5.1 Introduction

Mask as an attribute of expression, imagination and art form has been acquired in almost every society and culture of the world thus it is established as an universal art form since the prehistoric period and played vital and varied roles ranging from sacred, spiritual, comical, mundane and various other aspects of the culture. Masks are the implicit faces which used as a form of masquerade, usually worn over or on the face, an extension of facial make-up and sometimes it covers almost whole body of the wearer. A mask characteristically hides the identity of the person and transforms it into the identity of another being by its own features. This inevitable characteristic of hiding and revealing of identity or gestures are the common element of masks according to their varied appearances and symbolism used in different cultures and society.

Masks are the intrinsic and vital part of human life and culture, which have been created in numerous varieties, on the basis of visual and symbolic values. According to the urge of imagination and to personify the expressions it has been utilized in the tradition of ritual, social and religious ceremonies where the mask functions as magical or religious attribute in which the participants worn the masks to attain the identity of super-human, infra-human and legendry figures. Similarly in the theatrical performances specifically in performing arts and drama masks are objectified for the expressions of tragedy, comedy, ferocity and other feeling which are sometimes not possible to depict through the bare faces and with the existing identity(plate-5.01). The actor who wears the mask is naturally felt an alliance with the spirited energy of mask as it is predictably affect his performance, whereas during the performance he has to follow the particular procedures in personification of the identity of mask, which he does by minutely performing the acts and dance schedule parallel to the theme of music and plot otherwise the mask would lose its meanings and remain lifeless object. Therefore
the complementary combination of both the collaborated identities pours the force of life in the representation of mask and leads the succession of the performance. It is believed in many of the cultures that masks inherit the characteristics and power of the depicted image into the wearer, which sensibly stimulates the emotions of the spectators through the performance. (Subbiah: 2013)

The masks have been utilized almost universally to depict the characters in theatrical performances. Theatrical performances are considered as the most influential form of the literature which experienced as a real virtue of life in acoustic and visual mode of communication and masks undoubtedly enhance the limits of the expressions in the theatrical performances as it possessed its own physical, metaphysical, visual and symbolic form. The mask as an attribute of performance in theatre considerably first emerged in the western civilization from the religious and ritualistic practices of the ancient Greece (plate-5.02) supposedly initiated by a poet namely Thespis in 6th century, who is accredited with originating tragedy, where the religious performers in the worship of Dionysus, god of fertility and the harvest attempts to impersonate and masquerade (plate-5.03) as the deity by donning goatskins and by gulping wine eventually developed into the sophistication of masking and the literature of worship performed as disguise which noticeably possesses a white linen mask hung over the face or a attire enabled the performers of the ceremony to make the manifestation of god. (Foreman: 1997)

Origin of the word mask can be traced in foreign societies as in French it can be refer to the term ‘masque’, in Italian ‘maschera’ and in the Spanish ‘máiscara’ (plate-5.04). The word is also considered to originate from Latin words ‘mascus’ and ‘masca’ which means ghost. Moreover the Arabic term ‘maskharah’ which means jester or masquerade can be associated as the originator of the term mask. The roots of mask culture can be found in the pre-historic rock arts from the different sites of the world including cave engraving of Caverne du Volp, France, Altamira caves of Spain, Kundusi of Tanzania, Algeria, Libya, Kazakhstan, New Mexico, Sweden, Siberia, Canada, Peru, and Bhimbetka in
India and others. Accordingly the masks has been celebrated every part of the world.

According to the characteristics masks has been designed in numerous varieties from mundane to ferocious images which covers the head and faces or tied over the head and front of the face to worn over the complete body with inventive movable limbs and to make these masks the mask makers in different society have utilized varied resources of the material as per their imagination, creativity and availability of substances like wood, metal, stone, feathers, leather, shells, fibres, ivory, clay, horn, furs, paper, cloth, corn husks and many others with the various surface manifestations ranged from roughed minimalism to convoluted details of carving including glazed woods, metals and mosaics to colourful embellishments (plate-5.05). Masks are generally worn with combination of specific attires, consequently as a whole it seems to be covering the complete body of the wearer and put forth the distinct identity of the character. As the costume essentially helps to imaging the identity of the character generally the tradition prescribes its manifestation as well as the mask also (plate-5.06). According to the masks costumes are also made of variety of materials which have visual and symbolic connection with it and the depicted character. (Vardpande: 1981)

