

Blue Print of the Project

Unmasking the Masks: An Analytical Study and Documentation of the Mask Performances of Assam.

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Guwahati

1. Brief Introduction of the Project:

Assam, as the land stands with various communities of diverse ethnic demonstrations, presents a wide canvas of colour and costume, life and tradition, body and sound, context and texture which find reflections in the masks and the process of mask-making itself. With all these contributing to it - the society, man, its mind making, playing with, looking through the mask - an exclusive tradition is enduring for several centuries harnessing traditional skills and motifs presenting a range of cultural texts. And through these multiple traditions the mind of the artist views the world – both expressed and concealed - within the mind and outside. “Performance”, to quote Richard Schechner, “is an illusion of an illusion, and as such, might be considered more ‘truthful’ more ‘real’ than ordinary experience.”¹ Thus, the performative texts and the performance situations in which the varied artistic expressions are represented are also trustful representations of social realities and mental horizons of the individual as well as social psyche. They also present a world view of a society to which the performance situations belong. Performance is also the most important and illustrious for that matter, part of these traditions as they communicate a distinct cultural mode, lead the audience to a world of joyful experiences and invite their own interpretations.

Transcending temporal conditions, several art forms have survived and continue to influence human existence in a socio-cultural atmosphere. Assam, being a land of diverse cultures comprising both tribal and non tribal communities, has grown over the centuries of political and social upheavals in which various artistic tendencies have evolved responding to experiences of life. The development of folk and other tribal culture is a reflection of these naturalistic and artistic human responses. The mask performances prevalent in Assam are further artistic tendencies developed with further orientation of the softer faculties of human minds. Together with these the range of performance practices emerging from the Sankaradeva Movement, has followed a new order of ritual practices – the receptivity and proliferation of which have introduced a new chapter in the cultural history of Assam. The spectrum of these has their own performative contexts to which they still belong and continue to be relevant. At the same time, the larger scenario of diverse performing arts traditions is both inter-relative and interactive in nature. While on the one hand these traditions are vertically rooted to their respective soil, they also tend to have a horizontal interconnectivity with other epic and *puranic* traditions of India. These cultural interactions and mutual

¹ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*. 2003, p. xiv. Source: Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory*. London and New York: Routledge. 2003.

exchanges occur at various levels based on surrounding changes and the development of new trends. .

The present research proposal within the course of the ongoing research analysis has proceeded with an analytical study of some of the mask traditions of Assam and has explored the practical aspect of the tradition in relation with the performance and the performer.

2. Objectives of the Research. Data Creation or Documentation of the Project

- a. While the finished product of masks are seen on stage, it's very important to understand the process of making of the art form, that builds up the character portrayal of the art form.
- b. The objective of the project is to understand the underlayered meanings of the process of making the masks suiting to the context of the performance.
- c. The process of making itself includes an artistic engagement of selection of the subject to frame the masking of a character.
- d. The study aims at bringing into account a kaleidoscope of the mask performance traditions in Assam and an aesthetic, sociological and performative appraisal and analysis of the some of these traditions embracing the folk classical continuum in the cultural scenario of Assam
- e. The project documents the living art traditions of the mask performances, hence it tries to dwell upon the issues of preservation and sustenance of the art form, training methodology etc through interviews of the performers and mask makers.
- f. Importance is given to the mask making process and preparation of the performance to unmask the layered meanings of the mask performance through analytical interpretations of contexts in which the art form has developed and sustained.

3. Implementation of the Project

In pursuing the present research the intention would be to access the material for the study of the chosen art form in appropriate and ethical ways will be chosen keeping in view the practitioner's rights, importance, concentration, notice and receptivity. Extensive fieldwork is done to access to vast body of cultural texts preserved and practiced in *Sattras*, ethnic communities and social groups in which both direct and participant observation methods were used for collecting data. Also, the already

archived material shall also be tapped to use as one of the library references for the present research. The structure of the research work as framed and implemented is mentioned below.

Structure of the Research Work

- 0.1. Introduction
- 0.2. Traditions of Mask Performance in Assam
- 0.3. Area of Investigation.
- 0.4. Significance of the Study
- 0.5. Methods and Methodology
 - 1.1 Tribal Traditions
 - 1.1.1 Sonowal Kachari
 - 1.1.2 Tiwa
 - 1.1.3 Rabha
 - 2.1 Non Tribal Traditions
 - 2.1.1 Sattriya Tradition of Masks
 - 2.1.2 Bordhuliya
 - 2.1.3 Dhuliya Bhaoriya
- 3.1. Observations of the documentation.
 - 3.1.1 Performance – Intra-textual and Inter-textual Dimensions.
 - 3.1.2. Comparative Understanding
 - 3.1.3 Issues of Preservation
- 4.1 Conclusion

