

From Subjectivity to inter subjectivity: With Special Reference to Mukhā-Bhaonā of Assam.

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ABSTRACT:

Being embodied in a cultural life-world (*lebenswelt*), the environment plays a significant role in harnessing our thought process to the outer world that it is directed to. In this context, the North-Eastern region of India is abundantly marked by diverse cultural roots, multiple belief system, heterogeneous tribes, and more, and not to forget, the rare, sub-species of flora and fauna. When one talks about cultural identity, what is it, that she is referring to? What does culture mean then? Is the age old dichotomy between culture and nature, a constructed one or, does it fall under the natural schema of binary? This paper will try to explore the uniqueness that lies in bridging the gap between the world of materiality and visibility through the **Mukhā** (masks) as being intersubjective for they draw out the essence of life in the phenomenological sense of life-world.

KEYWORDS: Mukhā (masks), Assam, Srimanta Sankardev, Majuli, Intersubjective, phenomenology.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Culture, as popularly understood is the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively. These manifestations take the form of food; art, drama, music; attitudes; beliefs; language; customs; rituals; behaviour; faith, religion and more. In this context, Assam's '*Mukhā Bhaona*' (Mask Enactment of Drama) speaks volume. It was in Majuli, the repository of [Vaishnav cultural heritage](#) and art forms in Assam, that [mask-making](#) had its roots and thrived since 16th century till recently. The masks are not plain objects of visibility; they dialogue an entire narration of epics like Ramayānā, or, the Mahābhārata and infuse in life to the otherwise dry, material that they are made of. These **Mukhā** or, masks go beyond the scientific domain of length and measure of being plain objects, and embroils itself into the world of phenomenology of perception, paving a way to extract out meanings from them thus, adding a subjective gloss to their narration.

II. RATIONALE OF THIS PAPER

With the advent of modern means of popular entertainment, its acclaimed stature waned considerably. *Chamaguri Sattrā* was famed for the traditional craft of mask making, which was by and large a hereditary skill, but over the years it became a dying art form with local youths displaying apathy towards it. Earlier, the demand for the masks were confined to "*Mukhā Bhaona*", the traditional theatre form in which masks of epic, mythological and historical characters were used, which was not enough to sustain the art form and neither did it receive the due recognition outside the state. In recent years, however, there has been a surge of interest following several workshops organised by different organisations, including government and others, in Majuli, in other parts of the state and even outside. The concept of personal identity is that it unfolds over the episodes of one's life over events that marks the true affinity of the person. These events are carved out of the belief that these are the precise images, the crisp emblems, the lucid representations that marks a person with what is known as his cultural identity. Masks have been used since antiquity for both spiritual and social purposes almost all over the world. It has been playing a major part in the world theatre tradition which is continued till today. The use of masks in our contemporary theatre is highly valued. Assamese are lucky enough that Srimanta Sankardev showed the path of using masks in aesthetics and other patterns of creativity.

III. METHODOLOGY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The methodology that this paper leans towards is a combination of the Husserlean **phenomenological stance** to **conceptual method**. The phenomenological methodology takes the route of suspending a belief as true via something technically called as epoché or bracketing. Further, the attempt to reach towards the epoché method is highlighted through the method of intentionality where the thought-process is always taken to be 'directed at' something. This directional aspect can be seen in the masks that direct at certain emotions, angst to anxiety as the character maybe while bracketing the other non-angst/non-anxiety bhaōna or emotions. The conceptual methodology seeks to delve deep into the concepts such as bhaōna, mukhā and so on embodied in the context of Assam in particular and Majuli, in general.

The literature review ranges from primary to secondary works of the saint himself, Srimanta Sankardev and his philosophy of '**Ek Sarna Naam Dharma**' which is to refuge in the feet of Lord Krishna through devotional songs, acts of Bhaona and so on. Once one is embedded in the rich karma-yoga of the self, the transcendence from subjectivity to transcendental subjectivity takes over. This work sees a lot of extractions from the excerpts and commentaries of the original and secondary works on this theme of Mukhā-bhaonā.

IV. BRIEF HISTORY OF AXOM: FOLK-LORE AND MUKHĀ-BHAONA OF AXOM

The new tradition of Mask theatre which was enriched by the disciples of Srimanta Sankardev is a glorious chapter of Assamese cultural history. Though the performance of Mask Theatre is continuing today but the lack of required depth and density of such presentations are not up to the mark. The said performances are seen in a gap of 4 to 5 years or more, which is a sign of decay. Because of long intervals of mask theatre presentation it is going to be a subject of inattentive for the people of Assam. Therefore, a congregational approach in practicing and acclaiming the Mask Theatre in a scientific way is a call of time, which must be responded without fail, for the sake of Assamese theatrical art and tradition.