Similar to the other art forms the visual and symbolic characteristics of masks has been mainly influenced by the natural forms, which has been divided into two categories the masks which possess the human features are classified as anthropomorphic and those with the animal features are theriomorphic. In some of the instances masks depicts the forms of reality or natural feature whereas some of the mask features abstract forms. As the mask utilized to impersonate another being those exists beyond reality so generally it portrays the supernatural or superhuman beings, forefathers, (plate-5.07) and imaginary figures subsequently the most significant feature of a mask is to absorb and reveal the spirit of the predictable identity (plate-5.08), which is the prominent rationale of its existence. Moreover in the absolute interpretation of the new identity by the wearer is essential in the mask performance, if the represented
spirit would not match with the image of the mask then the whole ritual practice, and performance will become inadequate and worthless. As a result mask most often functions psychologically to connect with the distinct constructive spirits and powers (plate-5.09); on the other hand it considered to defend the unknown and pessimistic spirits by possessing the prospective welfare of life. (Malik: 1998)

5.2 Tradition of Masks in India

Mask has been an important attribute of the folk rituals, festivals, ceremonies, traditional and commercial theatre; it is having a cherished existence in the socio-cultural matrix of different societies in India. A good number of Communities have the tradition of mask making which has been used for various purposes. Among these, some of used it in funerary rituals, therapeutic rites, fertility rites and even in magical traits also subsequently the socio-religious uses of masks in India are overwhelming which opens the doors of a creative arena of performing and plastic arts. (Devi: 1990)

In many of the societies masks are the integral part of the religious dances, theatrical performances, dramas, and other similar acts which carrying the ethical and aesthetical values. Such as in Vellaloore Ezhai Kaathamman Madhukkudamedutha festival of Madurai (plate-5.10), Kulasekaran pattinam Dussera festival of Mysore, Kaliyamman Pongal festival and many others festival of the south India where the masks are utilized as a part of the festival ritual (plate-5.11), the devotees or the main performers worn the masks and practice rituals and offering in front of the temple deity, verity of masks such as deity’s and demon masks, animal and anthropomorphic masks, human and super human masks are worn in those occasions by the performers to supplicate prayer and gratitude to their deities and ancestors for agriculture, health and prosperity in life. (Thiagarajan: 2006)

Masks has been made in India in several states as an form of art and aesthetic creation and it is deeply related to the tribal communities and thought provoking history of socio-religious and cultural evolution since the pre-historic period to till date. In India there are generally two specific features of masks and
the morphological characteristics of masks are mainly influenced by natural forms and mythological interpretations. Masks that possess the human feature are the anthropomorphic and those animal features are theriomorphic which represents the image of demons, deities, ancestors, animals, and imaginary figures, both has been used through ages in socio-religious festivals, theatrical performance, commemorative and therapeutic occasion as the vital part of the religious as well as the visual culture. There are various kinds of masks like Bhuta masks of South India (plate-5.12, 5.13), painted masks of Bastar of Madhya Pradesh (plate-5.14, 5.15), Hanuman masks of Orissa (plate-5.16, 5.17), tiger masks of Himachal Pradesh made of Papier Mache, wooden masks of Sikkim and Tibet. (Vardpande: 1979)

Karnataka has been the centre of significant masks and puppets particularly the headgears called ‘Kirtams’ which used in the performance of Kathakali a classical dance (plate-5.18), there are various headgears used by the performers to depict the vivid kind of characters and emotions, are mainly based upon the religious figures prevailing annoying, generous, devoted, pleasure, ferocious, and destructive features. These masks are mainly made of wood and decorated with closely knit silver beads on a scarlet red base, for further decorations mask is bejewelled by fixing glass pieces on aluminium foils with the large central motif of glass flower petals and small silver beads including various gaudy materials. (Pande: 2001)

