

Tradition of Mask Making in a Vaishnavite Monastery of Assam, India

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Abstract

In Assam there is a rich heritage of mask making. The mask makers of Assam have shown great resourcefulness in selecting and combining the available materials, bamboos, cane, clay, cloth, pith plant (Aeschynomene indica), wood, etc.,. Morphological features of the mask are derived from natural forms. In Assam mask is an integral object of satras wherein many demon, serpent, incarnation of Lord Vishnu are knitted and portrayed in dances and dramas. Vaishnavite masks are made of woven bamboo splits covered with cotton cloth and clay, so that they remain light in comparison to their size. Generally the morphological features of masks are derived from natural form. Masks which possess human features are known as anthropomorphic and those with animal features are known as theriomorphic. In the satras of Majuli both anthropomorphic and the theriomorphic masks are made, though some are combined ones. Occasionally pliant masks are used in performing arts of the satras of Majuli. Majuli is a river island, where there are 22 satras among whom four (Alengi Narasimha Satra, Bihimpur Satra, Chamaguri Satra and Natun Chamaguri Satra) have praiseworthy tradition of mask making. The available mask of the Satras of Majuli are good examples of this tradition which continuing from the ancient past to the present period. This paper attempts to give an appraisal of the continuity and change of mask making tradition of Nature Chamaguri satra of Majuli.

(i)

Masks are virtual faces which are use as a form of disguise. It transforms something from natural aspects to that of culture. It is usually worn over or infront of the face; sometimes however a mask covers almost the whole body of the wearer. A mask hides the identity of a person and helps to reveal the identity of another being. These inevitable characteristics of hiding and revealing personalities and moods are indispensable to all the masks found in different parts of the world. Usually masks are worn to express ferocity and other feelings which are not possible to express by human

beings through bare faces. Masks are generally worn with a costume; sometimes such a costume is so complete that it covers the entire body of the wearer. Mask is a form of art. It is an aesthetic creation of man and it has a thought provoking history of evolution. In human society there are generally two specific features of masks. The morphological features of the mask are derived from natural forms. Masks which possess human features are known as anthropomorphic and those with animal features are known as theriomorphic. Some of the masks closely resemble real objects while some others are made on the basis of imagination. Usually masks represent demons and deities, ancestors, animals, imagined figures, etc. Among the uses of masks socio-religious, festive, theatrical, funerary and commemorative, therapeutic, etc. are very common.



Fig: Anthropomorphic mask of Demon Khara



Fig: Theriomorphic mask of monkey king Sugriva

In each society there is pristine permission and prohibition integral to facial expressions. In all culture keen attention has been paid to train the members about the facial expression according to the context. Some of the facial expressions are taken as the sign of vulgarity and bad manner of a person. Moreover, an expression accepted in a particular situation like in marriage ceremony, different festivals, etc., are not accepted in a mortuary rite or in some other rituals. The facial expressions tabooed in different environments of a culture are also depicted through the masks made by the members of

that society. This proves that masks are the medium through which one can express such feelings which do not have social sanction. In most of the societies tradition restricts the imagination of a mask maker, and he is not allowed to make a mask ignoring the pristine code. There are many tales about the harassment by demons and deities of the mask maker for creating a mask ignoring the traditional strictures. Moreover, such masks create displeasure amongst the fellow members of the society. It should be noted that in almost all the societies, mask making is a male job. In Assam although it is not tabooed for the woman, yet all the mask makers of the state are males only. A mask maker creates a mask within the traditional framework; the spectators of the society can explain every feature of a mask, because they are also acquainted with the norms and values of the society. While wearing a mask, it is believed that the person feels the presence of the demon or deity who lives in the mask, in his body and heart. Some of the masks are greatly revered by the people and only pious and good man is allowed to wear such masks. There are many stories of mishappening due to the wearing of revered mask by a wicked person camouflaging his mischievous activities. Sometimes the wearer of a mask undergoes a psychic change and behaves like the demon whose mask he has worn and foretells in frenzy. A paramount role of mask is to provide the change of the age of the demon or the deity and to correlate it with the present time. The spectators of a particular society can easily identify the different masks, and the gestures and postures of the wearer because they are the bearers of same culture. A mask can create pleasure and gaiety; however most of the masks create fear, anguish, and death.