Activities done so far:

1. Visit to Natun Camoguri Sattri, Majuli to work on Sattriya Masks

Revived and popularized as a vibrant art tradition by the Sankaradeva Movement, use of masks formed a major component in the efflorescence of arts during in Assam were not a dormant feature in the days earlier to the resurgence. Sankaradeva first used mask in his *Cihna Yatra* . With the use of indigenous elements and an understanding of the ethnicity the saint-poet conceptualized mask and its implementation in *bhaona* with a wider artistic vision. With this experiment starting from *Chihna Yatra* to *Ram Vijaya*, being his first

and last plays respectively by the saint, Sankaradeva used *cho-mukhas* in various ways and that opened up a new panoramic vision of aesthetics before the audience and at the same time unwrapped a new form of practice which gradually contributed to its development as a distinct art and also its expansion in terms of vocational training and economic gains. The discipline of *Mukha Bhaona* – an emerging trend from the *Bhaona* (Vaisnava theatre of Assam) itself speaks about the heights of the regard which the art practice received. The *Camuguri Sattra* is one of the most celebrated *Sattra* which has contributed immensely in the field of preservation and development of Sattriya Mask Traditions. Visit to the Sattra helped us in understanding the mask making process of and its practical aspects in the Sattriya Tradition.

2. Visit to Sonowal Kachari Community in Marica Village of Narayanpur in Lakhimpur District.

The *Sonowal Kacharis*, a section of the *Bodo-Kacharis* as mentioned earlier, inhabit mostly in the districts of Dibrugarh and Tinsukia with scattered settlements in the districts of Lakhimpur, Dhemaji and Golaghat. They are called as *Sonowals* as *Ahom* rulers are said to have engaged them in collecting gold particles by sifting the sands of the Sowansiri river. The community has adopted Assamese as their mother tongue and Hinduism through a process of acculturation. Hence their habitat and village lifestyle share commonality with the non-tribal groups or communities.

The *Bihu* is a very important festival for the entire community and the community holds its own belief for observing the festival and therefore the performances celebrate the myth and legends associated with cosmological view of the community. The rituals associated with rites de passage are also hosted by the community in which the *medhi* takes a major role in heading the ceremonial function.

Bahua nrtya is a performance done by the community on the occasion of Bihu to protect the community from all evil happenings. The enactment is also based on the *rudra dance* done by Siva and his consort when king *Daksa* humiliated Siva. The *bahuwa* performer recreates the episode of humiliation and depicts how the Lord beheads the king *Daksa*, but on request of *Sati* the Lord blesses him life with a head of a goat. Basically the performance is done on the occasion of camp-fire of the *Bihu* festival, an episode of representation with a male and female performers arranged with music and dance. The performers are veiled with a costume specially prepared for

the occasion with banana leaves and also wear facial masks made of dried gourd skin with dark colored paints. A special head gear from the bamboo strip with horns and cap veiled in black cloth is prepared for the performer. The accompanists also wear a special costume with white robes, head gear and long skirts. The presentation is a fast number as with sharp circular turns responding to the rhythmic beats of the percussion and cymbals. At the end of the presentation, the dancers are supposed to surrender their costume in a nearby river and return back to their normal life. The performance, also done on the occasion of *Bathou puja* is believed to usher in well being to the society.

3. Trip to Khoirabari Village of Dimoria region for *Bordhulia* tradition.

An orchestral presentation of *dhol* and cymbals accompanied with dramatic enactment was introduced in the area of Mitoni in the lower parts of Assam. The person leading the drums is called *baya*. The orchestral presentation is performed in the ritual ceremonies of marriages. 30 to 35 team members perform in the presentation including *dhuliyas* and *bhaorias*. Chongs are performed which are dramatic enactments which runs at two levels – one narrates the mythical tale while the narrative comments on social realities. Wooden masks are used to enhance the impact of the narrative commentary. The presentation includes a circus-kind of presentation capturing audience's attention immediately with several acrobatic stunts. Mythological stories are interfused in between. Songs, dance, *byanga abhinaya* (comic interludes), It's a little difficult to say when this form has emerged. The form is one of the examples of presentation that has emerged from societal needs or the demand for social entertainment with popular stories These presentations continue throughout the night. The *Dhuliyas* at times also use wooden masks. The *Dhuliyas* stand in cue during the presentation while the main *Dhuliyas* keep moving in the acting space during the course of presentation. In some areas, the main *Dhuliyas* wear headgears (*paguris*) and wear colored costume with *gamoca* on the waist. There are no rules set for the costume of the *Dhuliyas*. At times they also wear oversized gowns to create hilarious situations.