In Uttar Pradesh masks of the different Character both anthropomorphic and theriomorphic like Brahma, Vishnu, Siva (deities), Ravana and Asuras (demons), Hanuman, Jambuvana (animal masks) has been utilized in the theatrical performance of Ramlila, which is firmly portrays the chronicles of the classical epic Ramayana and heroic tales of lord Rama. Theatrical performance of Ramlila starts nine days before and goes part by part every day in the evening hours up to the festival of Dusshera where at the end Lord Rama kills the Demon Ravana. Here the (Mukhota) face masks, (Mukuts) headgears and crowns are made of wood and paper with strong decorations of glittering material like metal.
foils, shining threads, mirror pieces etc. Similarly the costumes are also equally
decorated by gaudy embroidery and jewelled with ornaments. (Vardpande: 1992)

The wooden masks of West Bengal plays an important role in the socio-
religious and cultural milieu. Here the traditional artists mainly from the Purulia
district make wooden masks for ‘chhau’ performers. Chhau masks are
considered as they are the manifestations of the deities and various mythological
characters of classical epics of India (plate-5.19). Similarly in Darjeeling and
Tibet wooden masks painted with vivid colours are used in the performance of
devil dances and the other religious festivals.

Masks are closely linked with the rituals, festivals and the life of Buddhist
Monasteries from Nepal to other Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan including Tibet,
Ladakh, and Sikkim. The ‘cham’ dance of Tibetan monks is significant due to
interesting amalgamation of Indian and Tibetan forms where the procession of
ferocious wild Parthenon (giant colourful mask considered as the protector to the
harmful spirits) incorporated with the comic character represents the lucid
combination of both the cultures (plate-5.20). The performance of Cham mask
dance mainly includes two sections the first one honours and pays reverence to
the eight aspects of Padmabhava (Buddhist Mentor forms) and second depicts
the Maha Dongcren (great destruction) by a horned masked figure, killing and
finishing the demonic force. (Chatterjee: 2007)

Similarly in North-east of India the mask tradition is celebrated among the
tribal communities in a mythological manner and all the related myths with these
performances are basically persuade the secular mask customs in the region.
The remarkable ‘Ajilimu’ dance performance of Sherdukpen tribes. The masks
depicts the two terrible demons ‘Nyapa and Nyaro’ with ferocious expressions
and gestures with flowing erratic hairs here and there to keep away the negative
spirits (plate-5.21). In another performance the clownish mask appears like a
giant dummy of yak made in bamboo frame covered with black cloth are
manipulated by two persons depicts the comic sense. (Ghosh&Bannerjee: 2006)

All the above traditions of mask performances represent the strong
existence of masks in the field of socio-religious and cultural matrix of India with
numerous variety and practices since the pre-historic period to the modern ages. Apart from this a phenomenal traditions, masks has been emerged in Assam with the beginning of the medieval ages, under the cultural and socio-religious reformations where a multifaceted figurine and reformer, Saint Sankardeva introduced the Neo-Vaisnavism in whole region and in order to propagate his ideology of devotion and social harmony he incorporated various art forms like painting, dance, music and theatrical performance embedded with a small galaxy of vivid characters of masks which represents the wide range of images and emotions.

5.3 Origin and Growth of Mask tradition in Majuli

Assam has been a centre of vivid culture, and rich heritage of masks or ‘Mukha’ in Assamese, deeply persuaded by the cult of Neo-Vaisnavism of Sankardeva in the fifteenth century which represented a distinct and noble scenario in Assam in the various aspects including Art and culture (plate-5.22). The sacred atmosphere of Satras gave shelter to the vivid kind of art forms like dance performances, raga based music and songs, illustrated manuscripts, wood-carvings and reliefs to adorn and depict the Vaisnavite thought among the spectators and visitors of the Satras and conspicuously the art of Mask-making and performance which specifically used in ‘Bhaona’ (theatrical performances). Mask culture is basically developed together with religious theatrical performances and Vaisnavite dramas, written and brought into tradition by Sankardeva who wrote and translated many of songs (Bargits), dramas (Ankiya-nat), epic poetry, theoretical essays, ‘Nat’ (Skit), ‘Bhaona’ (Drama). (Roy: 1985)