Masks have intricate existence in the socio-cultural matrix of different societies and have been used for different purposes, among which socio-religious uses are overwhelming. The universe of the mask is the world of imagination. In some of the backward societies and also in some comparatively progressive societies masks are mainly associated with ceremonies and festivals which have social and religious significance. Masks are also used with funerary rituals, to cure disease and ailments, in fertility rights and so on. Use of masks in performing arts like in play dance drama, etc., is very common in a good number of societies. Today masks are used in some of the sports and also in warfare.

(ii)

Masks have been designed in innumerable varieties from a good number of materials available in the environment. Mask makers have shown great resourcefulness in selecting and combining the available materials in their surroundings. Among the materials used to make masks bamboo, cane, clay, cloth, feather, fibre, fruit shell, leather, metal, paper, pith plant (Assamese: *Kunhila*, Botanical name: *Aeschynomene indica*), stone, shell, wood, etc. are very common. Usually the masks are made from perishable materials which are rarely preserved for centuries. Mask is a culture complex and a good number of elements are indispensably related to it in every society. The study of primitive art including mask has attracted many anthropologists and scholars from various disciplines. In India, a good number of communities have the tradition of mask making, some of them use masks till today for different purposes. However, archeological evidence of masks on this country is scanty. There is no prehistoric evidence to know about the past of the glorious tradition of mask in Assam. Till to the recent past, the craftsmen of Assam made masks from bamboo, clay, earthen pot, gourd shell, pith plant, sheath of areca nut leaf, wood, etc. Though wood and pith plant are also used, nowadays the mask makers of Assam, particularly mask makers of Majuli, usually make masks with the bamboo spilt covered with cotton cloth, clay and cowdung. The craftsman who has to work with a stone or a wooden log has to make the mask within the size of the material. On the other hand the craftsmen of Assam are in better position, because they principally make mask with bamboo spilt, which could be easily moulded to transform their ideas.

The masks hold deep significance in the socio-cultural study of a community which has a tradition of mask making. Mask is an integral trait of each civilization of world. In Assam also there is a rich heritage of mask and it is indispensable element of the *satras*. 'A wave of renaissance in the universe of religion and society swept over Assam during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Sankaradeva (1449-1569 AD) was the initiator of this movement known as Neo-Vaishnava movement or *bhakti* movement. Sankaradeva propagated a form of Vaishnavism that was simpler and more accessible than the ritualistic Hinduism of that time. The doctrine propounded by Sankaradeva

proved to be a great unifying force among the people of Assam irrespective of caste and creed. To preach Vaishnavism Sankaradeva established two types of religious institution - *namghar* and *satra*. *Namghar* is a village level institution while *satra* is the supreme institution of Assam's Vaishnavism. The term *satra* at the time did not convey the sense of a systematic institution which developed after the death of Sankaradeva' (Sarma, 1966:103). Literally the term *satra* means *adhivesana* (assembly), *homa* or *jagyna* (sacred fire), or *nivasa* (abode). In Assam's context the term refers to the supreme residential unit of Vaishnavism where the Guru and his disciples live to practise Vaishnavism. 'Namghars and *satras* also acted as agencies of social control and in the course of time these institutions have grown into cultural centers. In fact, the *satras* in contemporary times have given a distinctive flavours of Assamese culture. The establishment of *satras*, each having a body of followers, with the emergence of distinct residential communities centering round them, have been a characteristic feature of the Vaishnavite movement found in full expression through such central institution as the *satras*' (Barua, 1994:21).

Majuli is the embodiments of socio-economic and cultural awaken of Assam and is known for the visit of Sankaradeva in the early sixteenth century. Majuli is a riverine island situated in the upper reaches of the river Brahmaputra in upper Assam within the latitude of 26°45' North to 27°12' North and longitude of 93°39' East to 94°35' East, with mean height of 84.5 metre above maximum sea level. Though due to the relentless erosion the area of Majuli has changes frequently, at present (1991 census) total area of the island is 3058400 hectre. Majuli has a population of 1.6 lakh, majority being tribal, with tremendous potential for spiritual and eco-tourism. In the sixteenth century Sankaradeva took shelter in Majuli and spent a couple of years at Dhuvahat Belguri in west Majuli which was a place of historic and auspicious glory. Sankaradeva had established the first *satra* at Belguri of Majuli. In Majuli , he initiated his principal apostle Madhavadeva. During the heyday of Sankaradeva there were 65 *satras*, however, at present there are only 22 *satras* which only four have glorious tradition of mask making. These are : Alengi Narasinha Satra, Bihimpur Satra, Chamaguri Satra and Natun Chamaguri Satra. The Chamaguri Satra is situated at a distance of around 8 km. on the southern direction of Majuli Police Station. This *satra* was established by Chakrapani, the