4. Trip to the Tiwa community in Morigaon District for Barat puja.

The *Tiwas* who constitute a major tribe in middle Assam are believed to have migrated to the plains from the Tibet region. However, the migration with its time and route is still shrouded in mystery. They have a concentration in terms of their habitat in Nagaon and Marigaon districts with some more sporadic settlements in Dhemaji, Jorhat and Lakhimpur districts. While most of the members of the community have adopted

Hinduism and Assamese language as their own, there are some of the groups following traditional faiths as well as retaining the language of which too have a mixture of Assamese. *Barat Puja* is an important festival for the entire community celebrated on the occasion of *Kati Bihu* which is observed during the autumnal period in which the community offers respect to the ancestral origins of the community. In the ritual progression of the ceremony which includes chantings *barat nam* , masked performances are also done with representations of Siva, *Garuda*, *tiger*, *bear*. *boar* etc. The masks are prepared of bamboo however the structure of the masks has a special identity of its own.

4. Photos (preliminary level)related to the project/ art form



The Sonowal Kachari Community Performers of Bahua Nrityaof Sonowal Kachari



Mask Making Preparation by Shri Hemchandra Goswami at Natun Camuguri Sattrra, Majuli



Khageswas Das of Dhuliya Bhaoriya tradition Ratneswar Das Bayan with Bordhol demonstration



Sarbeswar Bordoloi of the Tiwa Community

With the family of Ratneswar Bordoloi and Sarbeswar Bordoloi

5. Time Frame of the Project

While the estimated time frame of the project was a year due to the unwarranted situations caused by natural calamities in the Brahmaputra Valley the project will need an extension for a year and half.

6. Specific Areas of the Respective state in which the art form is practiced

The state identified for the present study is Assam and the areas within it where the forms are practiced are : Majuli, Narayanpur, Morigaon, Kamrup, Dudhnoi .

7. Conclusion

The mask in the performed body is a revelation of a concealed mind. In fact, it is a revelation and yet a concealment of realism in a symbolic plane which signifies the shades and dichotomy of mind. Since its inception, the concept of mask is visualized as a mode of interpreting the mind of a character through a body which consciously prepares and modifies

the identity of the character. The project envisions in analysing the layers of the meanings inherent in the masks right starting from its making to the performative interpretations. While the performance is the final output the making of the masks itself includes layered meanings of understanding a character.

During the field work have been done towards the study of the mask traditions of various communities. It's interesting to see the usages of the masks in various ritual contexts. While, in some respects it is used with a purpose of entertainment, in some other the ritualistic rigour of the performance suggests a deeper symbolic meaning of the masks apart from the physical utilization of the structure. Moreover, it's enlightening to see the preparation process of the masks which itself becomes a performance narrative. Attempts have been made to document the process of making of the mask which unmask the subjective discourse of the preparer and the prepared material. However, one of the biggest challenges faced during the field work is the periodic observation of these performances rather than regular performance. Hence being performed on a particular season with a periodic observance the ritual within three years some of the rituals couldn't be observed. However, interviews of the artists have been taken to understand the role of the masks in the performance and its mask making process.



Scheme for “Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage and Diverse Cultural Traditions of India”

Form for National Inventory Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage of India

A. Name of the State: Assam

B. Name of the Element/Cultural Tradition (in English)

Mask Traditions of Assam

B.1. Name of the element in the language and script of the community
Concerned, if applicable.

Tiwa language transcribed in Assamese, Sonowal Kachari Language transcribed in Assamese, *Desi* Language transcribed in Assamese.

C. Name of the communities, groups or, if applicable, individuals concerned (Identify clearly either of these concerned with the practice of the said element/cultural tradition)

Sonowal Kachari

Tiwa Community

Rabha Community

Non tribal Community of Majuli and Kamrup metropolitan

D. Geographical location and range of the element/cultural tradition (Please write about the other states in which the said element/tradition is present.

- Sonowal Kacharis are predominant in areas of Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh and Tinisukia.
- Barat puja done mostly by the Tiwas of the plains reside in Morigaon, Nagaon and Kamrup regions of Assam. The Hill Tiwas reside in the Karbi Anglong District of Assam and spread to the Ri-Bhoi districts of Meghalaya too.
- Bharigaan performed mostly in Goalpara district in the habit of the Pati Rabhas.
- Sattriya Masks get predominantly practiced in Camuguri Sattri, Majuli which has contributed immensely in the field of promotion and preservation of the art form.
- Dhuliya Bhaoriya has been mostly practiced in Morigaon district of Assam.

E. Identification and definition of the element/cultural tradition of the India

(Write “Yes” in one or more boxes to identify the domain(s) of intangible cultural heritage manifested by the element. If you tick ‘others’, specify the domain(s) in brackets.)