The ‘Bhaona’ represented the functional aspects of plays written on the Ankia-Nat (Scripts, of Drama). It is a form of theatre brought into being by Sankardeva. Initially it was not in a proper form of written play as the first organised performance of ‘Chinha yatra’ (dramatically procession) was mere a dramatic display aimed to endearing over the reluctant community in which the show depicted the silhouettes of the mythical seven Vaikunathas (abode of Vishnu) painted by Sankardeva himself on scrolls commenced by the
‘Sutradhara’ (an orator, demonstrator and the running commentator, is the main featured performer who dances, recites the verses, introduce the characters, give them on spot directions, announces their entrance and relevance, and correlate the whole performance on the stage in sequence, he is a trained musician and dancer including multidimensional qualities of performance) further the show was assembled with musical group of singer and instrumentalists and only the two character of Vishnu (Hindu God) and Laxmi (Goddess) but there was no procession of the linear narrations. Later Sankardeva incorporated the enactment of the written plays based of the narrations and tales of the classical Sanskrit epics and puranas. In the course Sankardeva wrote six plays are Patni-prasada, Kali-damana, Keli-gopala, Rukmani-harana, parijata-harana, and Rama-vijaya, Madhavadeva also composed six religious plays. The performance of such devotional plays popularly known as ‘Ankiya-Bhaona’ was being performed in the Satra and Namghar of the village. (Sarma: 1966)

The presentation of Vaisnavite mythological theatre in traditional style is called ‘Ankia-Bhaona’ or else it is popular by name as ‘Bhaona’. The language used for these plays was ‘Brajawali’ an artificial literary language of the Vaisnava writers, and the theme was invariably related to Krishna and the different incarnations of Vishnu, especially Narasimha (incarnation of Vishnu) and Rama. The performance of Bhaona generally starts with the introductory Slokas (prose) and the appearance of either a king or the Lord Krishna and gradually entry of the primary characters to the stage presided by the Sutradhara. Presence of Sutradhara from the beginning to the end of the performance is the vital characteristic of the Bhaona as he explains the theme and executes the principal actors to the audience. Another important feature is the profusion of appropriate libretto and songs, completely based on musical ragas (melodies) and the perfect talas (rhythmic beats).

Dramatic characters of plays also enters into the stage with rhythmic walk by following the beat of the musical instruments particularly Khol (drum). The actors were earlier known as nartaka or natuwa (dancer) but now they are commonly called bhawariya (actor) but the word bhawariya is not generally used
for the actors who play the roles of lord Rama and Krishna they referred as Gosai. Female roles are played by the young male actors of the Satra. In the journey of creating dramas and stories symbolic use of colours is admirable, to distinguish the vivid characters like deities, demons, sages and common persons for an instance Vishnu, Rama and Krishna are depicted in mild blue colours, where demon figures painted in black and red hues. Consequently depiction of the vibrant and vivid mythological character of Bhaona more interestingly, opens the imaginative and vital threshold of the world of Assamese Masks. (Barpujari: 1990)

Masks prevails the profound consequence in the socio-cultural milieu of a community which has a tradition of mask making. Masks are the manifestation of integral essence and beliefs of almost all the cultures. Similarly in Majuli also a rich heritage of mask can be observed outstandingly and it is the indispensable constituent of the theatrical performance and the Satras of Majuli (plate-5.23). Due to surround by the mighty river Brahmaputra the art and culture of Majuli up to an extent remained in its original form and still it is unaired to modernization. Therefore the masks of Majuli have individual quintessence of spirit and intense ability to evoke the relevant emotions.

Masks of different sizes and variety has been created in the tradition of Vaisnavite theatrical performances and incorporated as the vital attribute of ‘Bhaona’ to represent the visual and symbolic values of the dramatic characters. The forms and expression of super-human beings or supernatural, animal and imaginary figures portrayed through the masks which is not merely possible to depict with natural faces. According to some of the medieval biographies Sankardeva probably have been thought to incorporate the Masks, and incorporated in theatrical performance of Bhaona to depict the characters more effectively and interestingly.