Use of effigies and masks were quite common during Sankardeva's time. The universe of the mask associated with the *Satra* institutions is the world of imagination. Like the effigy of the serpent demon *Kaliya* in the *Kaliya Daman* and the man in this role entered into it and spoke from within. Besides, elephants, *Hanumanta*, *Garuda* and *Jambubanta* were also made with the help of bamboos and clothes. Based on the usability, the masks are classified into three subcategories:

Mukh-Mukha, covers the face or head.

Bor-Mukha, covers the entire body or sometimes upper body and are not at all flexible, there is no moveable parts.

Lutukori-Mukha, covers the full body with flexible body parts representing hands, beaks, eyes, jaws, wings, etc. The *satras* where the art of mask making is still practiced since the time of Sankardeva, are *Khatpar Satra* and *Natun Samaguri Satra* holds the credit of carrying the four hundred years old traditions of making masks and has earned the credentials in both the national as well as in the international backgrounds of dint of mask making and mask.

However, Majuli the world's largest river island in the Assam state of India is the only place of Mask culture (**Mukhā-Bhaona**) and the open air museum of mask and other traditional assets of Assamese culture. The said mask theatre was first introduced in Majuli through the Sankarian theater popularly called as, **Mukhā-Bhaona**. As told before, **Mukhā-Bhaona** is purely Sankarian theater where the mask gets priority in case of all characters. In times of Sankardeva masks were used for some particular characters but in later period the effort of using masks for every character of the play is enjoyed and these presentations were treated as Mask Theatre (**Mukhā-Bhaona**).

Sankardev wrote seven plays namely 1] **Rama vijaya**. 2] **Patni prasada**. 3] **Parijata Harana**. 4] **Rukmini Harana**. 5] **Keli Gopal**. 6] **Kaliya Damana** and 7] **Chinhna Yatra**. The use of mask in the said plays was limited to some particular characters but in the Mask theatre presentations of later period all characters were designed with masks. It is an outward expression because the script and other characteristics of the play remain intact. The same script can be presented without masks and with full masks. Though the accurate time period of the said practices is not known but it can be presumed that these types of presentations were started after the demise of Madhav Deva, the main apostle of Sankardeva, who left this world after his Master. The use of masks in case of every character of the play presentations got tremendous support of the audiences and became an extraordinary branch of Sankarian theatre as **Mukhā-Bhaona**.

V. INTERSUBJECTIVITY (Embodied Subjectivity) OF Mukhā

"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) made at Majuli closely resembles a horse than a lion, as per the scriptural guidelines only.”¹ Each mask is made as per the description Sankardeva gave in those plays. He described their faces, their get-up. The *satras* of Majuli have kept those descriptions alive through the masks. 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. Sankardeva does not glorify the dark sides of life as it is the calmer side of the compassionate deity **Krishna Vishnu** that remains central. So the violence of the violent characters are also minimised with hope for restoring the goodness over evil. Due to the submissiveness, the main pulse of Vaishnavism, many powerful characters of Hindu scriptures are also depicted through calm and quiet looking masks.”²

Lastly, but not the least, the masks carry with them the Husserlian Life World, the pre-rational, oral and lived dimension of life that does not dichotomise past, present, religious avatars and interventions and profane disorder that looks forward to a happy reconciliation in the sacred assurance that *satra* masks are generally worn at the ritualistic plays, and during that time the actors became the mythological characters, and the spectators also pay respects or regard with other feelings to these characters forgetting their actual identity and accepting them as the characters they performed in the play.