- i. (Yes) oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage
- ii. (Yes) performing arts
- iii. (Yes) social practices, rituals and festive events
- iv. (Yes) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe
- v. (Yes) traditional craftsmanship
- vi. other(s) ()

F. Provide a brief summary description of the element that can introduce it to readers who have never seen or experienced it.

Bahuwa Nritya of the Sonowal Kacharis

The *Sonowal Kacharis*, a section of the *Bodo-Kacharis* as mentioned earlier, inhabit mostly in the districts of Dibrugarh and Tinsukia with scattered settlements in the districts of Lakhimpur, Dhemaji and Golaghat. They are called as *Sonowals* as *Ahom* rulers are said to have engaged them in collecting gold particles by sifting the sands of the Sowansiri river. The community has adopted Assamese as their mother tongue and Hinduism through a process of acculturation. Hence their habitat and village lifestyle share commonality with the non-tribal groups or communities.

The *Bihu* is a very important festival for the entire community and the community holds its own belief for observing the festival and therefore the performances celebrate the myth and legends associated with cosmological view of the community. The rituals associated with rites de passage are also hosted by the community in which the *medhi* takes a major role in heading the ceremonial function.

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leaves and also wear facial masks made of dried gourd skin with dark colored paints. A special head gear from the bamboo strip with horns and cap veiled in black cloth is prepared for the performer. The accompanists also wear a special costume with white robes, head gear and long skirts. The presentation is a fast number as with sharp circular turns responding to the rhythmic beats of the percussion and cymbals. At the end of the presentation, the dancers are supposed to surrender their costume in a nearby river and return back to their normal life. The performance, also done on the occasion of *Bathou puja* is believed to usher in well being to the society.

Barat Puja of the Tiwa community

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Sattriya Masks

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theatre of Assam) itself speaks about the heights of the regard which the art practice received. The *Camuguri Sattra* is one of the most celebrated *Sattra* which has contributed immensely in the field of preservation and development of Sattriya Mask Traditions. Visit to the *Sattra* helped us in understanding the mask making process of and its practical aspects in the Sattriya Tradition

Bordhuliya Tradition

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- G. Who are the bearers and practitioners of the element/Cultural Traditions? Are there any specific roles or categories of persons with special responsibilities for the practice and transmission of it? If yes, who are they and what are their responsibilities?

There isn't any particular performance community who practices art. Performance is subject to equal participation of the people of the villagers or a *Sattra*. However,

women participate mostly in this performance process by weaving costumes for the performers.

H. How are the knowledge and skills related to the element transmitted today?

The system of knowledge associated with each and every cultural element is orally transferred with no written documentation of the art form. The fact that it's been practiced even today proves it's the community's firm belief in the expression that has made it prevalent even today. While these art forms are mostly related to the community's own expressive content, deeply entrenched in their system of knowledge, the cultural element celebrated with a spirit of unity and strength, binds the community together and transfers the same spirit of unity to the next generation.

I. What social functions and cultural meanings do the element/cultural tradition have today for its community?

The performance is not just "performing art" celebrated by the community but in most of the cases these performances are acts of veneration practiced with utmost respect. However, today the performances have also become a symbol of their distinctive cultural identity for each community.

J. Is there any part of the element that is not compatible with existing international human rights instruments or with the requirement of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, or with sustainable development? I.e. describe any aspect of the element/cultural tradition that may be unacceptable to Law of the country or may be in opposition to practicing community's harmony with others.

No

K. Your Project's contribution to ensuring visibility, awareness and encouraging dialogue related to the element/cultural tradition.

- While the finished product of masks are seen on stage, it's very important to understand the process of making of the art form, that builds up the character portrayal of the art form. This would enhance artistic dialogue and collaborations in this art form with other artistic skills.
- The project contributes in exploring underlayered meanings of the process of making the masks suiting to the context of the performance.
- The study contributes in bringing a kaleidoscope of the mask performance traditions in Assam and an aesthetic, sociological and performative appraisal and analysis of the some of these traditions which would help in the visibility of the art form in various academic forums.
- The project documents the living art traditions of the mask performances, hence it contributes towards the issues of preservation and sustenance of the art form.

L. Information about the safeguarding measures that may protect or promote the element/cultural tradition

a. (Write “Yes” in one or more boxes to identify the safeguarding measures that have been and are currently being taken by the communities, groups or individuals concerned)

- i. (YES) transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education
- ii. () identification, documentation, research
- iii. (YES) preservation, protection
- iv. (YES) promotion, enhancement
- v. (YES) revitalization

b. Write about the measures taken at local, state and national level by the Authorities to safeguard the element/cultural tradition?