son of Sankaradeva's great grand daughter Keshavapriya, in the year 1663. Segmentation of the *satra* is a well known fact. In the year 1923, a section of the bards integral to the Chamaguri Satra bifurcated from the original *satra* and had established the Natun Chamaguri Satra. Both the *satras*, Chamaguri and Natun Chamaguri, have resourced with the notable skill of mask making.

Majuli has a praiseworthy tradition of mask making. In the remote past, it is said by many old men of Natun Chamaguri Satra, that a loud voice of unknown being heard from the river Brahmaputra urging people to learn a skill as '*Banhtote kathito, jopatote pachito*', the meaning of which is 'you will get a piece of split from a bamboo and a basket from a bamboo grove'. The miraculous voice was heard again and again to inspire the people of Majuli for learning the skill of mask making. The primary occupation of the people of Majuli is agriculture and are all bound to the wheel of agricultural works. The other works like basketry, boat making, domestication of animals, etc., are more or less obligation to them. Therefore, nobody intended whole heartedly to obey the voice and to learn the skill of mask making. They also thought that they will get only a split from a bamboo and a basket only from a bamboo grove. During that period baskets and such articles are not commodities for sale in market. Hand fan (*bichani*), different type of baskets like *pachi, kharahi, tom*, etc., are made by the persons who know the skill, and generally such articles were taken by the co-villagers without giving any money to the maker. Owing to such a situation the people of Majuli had not shown any inclination towards learning the new craft.

(iii)

In Assamese language the equivalent term for 'masks' and 'mask maker' are '*mukha*' and '*khanikar*', respectively. To make a mask the craft man fetch a local variety of bamboo known as *jatibanh* (*Bambusa tulda Roxb*), which is neither immature nor very mature. Then with the help of a machete (*da*) the bamboo is cut into pieces of about 2 to 2.5 meter in length. These bamboo pieces are kept under water of pond or pool for a period of 5 to 7 days. The soaking of bamboo pieces in water prevent insect attack and provide more flexibility to the bamboo tubes. Then with the machete tubes are longitudinally divided into a few pieces from which splits are made with the help of a sharp knife (*katari*). These bamboo splits are woven in open hexagonal pattern to make

the base of the mask. 'In hexagonal work the wefts instead of being horizontal and vertical are worked in three directions, forming in open work hexagonal spaces in close

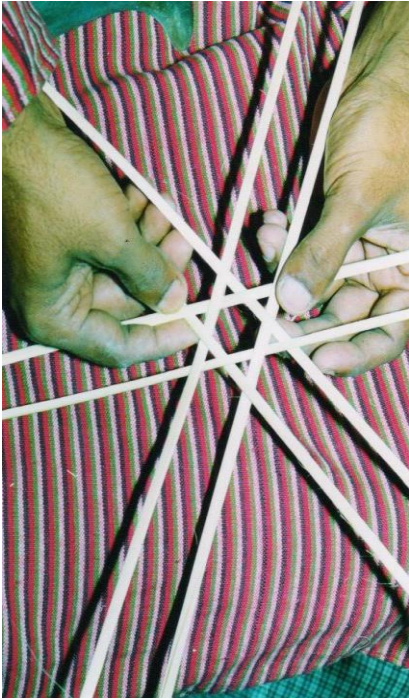


Fig: The open hexagonal pattern



Fig: The mask makers engage in making base of the mask



Fig: The base of the mask is covered with the mixture of cotton cloth, clay and cowdung of calf



Fig: The step of *chehara dia*, giving the appearance of the mask

work, six pointed star' (A Committee of Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, 1954:273). Use of open hexagonal pattern as a basketry technique in Assam is very old. The mask makers referred to this as *Lakhimi sutra*. Lakhimi or Lakshmi is the Hindu goddess of wealth and prosperity. Goddess Lakshmi is also known by the name Shri, which means 'beauty'. A mask is an object of beauty and the epitome of aesthetic value. Moreover, throughout Assam paddy to be sown in the next year is preserved cautiously in a bamboo basket (*tom*), which is invariably weaved in open hexagonal pattern. Irrespective of caste and creed, the Assamese people respect paddy as one of the abodes of goddess Lakshmi. Among all the baskets integral to the paddy cultivation, only *tom* is weaved in open hexagonal pattern. Because the mask is weaved like the *tom* and a *tom* is believed to be the abode of goddess Lakshmi or Lakhimi, therefore, the weaving *sutra* (definition) of the mask is known as *Lakhimi sutra*.

