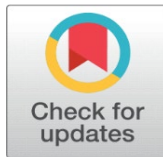


# THE CREATION OF TRADITIONAL MASKS IN ASSAM WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MAJULI

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## ABSTRACT

The Vaisnavite Monasteries are an integral part of the breathtaking Sattras Assam socio-religious and cultural complex, which was established in the 16th century by the esteemed Saint Vaisnavite Srimanta Sankaradeva. Sattras is a truly exceptional institution that encompasses a wide array of socio-religious, cultural, and artistic domains. The Mask or Mukha, due to its portrayal of spiritual beliefs, has historically possessed a distinctive shape in Assam, making it an essential cultural and religious tradition. Masks have been utilized in rituals and festivities across the globe for centuries, and India has a rich cultural heritage in the art of mask-making. Majuli Island in Assam, renowned for its mask-making, holds a special place in the hearts of culture enthusiasts worldwide.

**Keywords:** Traditional Mask, Mukha, Culture, Sattras, Art

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Indian state of Assam is located in the country's northeast. Assam is a region with mountains, plains, and rivers. Bhutan, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Meghalaya, West Bengal, and Bangladesh surround her. The state is traversed by the Brahmaputra River from North to South. The state is divided into the Brahmaputra Valley and the Barak Valley, two river valleys.

The Assamese's ethnic background ranges from Mongoloid tribes to people with pure Indian ancestry. Assam's first settlers were presumably of Austric ancestry. They are known as "proto- Austroloids" since it is believed that they

migrated from Australia and other Pacific Ocean islands to the Asian mainland. The proto-Austroloids of ancient Assam appear to have been ancestors of the Khasis and Jaintias. In Assam, the Mongoloids had arrived after the Austrics. The Bodo tribe first emerged and settled across the Brahmaputra valley among the Mongoloids. The Bodos, also known as the Kacharis, were formerly a dominant ethnic group. They are reported to have controlled all of Assam at one point. The tribe's additional branches include: The tribe also includes the Kacharis, Meches, Garos, Abors, Miris, Mishmis, Rabha, Tipra, Akas, Daflas, Nagas, Kukis, Mikirs, and Mizos as subtribes. The Kacharis and Chutias ruled over a sizable portion of eastern Assam on the eve of the arrival of the Ahoms in the 13th century. The Aryans, who had already made an early settlement in the Brahmaputra valley, arrived next. Of course, the Aryans could establish their cultural dominance over this nation among the other races. The Assamese religious system is gradually becoming more flexible. Animism, Tantrism, Brahminism, and Vaishnavism are the indigenous religions. Prior to the establishment of Shrimanta Sankardeva's new Vaishnavite religion, the Assamese practised Tantric ceremonies (1449-1568). The Aryans' arrival in Assam marked the beginning of Hinduism in its purest form. [IGNCA. \(2022\)](#)

**Figure 1**



**Figure 1** Ravana

**Source** <https://www.taleof2backpackers.com/mask-making-majuli-assam>

### 1.1. AMONG ASSAMESE PILGRIMAGE SITES, MAJULI IS WELL KNOWN FOR ITS SANCTITY

Assam's cultural centre is Majuli. It is the world's largest River Island and a well-known place of pilgrimage. It is home to the Vaisnavite Monastery's main building, which has many Sattras. The Sattras serve as both the hub of religious activity and the foundation of Assamese culture as a whole. I'm attempting to paint a picture of the numerous Sattras of Majuli and a glimpse of cultural events in this essay. One of the largest populated river islands in the world is Majuli, the Assamese state's spiritual centre. It is a well-known pilgrimage site in Assam. The area is also regarded as the state's cultural centre. The Sattras, or Vaisnavite monasteries, of Majuli are well-known worldwide. Many pilgrimages come to this island each year to see the Sattras. The Sattras draw visitors in with their deep spirituality, peaceful surroundings, traditional religious arts and crafts, literary contributions, and collection of century-old antiquities. [Nath \(2013\)](#)

**Figure 2****Figure 2** Ravana

**Source** <https://www.taleof2backpackers.com/mask-making-majuli-assam>

## 2. MASK MAKING

Masks have been utilised in ceremonies and celebrations all across the world. While masquerade balls are popular in the West, India also has an own cultural tradition of masks and mask manufacturing. For its expertise in mask-making, Majuli Island on the Brahmaputra River in Assam has earned a particular place in the hearts of culture enthusiasts everywhere.