The art forms have been mostly people’s repository or the community;s repository transmitting the system of knowledge generations after generations. Few activist of the region have taken steps forward to preserve the art forms with their personal efforts. The zonal cultural centres have taken steps to showcase few of the art forms. Doordarshan Kendra Guwahati and North East have also documented few art traditions. The state govt. and the central govt. has also supported some of the art forms like the Sattriya masks, Dhuliya Bhaona by presenting it in some of the state festivals. While some of them like Bahuwa Nritya and Barat puja are done as rituals, showcasing of these art forms outside the context of the ritual is yet to be explored.

M. Write about the threats, if any, to the element/cultural tradition related to its practice, visibility and future longevity. Give facts and relevant reasons based on the current scenario.

Art forms survive only with the practitioners. Hence more are the practitioners, the art form proliferate with more interpretations. In some cases, the new generations are not taking much interest in the field of mask making which is posing threat to the artistry of mask making of Tiwa community. The Bharigaan practioners are using the masks handed down to them by their ancestors and the masks itself are elements of veneration. Regular attempts of new mask making are lagging behind. The Sattriya masks and Bor dhuliya masks have been worked upon and new generations have also come forward to continue the tradition.

N. Safeguarding measures proposed

(This section should identify and describe safeguarding measures to protect and promote the element/cultural tradition. Such measures should be concrete and can be

implemented to formulate future cultural policy for safeguarding and promoting the element/cultural tradition in the state)

- Need of the workshops to train more community participants.
- Fellowships to the learners and artisans would be a great financial support since most of the villagers are farmers and work as amateurs in the field of arts.
- Showcasing of the art forms in community festivals in ritual context would help in promotion of the art form.
- Media could play an important role in covering such festivals which would remain as an archive.
- Research work on such artistic practices would highlight about these art forms in academic forums.

O. Community Participation

(Write about the participation of communities, groups and individuals related to the element/cultural tradition in formulation of your project).

The Community participation is strong. In fact that has been preserving this art form till date and in cases like Bharigaan has helped in revival of the form with a new verve.

P. Concerned community organization(s) or representative(s)

(Provide detailed contact information for each community organization or representative or other non-governmental organization that is concerned with the element such as associations, organizations, clubs, guilds, steering committees, etc.)

Kalpa, Assam Academy for Cultural Relations. Srimanta Foundation, Assam Sattrā Mahasabha, Vivekananda Kendra.

Prabin Saikia (7399702696), Mukul Rabha,

Puranjoy Sonowal, **9401122468** Muralidhar Das. **9954337139**.

Hemchandra Goswami. **9401937283**;

i. Name of the entity:

Sonowal Kachari Community, Rabha Community, Tiwa Community, Natun Samuguri Sattrā, Dhulia Bhaoriya.

ii. Name and title of the contact person: Puranjoy Sonowal, Bacan Rabha, Ratneswar Bordoloi, Hemchandra Goswami, Muralidhar Das.

iii. Address: Marica Village, Narayanpur Lakhimpur.

Loknatya Bharigaan Milan Gosthi, Manikganj, Goalpara

Teteliya Village, Morigaon.

Natun Samuguri Sattrā, Majuli.

Khoirabari Village, Sonapur, Kamrup.

iv. Telephone number: +919401122468; 8011109755; 8752008500; 9401937283; 9954337139.

v. E-mail:

vi. Other relevant information

Q. Give information of any Inventory, database or data creation centre

(local/state/national) that you may be aware of or of any office, agency, organisation or body involved in the maintenance of the said inventory etc.

The communities in the respective villages have started preserving their own art forms with respective groups of practitioners. The Loknatya Bharigaan Milan Gosthi is one of them. In few cases like the Tiwa community, Sonowal Kachari, the village annual festival committee puts up the festival and hence becomes an agency of promotion of the art. In cases of Sattriya masks, the sattrā itself gives an institutional support to the art form.

R. Principal published references or documentation available on the element/cultural tradition

(Books, articles, audio-visual materials, names and addresses of reference libraries, museums, private endeavours of artistes/individuals for preservation of the said element, publications or websites).

Books:

Adhikari, Gagan Chandra. *Srimanta Sankardev Aaru Uttar Purbanchalar Janagoshti*. Purbanchal Prakash. 2007.

Barkakti, S. N. *Tribes of Assam*. New Delhi. National Book Trust. 1969.

Barua, B. K (ed). *Asamar Lokasanskriti*. Gauhati: Lawyer's Book Stall, 1967.

_____ (ed). *A Cultural History of Assam*. Gauhati: Lawyer's Book Stall, 1969.

Bharali, Sailen. *Asamiya Loka Natya Parampara*. Guwahati: Bani Prakash, 1984.