The weaved base of a mask is covered with one or more pieces old cotton fabrics, which is wiped with a fluid of a special type of clay (*Kumarmati*) and water before covering the mask. Then a mixture is made with the cowdung of calves, clay, and water is applied over the mask for a few times according to the requirement. In this step, features of the mask become prominent. This step is known as *chehera dia*, means 'giving the appearance'. Then it is dried in sunshine. Before completely drying, the mask is scrapped with a bamboo scraper (*karani*), which is followed by drying and colouring of the mask. Embellishments like hair, moustache, crown, and required ornaments are finally added to a mask. In old days the craftsmen used natural colours for the beautification of a mask. Extraction of natural colour is very troublesome, time consuming, and strenuous process. Therefore, nowadays the craftsmen use colours available in the market. During the pre-independence period, craftsmen kept colour in bamboo tubes of different sizes, small brushes were made from pigeons feathers or bamboo sticks by adding goat's hair as bristles; broad brushes were made by fixing jute fibre to bamboo sticks. Today the mask makers use synthetic brushes. However, till today each craftsman use pristine broad brush made of jute fibre and bamboo stick.

There are three types of masks in Majuli: These are: *mukh mukha*, *cho mukha* and *lotokai mukha*. *Mukh mukha* is worn over the face. *Cho mukha* is very big in size and covers almost the whole body of a person. Sometimes a *cho mukha* is made 2 to 5 metre

in height above the waist of the wearer. The huge structure of such a mask portrays the aura of the character portrayed .It is pertinent to note here that in comparison to the huge structure of such masks, they are very light due to the raw materials used and the intricate



Fig. *Mukh mukha* of demon king Ravana



Fig: *Cho mukha* of Narasimha, the incarnation of lord Vishnu



Fig: *Lotokai mukha* of the demon Bakasura

manner of mask making. Due to its huge structure, a *cho mukha* is generally tied to the body of the wearer with ropes. *Lotokai mukha* is akin to *cho mukha* except its small size. Due to its small size, the wearer can easily control it and therefore, *lotokai mukha* is not tied to the body of the wearer. *Lotokai mukha* is also known as *lotokari mukha*. A *cho mukha*, sometimes a *lotokai mukha* also, is combination of a few easily separable parts.

Mask making is a male job; however, the females are also not tabooed from making it. It is not a common skill and is practiced by only a few male members of the families integrally related to the *satra* management. The art of mask making and often their forms and functions are passed down through lineages (*bamsa*) or families (*pariyal*). Mask making is not taught, but learnt by the interested juniors from the seniors through the process of socialization. The skill is indispensably related to the *satra* organization, and no person outside a *satra* is known for making it, though there is no restriction in such pursuit. However, at present some of the youths of the Natun Chamaguri Satra have initiated to this skill through an organization known as Sukumar Kalapeeth established by the expert mask maker Sri Hem Chandra Goswami.

The Natun Chamaguri Satra is resourced with the art of famous mask making since its inception. The tradition of mask making of the *satra* is carried out from the Prachin Chamaguri Satra where from it is bifurcated. The spellbounding ability in mask making of the forefathers of *satradhikars* of the Natun Chamaguri Satra like Tankeswara Deva Goswami, Moksheswara Deva, Raseswara Deva, Chaitanya Deva, Saisava Chandra Deva Goswami, et al. are still remembered. Till today some of the creations of those stalwarts are seen in the Prachin Chamaguri Satra. In the Natun Chamaguri Satra also there are many stalwarts like Kamal Chandra Deva Goswami (*satradhikar*), Bhimakanta Deva Goswami (*deka satradhikar*), Bansidhar Deva Goswami, et al., who have remarkable reputation for their creations of beautiful masks. The Chamaguri Satra has a thought provoking history of 236 years, and from that *satra*, the art of mask making is spread to different places. The present *satradhikar* of Natun Chamaguri Satra Sri Koshakanta Deva Goswami, Sri Umakanta Deva Goswami, Sri Phanidhar Goswami, *deka satradhikar* of Prachin Chamaguri Satra, and Jaychandra Goswami of the same

satra, are some of the reputed persons whose names should be mentioned for their untiring devotion to add the eye catching value in mask making.