The neo-Vaishnavite culture of Assam, which is home to Sattras or monasteries, is also centred on the island of Majuli. According to legend, Mahapurush Sankardeva founded them in the latter half of the fifteenth century. Some old Sattras have ornate wood panels with fine detailing that depict tribal art, traditional culture, and Ahom kingdom heritage. Traditional performing arts have significant centres in the Sattras. Each Sattras is unique and acts as a temple for a particular style of art. For instance, the Auniati Satra is well-known for its collection of antiquated artefacts, paalnaam, a group prayer, and traditional Mishing tribal dances. Dramatic masks are used in the raas leela and bhaona theatre productions that are staged by the Dakshinpat and Garamur Sattras. The most well-known of them is Samaguri Sattras, which has highlighted Majuli for its mask-making craft and has some of its amazing folk works on display in the Victoria & Albert Museum in London.

## 3. STYLE AND TECHNIQUE/APPLICATION OF COLOUR

The fact that these masks are fashioned from local materials on the island rather than Plaster of Paris and without the use of artificial colour sets them apart from other folk masks found around the nation. Complex intricacies and intricacy receive further consideration (newer kinds of masks have movable jaws, making dialogue delivery easier). The traditional craft of manufacturing masks is taught to the pupils at the Sattras by the guru or teacher, or from father to son.

**Figure 3**

**Figure 3** Application of colour on Mask (Mukha)

**Source** <httpswww.tribuneindia.comnewsfeaturesa-world-of-masks-in-assams-majuli-island-177376>

The process entails building a bamboo framework in three dimensions, then plastering fabric pieces with clay. It is covered with a mixture of clay and cowdung after drying. This aids in giving the mask depth and more detail. For beards, moustaches, and hair, water hyacinth and jute fibres are employed. After the mask is finished, it is burnished with a kordhoni (bamboo file). Finally, skillful painting gives the masks drama. The hengul (red) and hentul (yellow) stones are the preferred sources of colour for Majuli's mask-makers. [Majithia \(2020\)](#)

Making a mask involves a complex process. Making a three-dimensional framework for the face is the first step. It is constructed from split pieces of a local bamboo type. The framework is made by weaving these breaks into a hexagonal pattern. Currently, pieces of cotton cloth dipped in a mixture made from clayey soil, water, and cow dung are placed on top of the woven base. Using a particular pair of knives, facial features are then carved out on each of the wet frames after this paste has been applied to the mask as many times as necessary. After that, the pieces are dried in the sun. Earlier, the masks were decorated with natural colours. Now, however, synthetic colours purchased from the market are employed. Jute and water hyacinth are used to make moustaches and hair. The masks are only prepared for the Bhaona performance following these painstaking preparations.

**Figure 4**

**Figure 4** Different types of Mask (Mukha)

**Source** <httpswww.taleof2backpackers.commask-making-majuli-assam>



#### 4. TYPE OF MASKS

There are three types of masks produced. Cho Mukha is a head and body mask, Lotokoi is a larger mask that covers the chest, and Mukha Bhaona covers the face. The eminent Sankardeva explained the characters in his Ankitya Natya, from which bhaonas have emerged, and this is exactly how the masks are produced. The performers can wear these bamboo masks easily and comfortably because of their light weight. The mask is made in a period of 10 to 15 days.

We witnessed Ram, Sita, Ravana, Narasimha, and the abhorrent Kabandha, as recounted earlier. There were a few more devil masks present. These days, they also produce tiny masks that tourists purchase as mementos. These days, a lot of foreign tourists are also learning the craft of producing masks. The area is permanently changing due to tourism. [Majithia \(2020\)](#)

**Figure 5**



**Figure 5** <httpswww.tribuneindia.comnewsfeaturesa-world-of-masks-in-assams-majuli-island-177376>

**Figure 5**



**Figure 6** <httpswww.taleof2backpackers.commask-making-majuli-assam>

#### 5. CONCLUSION

The majority of countries have artisanal traditions, including those involving masks, which are inextricably linked to their cultural pasts, making them a global

phenomenon. The power of the human imagination and the universality of the human intellect are emphasised through masks from all over the world. The Mask effectively creates a silent language that is known by everyone in the society and culture, defining the essence of human expressions and encapsulating fundamental human emotions at many levels of "being," such as spiritual, religious, cultural, and material. As a cultural tradition of Majuli mask-making, it has greatly contributed to our intangible heritage over the years. Srimanta Sankaradeva introduced it into Sattriya culture as an aesthetic interpretation. The tradition involves passing on knowledge from generation to generation. Despite the fact that the mask-making method has not changed, their use has expanded far beyond Sattria and Namghar. Aside from traditional theatrical performances, these masks are also used for home décor, museum exhibits, and contemporary plays. This inventive creative experiment has made this custom well known all over the world. Majuli's mask makers aim to use their ancient skills to reflect contemporary manifestations of globalization.

It is indisputable that the tradition of creating masks is currently based on the preferences and various aesthetic standards of contemporary audiences. However, they imply that now is the time to seriously consider saving this heritage from extinction and take a risk. The Samaguri Sattria is an excellent tradition that exemplifies how a community may take positive action to preserve and retain its cultural legacy through preservation, daily practice, and passing on knowledge to others.

### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

None.

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