Bhattacharyya, Promod Chandra. *Asomar Janjati*. Jorhat: Assam Sahitya Sabha, 1962.

Bordoloi, B. N, Sharma G. C Thakur, M. C Saikia. *Tribes of Assam Part 1*. Guwahati: Tribal Research Institute, 1987.

_____ . *Tribes of Assam Part II*. Guwahati: Tribal Research Institute, 1988.

Chatterji, S. K Choudhury, M. M. *Tribes of Assam Plains A Profile*. Gauhati: Directorate for Development of Plains Tribes of Assam, 1980.

Das, A. *Asamar Utsav Parban Butoli*. Morigaon: Jnanviday Prakash, 2003.

Goswami, Ram. *Asamar Loknatya*. Jorhat: Assam Sahitya Sabha, 1991.

Weblinks:

<http://indianfolklore.org/TataFellowships/?p=774>. Accessed on 03/07/2015.

<http://tiwatribes.blogspot.in/>. Accessed on 03/07/2015.

http://www.srimanta.net/contents_13.php?q=3&ID=2&ID3=13&link_caption=Sonowal%20kacharis. Accessed on 06/07/2016.

http://research.omicsgroup.org/index.php/Sonowal_Kacharis. Accessed on 06/07/2016.

http://www.telegraphindia.com/1070504/asp/northeast/story_7726863.asp. Accessed on 12/08/2016.

<http://indianfolklore.org/TataFellowships/?tag=bhari-gan>. Accessed on 02/01/2016.

Signature:

Name & Designation:

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.....

Name of Institution (If applicable):

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Address:

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1st Report of
Unmasking the Masks: An Analytical Study and Documentation of the Mask
Performances of Assam.

By: Dr. Anwesa Mahanta
Sattriya Dancer and Researcher
Guwahati

1. Introduction:

Mutability and dissolution can be answered back by a reproduction of art. Whether it is a creation or a re-production, beauty gradually lives on surpassing beyond the mortal beauty with versions of new aesthetic contents and interpretations. Masks likewise are artefacts used to re-incarnate images of a character representation in a ritual as well as a theatre production.

Assam, as the land stands with diverse colours and ethnicity, presents a wide vista of colour and costume, life and tradition, body and sound, context and texture which find reflections in the masks and its mask-making process itself. With all these contributing to it - the society, man, its mind making, playing with, looking through the mask - an exclusive tradition is enduring for several centuries harnessing traditional skills and motifs. And through these multiple traditions the mind of the artist views the world – both expressed and concealed - within the mind and outside.

The present research proposal within the course of the ongoing research analysis has proceeded with an analytical study of some of the mask traditions of Assam covering the following plan of structure for undergoing the research.

- Masks and its context in the performance.
- Performance Techniques
- The mask making process.
- Issues of Preservation
- Performance – Intra-textual and Inter-textual Dimensions

2. Activities done so far:

1. Documentation of the mask performers of Sonowal Kachari Community in the Marica Village of Narayanpur.

The *Sonowal Kacharis*, a section of the *Bodo-Kacharis* as mentioned earlier, inhabit mostly in the districts of Dibrugarh and Tinsukia with scattered settlements in the districts of Lakhimpur, Dhemaji and Golaghat. They are called as *Sonowals* as *Ahom* rulers are said to have engaged them in collecting gold particles by sifting the sands of the Sowansiri river. The community has adopted Assamese as their mother tongue and Hinduism through a

process of acculturation. Hence their habitat and village lifestyle share commonality with the non-tribal groups or communities.¹

The *Bihu* is a very important festival for the entire community and the community holds its own belief for observing the festival and therefore the performances celebrate the myth and legends associated with cosmological view of the community. The rituals associated with rites de passage are also hosted by the community in which the *medhi* takes a major role in heading the ceremonial function.

Bahua nrtya is a performance done by the community on the occasion of Bihu to protect the community from all evil happenings. The enactment is also based on the *rudra dance* done by Siva and his consort when king *Daksa* humiliated Siva. The *bahuwa* performer recreates the episode of humiliation and depicts how the Lord beheads the king *Daksa*, but on request of *Sati* the Lord blesses him life with a head of a goat. Basically the performance is done on the occasion of camp-fire of the *Bihu* festival, an episode of representation with a male and female performers arranged with music and dance. The performers are veiled with a costume specially prepared for the occasion with banana leaves and also wear facial masks made of dried gourd skin with dark colored paints. A special head gear from the bamboo strip with horns and cap veiled in black cloth is prepared for the performer. The accompanists also wear a special costume with white robes, head gear and long skirts. The presentation is a fast number as with sharp circular turns responding to the rhythmic beats of the percussion and cymbals. At the end of the presentation, the dancers are supposed to surrender their costume in a nearby river and return back to their normal life. The performance, also done on the occasion of *Bathou puja* is believed to usher in well being to the society.