Masks, utilized in the religious plays encompasses the whole variety of several natural and imaginative forms, and intimately embedded as a form of interpretation of several heroic, demonic, anthropomorphic, theriomorphic and mythological characters of classical epics (plate-5.24). These Masks are usually
worn over or in front of the face, over the half of the body and sometimes it covers almost the whole body of the performer. Thus mask hides the identity of a person and helps to reveal the identity of the character played by the actor. Remarkably masks are worn with the perfect prescribed combination of the costumes to absolutely venture the expressions and extraordinary feelings like ferocity of a demon or other demon-like characters, and the other clowning, munificent, devotion, contentment, grotesque, annoyance and destructive gestures which are sometime not feasible to articulate by human beings through bare faces. Interpretation and making of such Masks with full of intensity of emotions; itself is a great deal of technical and artistic creation.

5.4 Method and Materials of Mask-making in Majuli

The Satras of Majuli are well known for the art of Mask making, whereas it is the signature art form of the Samaguri Satra since its origin, Satra is popular in all over the state as well as in the country for the art of Mask-making (plate-5.25). The new branch of Samaguri Satra which is known as Natun Samaguri Satra (New Samaguri) is situated near to the market of Rawanapar at Majuli, established in the year of 1824 A.D. According to the Satradhikar Koshakanta Goswami (recipient of Sangeet Natak Academy Award for the proficiency in the particular field of Mask-making) and his equally profound cousin Sri Hemchandra Goswami, mask making is the hereditary art of his family of the Satra and this art has been cultivated since mid of the seventeenth century in the Satra (plate-5.26). As the masks are the vital attribute of Bhaona, Satra is diligently carrying the art of mask-making and gratifying the demands of masks to almost all the Assamese theatrical performances. Moreover they have been organized many workshops and seminars on this art in various places inside as well as outside the state to demonstrate the importance and technique of this art (plate-5.27).

Mask-making is a form of art and aesthetic creation, considering its visual, symbolical, ideological and imaginative aspects. The artisans of Majuli and Assam principally prepares masks from bamboo, clay, earthen pot, gourd shell, pith plant, sheath of areca nut leaf, cloth, wood, etc (plate-5.28). Though wood
and pith plant are also used, nowadays the mask makers of the region, particularly mask makers of Majuli, usually make masks with the bamboo spilt covered with cotton cloth, clay and cow dung. The craftsmen, who prefer to work with stone or wooden medium, they are confined to make the mask within the size and weight of the material compare to those are made of clay, bamboo, cloth etc. as per the size of the masks these are quite light in weight. (Bhuyan, 2008) Masks are made on all the characters and narrations of the Mahabharata, Ramayana, and Purans. In all over the state masks of both bamboo and wood are used in various folk theatrical performances, the tradition of mask making is a hereditary skill passed down from father to son or teacher to students in the Satras. Most of the artisans who still prepare these masks are either inmates or connected to the inmates of the Satras. Mask making is a skill based art, and the artisans come apart from different caste or group. (Goswami: 2005)

According to Sri Hemchandra Goswami (plate-5.29), the art of mask-making and performance is an art of personification and to impersonate the particular characters by the actor. In acting primarily actor has to be acquainted with the whole particular emotion which he is going to be depicted through the character. Then it supposed to be transmitted through his collective efforts of acting, amongst the audience in absolute sense of emotions. This whole process of personification, expression and communication is divided into three parts according to the utilization of different parts of body in acting are described by ‘Bharata’ in his treatise “NatyaShastra” as Angika, Vachika and Aharya.

Angika are the actions which have to be performed by the actor mainly through the limbs of his body, or selection of the particular body language for the particular character which is going to be performed, including the expression, gestures and communication through the efforts, signals and motion of the different parts of body like symbols and notifications of finger, hands, legs, neck, shoulders. And collectively each and every part of the body to represent the character and lyrical emotions revealed by the expressions and gestures of the face, which includes the every action of the eyes, vibration of the lips, crunch
of the teeth, lines of the forehead, pulsation of nose, and many more gesture possible by every muscle of the face.

**Vachika** means acting by voice and speech, during the performance voice plays a vital role to depicts the proper existence of the character, sometimes effect of voice and sound itself leaves a strong presence of the personified character, like the grunge and vibrated voice of the terrible laugh of the Ravana assures his presence, even in the dark or in his absence. An actor has to be always aware of the projection of ups and downs, boldness and mildness, smoothness and harshness of the voice to properly depict the acted character, even clear pronunciation and phonetics of the voice can give a clear idea of the imaging character.