So, to perform the role of Lord Krishna wearing of masks not required Lord Krishna because Krishna is the full incarnation of Lord Vishnu and one has to perform the role of Krishna by undergoing fasting and observing many taboos. Krishna appeared as a human being to eradicate the evils from the earth, he has to kill a good number of demons and demonesses. “All these demons and demonesses to wear masks. 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 belief that these rival masks may start quarrelling if these are kept in the dark.”³

There are a good number of incidents happened for not obeying the traditional strictures in mask making.” Once an enthusiastic mask maker made a huge mask of Kalinaga, the wicked serpent king, defying the traditional pattern by increasing the number of heads in the mask. When Lord Krishna started dancing over the head of the Kalinaga the furious serpent king left the stage and moved towards a nearby big tank along with Lord Krishna. A havoc was created among the actors and spectators, and after earnest prayer to the Almighty only Kalinaga stopped and fainted before the performances in a *bhaona*. “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).⁴

The masks are not plain objects of visibility; they dialogue an entire narration of epics like *Ramayana*, or, the *Mahabharata* and infuse in life to the otherwise dry, material that they are made of. These *Mukhā* or, masks go beyond the scientific domain of length and measure of being plain objects, and embroils itself into the world of phenomenology of perception, paving a way to extract out meanings from them thus, adding a subjective gloss to their narration.

VI. THE WAY OUT: BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN SUBJECTIVE (Emotions) AND OBJECTIVITY (Masks)

The Masks (*mukhā*) in the *Satra* are till date included in the ceremonies and festivals which have social and religious significance, and also are used in the plays of dance and drama. The materials such as bamboo, cow dung, potters mud (black clay), cane, wood, cotton cloth, natural dyes and natural gum from trees are used to create the masks. So masks are made of bamboo and cane, no plaster of paris is used – only local mud. No synthetic colours are used. The colours are made from leaves, seeds and flowers and also stones. Besides, some utilitarian aspects of life are also considered so when wearing a heavy wooden mask must have been difficult, leading Mahapurush Sankardeva, the founder of Neo Vaishnavism and the *Satras* and *Naamghars* in Assam, to think of making masks made of lighter materials, like the bamboo. So wearing a mask one also represents the folk and the region, its distinctive traits that enable it to reinterpret religious Texts and practices in its own ethnic way without distorting the core theme. In this context, Assam’s ‘*Mukhā Bhaona*’ (Mask Enactment of Drama) speaks volume. The materials used for making the *mukhā* are the humble, easily accessible, organic, natural ingredients like cow dung, mud and so on. These do not cause any allergic reactions to the skin. However, the

¹ Birinchi K. Medhi and Arifur zaman, Tradition of Mask Making in a Vaishnavite Monastery of Assam,

² Mask Maker of a Vaishnavite Monastery of Assam’ (Jt), 2004, Journal of North-East India Council for Social Science Research, Vol.28:1:4-8. (ISSN 0973-7913)

³ Mask Maker of a Vaishnavite Monastery of Assam’ (Jt), 2004, Journal of North-East India Council for Social Science Research, Vol.28:1:4-8. (ISSN 0973-7913)

⁴ Roy, Sankar Kumar, 1985, A Report on the Mask Preserved in the Anthropological Museum, Department of Anthropology, Gauhati University, The Assam Academy Review, Special Vol. No. 2:57-6

non-tangible, non-material or, rather the ideal impression that they impinge upon the minds of the wearers and the audience is beyond description.

VII CONCLUSION

The ideal picture that these minds carry away after the *bhaonās* depict a lot about how Sankardeva played an important role in giving holistic education to the public in general at a time when all such methods were unheard of. The *Mukhās* of *Bhaona* thus act as intersubjective entities when they blur the rigid domain of material world and immaterial world by bringing both these two worlds together in the same platform, *Bhaonā*. These *Mukhās* are the objects of visuality that visualises within itself the various life-forms that the wearer enacts via them. These visuals thus act in a two-way process. Not only do they make the wearer mask his emotions with all gentleness, or, ferocity as the case maybe, making the *mukhā*, the mask, the protagonist of the *Bhaonā* or, play. Secondly, the audience connects with these *mukhā* to such an extent that the moment a ferocious mask emotes out its role, the audience visualises it as the fearful mask, thus leading to bodily gestures of fear, awe and surprise. This is the moment when the mask, 'it' becomes a part of life- world. Similarly, when the gentle mask *mukhā* comes to the forefront, the audience visualises them as a part of their docile life and welcomes them with warmth. These visualisations go beyond the border of the plain objective masks and the plain subjective audience. This is so-because the objects, the masks via their talent of emoting emotions become a part of the subjective world, and the subjective world(the audience) by accepting the plain objects as a part of their life-world makes a transition from objectivity to subjectivity thus, making it inter-subjective. Thus this paper tried to explore the uniqueness that lies in bridging the gap between the world of materiality and visibility through these (*Mukhā*)masks as being intersubjective for they draw out the essence of life in the phenomenological sense of life-world.

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