It has been already stated that Natun Chamaguri Satra is resourced with famous mask making since its inception. Late *satradhikar* (head of a *satra*, principle abbot) Rudrakanta Dev Goswami was a praiseworthy mask maker who added new aesthetic dimensions to the tradition of mask making. He was wreath with the artist pension in 1988 by the Government of Assam. All his three sons, Dharmakanta. Hemchandra and Krishnakanta are stalwart mask makers. Now Krishnakanta worked as a lecturer of sculpture in the Government Art College of Assam. Hemchandra trained many groups of youth in and outside the state in the mask making style of Assam. In 1980, Hemchandra had established an institute, viz., Sukumar Kalapeeth, in Chamaguri Village, to train the village youths in the art of mask making. The beautiful mask of the demon king Ravana made by the Late *satradhikar* Umakanta Dev Goswami is preserved in the State Museum of Assam. The present *satradhikar*, Koshakanta Dev Goswami and his son Prasanna are also mask makers of repute. Koshakanta Dev Goswami was adorned with artist pension by the Government of Assam. In the year 2003, he was wreath with the Sangeet Nataka Academy Award by the Government of India.

It should be noted here that *ankiya bhaona* , i.e, the Vaishnavite one act play, is intergral to Assamese Vaishnavism. In the *ankiya bhaonas*, victory of good over evil is depicted through the mythological stories taken from the Vaishnavite scriptures. Principally in the *ankiya bhaonas* , and also in different theatrical performances of the *satras* many characters of demon, serpent, incarnation, etc. are knitted. To express the features and feelings of such mythological characters mask are worn. Masks are also worn by some of the characters of *rasayatra* (frolic of Lord Krishna with the *gopis*, i.e., his consorts), invariably performed annually in each *satra*. Traditionally though the masks are made to depict only the mythological characters, nowadays those are also made to highlight the characters of modern drama, and also to use as decorative objects.

(iv)

‘In the simplest societies every individual can and does perform all the secular activities of his community, except so far as there may be artificial restraints of his so

doing, and as a rule he can make any of the implements he requires, but, even so, there are usually to be found men who are more expert than others. Thus in some societies this expertness gives rise to special craftsmen; or certain men may in their spare time specialize in certain crafts. Where special craftsmen are found, it is necessary to make inquiries as to their status and how they are paid. Iron workers in Africa may form a despised or Pariah class or they may have special privileges and position. Canoe-builders, or other carpenters, may have a high social status. The craftsmen should be considered from economic, magical, religious, legendary and mythological points of view' (A Committee of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, 1954:222-223).

In Natun Chamaguri village, where the Natun Chamaguri satra is situated, not a single person practised mask making as primary occupation. All the mask makers belong to the Kayastha caste though the traditional occupation of Kayasthas is scribing. In the Census of India, Vol. III, Assam (1931:211), it is written. 'Caste in the Assam valley is not as elsewhere, chiefly a functional division. It is really a racial division and functional castes are very few' (cited in Cantlie, 1984:7). There is no caste in Assam, the members of which practice mask making as their traditional occupation. Like a mask maker an idol maker is also referred to as *khanikar* by the Assamese people. The idol (*murti*) making is also not practiced by any Assamese caste as their traditional occupation. However, there are some people in Assam who have used the term *khanikar* as their surname. In old days their forefathers had expertise in idol making, principally from wood and clay. A mask maker is respected by the people for his ability. Till the recent past, a mask maker did not receive any remuneration for making mask except honour and prestige for his ability. His creations were taken by the people to perform religious theatrical performances without giving him any money. Now a mask maker earn nominal money for his skill; however it is not sufficient to maintain his livelihood, and therefore, he has to earn money doing other job, and to satisfy his aesthetic urge, he makes masks.