¹ The village headman is known as *gaonbura* who is the key figure in the village administering the whole dwelling of the community. Office bearers like '*barik, pathek, asirbadha bura, gitghai, medhi, tamuli and randhani*' are there to support the head in his administration. The office bearers are entrusted with their individual roles: the *barik* is a treasurer and is in charge of the *Namghar*, *pathek* is the official reader of the ancient scriptures related mostly to religion, *asirbada bura* offer blessings on the religious occasions, the *gitghai* is known for his mastery in *husori geet* and religious songs, the *medhi* heads the religious ceremonies, the *bayan* takes care to promote and teach *Sattriya* dance and music, and a *tamuly* is supposed to serve betel nuts and leaves to the gathering of a religious ceremony, the *randhani* looks after the community feasting on such a gathering.



Mask Makers and Performers of Sonowal Kachari

2. Documentation of the Sattriya mask performers of Natun Camuguri Sattr, Majuli

Revived and popularized as a vibrant art tradition by the Sankaradeva Movement, use of masks formed a major component in the efflorescence of arts during in Assam were not a dormant feature in the days earlier to the resurgence. Sankaradeva first used mask in his *Cihna Yatra*. With the use of indigenous elements and an understanding of the ethnicity the saint-poet conceptualized mask and its implementation in *bhaona* with a wider artistic vision. With this experiment starting from *Chihna Yatra* to *Ram Vijaya*, being his first and last plays respectively by the saint, Sankaradeva used *cho-mukhas* in various ways and that opened up a new panoramic vision of aesthetics before the audience and at the same time unwrapped a new form of practice which gradually contributed to its development as a distinct art and also its expansion in terms of vocational training and economic gains. The discipline of *Mukha Bhaona* – an emerging trend from the *Bhaona* (Vaisnava theatre of Assam) itself speaks about the heights of the regard which the art practice received. The *Camuguri Sattr* is one of the most celebrated *Sattr* which has contributed immensely in the field of preservation and development of Sattriya Mask Traditions. Visit to the Sattr helped us in understanding the mask making process of and its practical aspects in the Sattriya Tradition.



Hemchandra Goswami illustrating the mask making process at Natun Camuguri Sattra, Majuli

3. Documentation of the mask performers of the *Bordhulia* tradition.

An orchestral presentation of *dhol* and cymbals accompanied with dramatic enactment was introduced in the area of Mitoni in the lower parts of Assam. The person leading the drums is called *baya*. The orchestral presentation is performed in the ritual ceremonies of marriages. 30 to 35 team members perform in the presentation including *dhuliyas* and *bhaorias*. *Chongs* are performed which are dramatic enactments which runs at two levels – one narrates the mythical tale while the narrative comments on social realities. Wooden masks are used to enhance the impact of the narrative commentary. The presentation includes a circus-kind of presentation capturing audience's attention immediately with several acrobatic stunts. Mythological stories are interfused in between. Songs, dance, *byanga abhinaya* (comic interludes), It's a little difficult to say when this form has emerged. The form is one of the examples of presentation that has emerged from societal needs or the demand for social entertainment with popular stories These presentations continue throughout the night. The *Dhuliyas* at times also use wooden masks. The *Dhuliyas* stand in cue during the presentation while the main *Dhuliyas* keep moving in the acting space during the course of presentation. In some areas, the main *Dhuliyas* wear headgears (*paguris*) and wear colored costume with *gamoca* on the waist. There are no rules set for the costume of the *Dhuliyas*. At times they also wear oversized gowns to create hilarious situations.



Khageswar Das curving masks of Bordhuliya Tradition

Murali Mohan Das, activist who has been working in field of promotion of the art form.

4. Documentation of the Mask maker and performer of the Barat puja of Tiwa Community.

The *Tiwas* who constitute a major tribe in middle Assam are believed to have migrated to the plains from the Tibet region. However, the migration with its time and route is still shrouded in mystery. They have a concentration in terms of their habitat in Nagaon and Marigaon districts with some more sporadic settlements in Dhemaji, Jorhat and Lakhimpur districts. While most of the members of the community have adopted Hinduism and Assamese language as their own, there are some of the groups following traditional faiths as well as retaining the language of which too have a mixture of Assamese. *Barat Puja* is an important festival for the entire community celebrated on the occasion of *Kati Bihu* which is observed during the autumnal period in which the community offers respect to the ancestral origins of the community. In the ritual progression of the ceremony which includes chantings *barat nam*, masked performances are also done with representations of Siva, *Garuda*, *tiger*, *bear*, *boar* etc. The masks are prepared of bamboo however the structure of the masks has a special identity of its own.



