourished. Currently, this custom is still practised in a few sattras. It mostly applies to sattras like the Khatpar Satra, Chamaguri Satra, and Elangi Narasimha Satra of Majuli, among others.

Objectives:

- i) To study the performance of Mukha Bhaona in Majuli
- ii) To explore the mask making process in sattras.
- iii) To study the cultural significance and perspectives of mask making and mukha bhaona in Assam

Methodology:

This research paper is qualitative nature and is based on both primary and secondary sources of data. The method that used for this paper is Analytical method. Secondary sources of data i.e. used for this paper are books, research paper, newspaper, magazine, articles, dissertations, reports etc. published in journals, periodicals, thesis and few websites in the internet whereas the primary sources of data i.e used for this paper is completely based on field study to some sattras of Majuli.

The Mask making culture as an Art Form:

The Sattras preaches Neo-Vaisnavism, which is one of the major Bhakti cults. This Bhakti cult has a distinctive and inventive personality that shared organisational, equitable, humanist, and democratic ideas to establish a classless civil society, which was uncommon in mediaeval society in a nation like India. Through the use of masks and mask performances (mukha bhaona), the Sattras' cultural features have emerged. These artistic expressions are visual assertions that foster an interactive discourse among the many artistic perspectives. The Sattras are guiding the religious life of the people as well as teaching moral values. These are the centers of the religious, intellectual and cultural life of the villagers. The Namghar, or prayer hall, is where the Sattra culture's Ankiya Naat and mask performance (mukha bhaona) is typically held. In the Bhaona, masks are primarily employed for ritualistic and religious activities, but they are also used in secular Sattra performances for social reform.

The origin of the mask performance and mask traces back since the evolution of dramatic narratives appeared in various ritual and social activities in this area during the ancient period. This style of traditional performance in Assamese culture was introduced by Sankaradeva by the 15th century in a new context. The dramatic presentation staged by the Vaishnavite Saint is therefore known as Cihna-Yatra. This performance stylization emerged at a later time. Ankiya Naat or Bhaona is the name of this lyrical-rhythmic, dance, and dramatised performance. This activity achieved unique lyrical-rhythmic style in dance and dramatic performance that creates a unique visual narrative language in Bhaona.

Sankardev wrote 6 plays namely- Rama Vijaya, Patni prasada, Parijata Harana, Rukmini Harana, Keli Gopal and Kaliya Damana. In Sankaradeva's plays, masks were only used by a few characters, but in later Mask theatre productions, all characters wore masks. In the Sattras, masks are primarily employed in ritualistic and religious performances of the Bhaona or Ankiya Naat, the Vaishnavite theatre. Masks are painted in the Sattras of Majuli's performance arts, and the Sattras' Ek-Saran-Hari Naam Dharma religion still thrives and supports this tradition today. The masks of Bhaona are an important object of visual narrative in the mask performance. They are used for socio-religious activities, theatrical performance, and decorative purpose. Masks express emotions of humans and animals, as well as the emotions of demonized characters. Sattras are the main hub for making the masks, with Natun Chamaguri Sattra being the most important.

Bhaona is a colourful presentation of lyrical performance that conveys its ideology to the society in the context of social reformation since the medieval period. Masks are used to hide the identity of the performer and create a unique visual reality. Masks are usually worn with a costume, sometimes covering the entire body of the performer. This performance is still present in today's society in this area.

The biggest festival observed by all Satras in Majuli and the surrounding region is the Raas festival. The popular Hindu mythological tales that serve as the basis for the masked performances of Bhaona are organised by various Satras. The performance, which is the main attractions for the general public, is actively participated in by the locals. The majority of the masks in Assam are supplied by Chamaguri Satra, which also provides the majority of the Bhaona mask.

Structure and Types of Mask:

Bhaona masks are usually made in two forms: concrete or rigid and flexible. The flexible masks are 6 to 10 feet tall and are worn by the performer for a religious performance. Masks depicting demonic characters are grotesque and superhuman characters are usually large. The mask of the mythical birds Narasimha and Garuda is largely constructed and has a highly stylized motif. This mask embodies the complete Bhaona movement of this region.

The effigies and masks are used from the time of Sankaradeva, which were associated with the world of imagination. Examples include the effigy of Kaliya in the Kaliya Daman, and elephants, Hanumanta, Garuda and Jambubanta were also made with bamboos and clothes. The masks are divided into three subcategories based on their usability. These are-

- i) **Mukh Mukha** simply covers the head. It is the tiniest variation of the masks presented and is frequently utilised in performances.
- ii) **The Cho-Mukha or Bor-Mukha** is enormous in size and sometimes only covers the upper body. These are not flexible. These masks have no movable components. The height of this mask is often between two and five feet. Such a mask's large construction does a great job of capturing the character. These masks are extremely light despite having a large structure because to the raw materials utilised in their construction. Cho-Mukha is typically fastened to the wearer's body with ropes because of its enormous structure.
- ii) **Lutukori Mukha** is covered the entire body with flexible body parts that represent hands, jaws, eyeballs, beaks, wings, etc. This mask is not tied to the wearer's body

Conclusion

The use of large masks was reduced due to their size and weight. Over time, these masks grow to the size needed for religious activities. The Neo-Vaisnavism movement had a huge impact on the socio-cultural and religious status of this region during the last five hundred years and continues to exist today; at present no secular or occult performance is performed in Bhaona. Since all Bhaona masked characters are Hindu mythological figures, they have little space in secular performances. These mukha bhaonas are performed only in an annual ritual performance organized by a handful of Sattras in the Majuli. Bhaona masks are an elegant art form transformed into an important visual narrative object in masked performance. Here, the mask changed from an object of art to an object of use. The usefulness of masks is found in socio-religious activities, theatrical performances and decorative purposes. In action, it expresses all human and animal emotions. The feeling of demonized characters is also a human feeling. Masks are the main means of conveying these emotions from the performer's side to the final audience. It creates a virtual atmosphere of emotional reality for viewers. The ideal image these minds carry after bhaonas speaks of how Sankardeva played an important role in imparting comprehensive education to the general public at a time when all such methods were unheard of. Bhaona's faces thus function as intersubjective entities as they blur the rigid realm of material and immaterial worlds, connecting the two worlds on the same platform, Bhaona. Those Faces are visualization objects that themselves visualize different forms of life that the user presents with them. So, these images work as a two-way process. They simply do not force the wearer to hide his feelings with all tenderness, or to say furiously: get a mukha, a mask, a Bhaona or the protagonist of a play. Second, the audience connects with these masks to such an extent that the moment the wild mask emphasizes its role, the audience visualizes it as a terrifying mask, leading to bodily gestures of fear, respect and surprise. This is the moment when the mask becomes part of the living world. Similarly, when the delicate mask of mukha appears, the audience visualizes them as part of their pious life and greets them warmly. These depictions cross the line between the usual objective masks and the purely subjective audience. This is because the objects, the masks, become part of the subjective world through their ability to feel emotions, and the subjective world (the audience) becomes part of the subjective world.

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