'The identification of specific emotions and their facial expression has been, and still is, the object of intense scientific scrutiny' (Bouissac, 2001:75). Every society has some sanctions and strictures regarding the facial expressions of its members. In Assamese society also there are pristine norms and values to regulate the facial muscles

according to the different social contexts. The facial expressions which are not accepted in a society are also depicted through the masks. 'The mask does not depict a single emotion at a particular time, it is not a portrait of who fears, who fights, who dies; it is symbol of fear, war, death' (Monte, 1967:9). Along with the ferocious looking masks of different demons and deities of Chamaguri and Natun Chamaguri Satra, there are a few masks which give very calm and quite appearances. The masks of mighty Ravana, Garuda (the mount of Vishnu), etc. emit mentionable peace, coyness, and amiability.

While moulding the faces of demoness Surpanakha (sister of Ravana), Narasimha (an incarnation of Vishnu), etc., the craftsman strictly abides by the description of the features given in the scriptures. That is why the mask of Narasimha (man-lion) closely resembles a horse than a lion. According to Roy (1984-85:58), 'The faces with their varied types of expression fear, sorrow, etc. freeze to reflect the universal experiences that serve as a fountain of recreation: they also act as a medium to reckon the past events primarily related to legends. This travels across the barrier of time and space, although its effects is relative to time and space'.

The available masks of Natun Chamaguri Satra can easily spellbound the spectators with their craftsmanship and splendour. Mask making at this *satra* has attained the acme. The masks are generally made before a ritualistic theatrical performance and are used for a few successive years till these are not destroyed by the insects, weather, or such other agencies. A slightly damaged old mask is repaired and coloured to use. No attempt has been taken in the *satra* to preserve the masks. These are kept in hanging from the walls of the *satra* or in the dwelling houses of the craftsmen. Nowadays the mask makers used to add small quantity of kerosene to the paste of *kumarmati* for mask making. They opine that adding of kerosene gives the mask a longer life because easily available kerosene acts as insecticide. The mask maker of Majuli also made some of the masks with movable parts which provide more effectiveness to the mask. The ornaments added to the head, horn etc., of the masks in such a manner that the ornaments can moves freely adding attractiveness to his creations. To make the masks lighter nowadays the craftsmen added more thermocol instead of adding more paste of *kumarmati*, etc., to a mask. Adding of thermocol made the mask lighter and the actors feel comfortable by

wearing these mask. Besides the traditional mask they also make small mask for the decoration of drawing room, motor car, etc.

(v)

Mask making tradition has been dispersed throughout the world ever since the early diffusion of *Homo sapiens*. Mask has intricate existence in the socio-religious matrix of different societies. Duerden (1970:19) writes: ‘Horton, in an article of Nigeria, has described how the Ekine Masqueraders stage a graduation ceremony. If a new member fails to carry out the steps correctly then his mask will be taken from him by a rival house of Masqueraders; those who have failed in this way have been known in the past to commit suicide’. Among some communities very strict procedures are involved in mask making. In Assam, mask are treated as animates. Before performing a Vaishnavite one act play, masks are taken to the *namghar* or *satra* paying great reverence by lighting earthen lamp (*chaki*), burning incense powder (*dhuna*), and incense sticks (*dhup*), playing drum (*khol*), and cymbals (*tal*), and singing prayer (*nam*). After the ritual performance masks are kept in the storing place showing the same reverence. There are a good number of tales in different villages of Assam about the mishaps for breach of taboo in mask making and for not showing proper respect to the masks.

There are a good number of superstitions associated with mask. ‘What is more interesting is that these (masks) are considered to be living. This is evident from the using of *chaki* (lamp) at night in front of the masks. There is a common believe that these rival masks may start quarreling if these are kept in the dark. ... Why do such believes continue? The people not related to rural cultural setting where these masks are used may take it as a matter of superstition, but it is a reality in the rural area where the boundary between the past and the present is a diffused one ’ (Roy; 1985: 59-60). In the Natun Chamaguri Satra some of the masks like the mask of Narasimha, Ravana, etc. are respected much more than the others. After the performance in a *bhaona* these are kept in a clean place and earthen lamps are lit and incense sticks are burnt every dusk in front of these. A worn out mask of Narasimha, Ravana, etc. are immersed respectfully in the nearby river by playing Vaishnavite drum, cymbals, etc., by a group of devotees chanting prayer. No doubt the masks of Assam have attracted many painters and poets to provide

noteworthy dimensions to their creation. However, mask making does not provide economic viability to the mask makers. Therefore, people of new generation are not inclined towards making of this beautiful form of art as their principle vocation.

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