Mask Makers of the Tiwa community



Sarbeswar Bordoloi during his illustration on mask.

5. Documentation of the Rabha Community at Manikganj Village for Bharigaan.

Another major community in the ethnographic profile of Assam is the *Rabhas*, widely scattered but mostly concentrated in the districts of Goalpara, Dhubri, Kamrup and Darrang. Besides Assam there, settlement spreads over areas of Meghalaya, West Bengal, Bangladesh and Nepal also. While divergent opinions prevail among scholars like Dr B. M Das² relating to the nature of migration, its emergence as a tribe, origin of its name, its linguistic features etc. It can certainly be said that they are sub-grouped socially into *Rangdani*, *Maitori*, *Pati* and *Koccha*. The *Rangdani* and the *Maitori* groups speak the language of their own with slight variations while the *Pati Rabhas* having adopted Hindu customs for all intents and purpose speak a dialect of Assamese language as their own. Like the other plains tribes, the *Rabhas* have a series of performative rituals emerging from agriculture and life cycle based festive occasions. With four essential musical instruments – *kara*, *jhap kara*, *badum duppa*, *brangci*, *karhanal*, *buburenga*, *gobena* etc. they celebrate *baikho* or *khokci* festivals for wealth and prosperity of the community. An important performative form among the *Pati Rabhas* is the *Bhaarigaan*, a semi-dramatic tradition with masks where stories from the *Ramayana* are represented with music and dance. Large sized wooden masks are used by the performers during the performance to represent the figures of Ravana, Hanumana etc. Stylized elements of gaits are seen in the entry of the characters of the masked performances. Music plays an important role since the scenes of the acts are connected with the musical renditions and hence play a role of the chorus. Since the masks made of wood are heavy, the movement of the characters is also marked with steadiness. Although fast movements are included the mask performer doesn't takes up a minimal space utilization.



A sequence from the Sugriva entry



Artists of Loknatya Bharigan Milan Gosthi

² Das, B. M. *The Peoples of Assam*. Delhi: Gian Publishing House, 1987.

3. Methods:

The methods employed in the present research are practiced based and contextual approach to the subject. Research attempts were made to access the material for the study of the chosen art form in appropriate and ethical ways keeping in view the practitioner's rights, importance, concentration, notice and receptivity. Extensive fieldwork has been done to access to vast body of cultural texts preserved and practiced by the performing communities and social groups in which both direct and participant observation methods were used for collecting data. Interviews were taken to understand the process of making the masks and mask maker's approach towards performance. Also, the already archived materials have been tapped to use as one of the library references for the present research. The primary source of understanding the subject would be based on the interviews and the observations of the field work. Photo documentation and video recording of the interviews and demonstrations would be done for the work of preservation and archival process of the practitioner's views and illustrations. The secondary source would be relied upon the books and articles written on the subject.

4. Observation and Analysis:

The mask in the performed body is a revelation of a concealed mind. In fact, it is a revelation and yet a concealment of realism in a symbolic plane which signifies the shades and dichotomy of mind. Since its inception, the concept of mask is visualized as a mode of interpreting the mind of a character through a body which consciously prepares and modifies the identity of the character. In this conceptualization of mask performance each form, be it Satriya masks, Bharigaan, Bordhuliya, Bahuwa Nritya, or teh sequence of mask displays at Tiwa community, play with these puzzles of human mind through a large body of arts, both plastic and performing, and represent these inner reflections which get evidenced by another set of minds observing, receiving and interpreting these visual codes. And with transformative power of the bodies communicating the messages, the eyes of the commoner along with the performed body experience not only what the eye perceives but even the unsaid and hidden aspects, which transport the receptive minds to a realm beyond the physical existence.

5. Conclusion:

During the last six months field work have been done to undergo a study of the mask

traditions of various communities. It's interesting to see the usages of the masks in various ritual contexts. While, in some it is used with a purpose of entertainment the ritualistic rigour of the performance suggests a deeper symbolic meaning of the masks apart from the physical utilization of the structure. Moreover, it's enlightening to see the preparation process of the masks which itself becomes a performance narrative. Attempts have been made to document the process of making of the mask which unmask the subjective discourse of the preparer and the prepared material. However, one of the biggest challenges faced during the field work is the periodic observation of these performances rather than regular performance. Hence being performed on a particular season with a periodic observance the ritual within three years some of the rituals couldn't be observed. However, interviews of the artists have been taken to understand the role of the masks in the performance and its mask making process.