**Aharya** is basically considering the relative adornment and depiction of attires and environment of the character and play. Apart from this, to enhance the possibilities of the depicted expressions, some external applications are mentioned in the aharya of ‘Natyashastra’. Aharya has been extended into the four branches of *Pusta, Alankar, Anga-Rachna*, and *Sanjiva* which are respectively elaborated as gratification of face through make-up and mask, decoration of stage through painting and graphics, technical aspects of establishing a stage and costume and backdrops. (Vardpande: 1992)

In Assamese Vaisnavite theatre ‘*Pusta*’ is acknowledged as ‘*Tsu – mukha*’ (Mask). The culture of mask and puppetry were prevailed in the Assam before the period of Sankardeva also, as the word ‘*Putlika*’ (puppet and mask) is found in some of the earlier accounts, but Sankardeva principally incorporated and popularised the art of mask-making by using the preliminary masks of the Lord Brahma, Vishnu, Rudra, (Deities) Garuda (avian) and Lord Krishna; these were masks made from the inexpensive and local resources and interpreted according to the dramas and Vaisnavite plays, to make the common people understand the themes and characters of the religious dramas. Later the tradition continued by Madhavadeva in addition of masks of some other characters like Ram and Sita,
Vibhishana, Hanuman, (Deities) and chariots also, utilized in *Rasa-yatra* (play) as mentioned in the *Guru-chairta* of Daityari takhur.

The Artisans of Majuli mainly make masks with bamboo split, which could be easily moulded to transform their imaginations, the masks of Majuli have uniqueness in terms of visual aesthetics, symbolic features and method and materials. (Barua: 1994)

**Materials of Mask-making:**

The first step starts with making of bamboo splits and basic armature of mask with these splits.

*Bahan-Kathi* (smooth, thin and flexible strips of bamboo): to make the *Bahan-Kathi*, a bamboo of two or three years old growing and flexible has been preferred and incise into the pieces of two and three sections toward the length. Then by a sharp knife long and smooth chiselled stripes (*Kathi*) are made from the inner bark of the bamboo.

*Soli* (a thin, long and round slip of bamboo) by leaving six of seven pubs of a matured bamboo from its root end or ground, rest of appropriate pubs are separated and incised into required length of pieces. Then by shaping round and smoothened those with knife *Solis* are made.

*Kami* (Lath) for making of *Kami* the upper pubs of bamboo has been chosen, by leaving seven or eight pubs from the ground, the remaining pubs are separated and by removing the inner mass of bamboo *Kamis* are made.

*Betor-sut* (a fine split of cane used as a string or rope) for making the thread or rope initially cane has to be dried properly, then its outer layer are removed and from the inner mass fine and flexible four or five pieces stings are chiselled carefully by knife.

**Cloth:** small pieces of cotton cloth and sometimes big according to the size of armature, cloth mixed with special kind of processed clay or potter clay are used to cover the armature of the mask.
**Atha jatiya Mati:** (glue like Mud) this is processed or glued mud made from potters clay made by keeping such clay in big vassal with water are made for apply with cloth on the armature.

**Gubar-mati:** (Cow dung clay) the clay is made by mixing calf dung in the potter clay properly by hands for covering and making the smooth base layer of the mask.

**Kuhila:** (*Aeschynomene Indica*) it is a kind of small plant of white colour found in the low-laying areas of Assam. By collecting the appropriate plants from the field and removing its skin and kept it for dried. The proper dried material is utilized to make the teeth, fingers and nails of mask.

**Process of Mask-making:**

The basic (*Mur*) armature of the mask are woven carefully with bamboo *Kathi* by using three kinds of knitting technique which are *Karaniya Mur* or *Lakshimi Mur, Chela Mur, and Tumor mur* or *Viswakarma mur* according to the size and variety of mask. To make the armature or ‘Mur’ of a mask the artisan first collects 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 the bamboo is incised into pieces of about 2 to 2.5 meter in length. These bamboo pieces are kept dipped into the water of pond 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 length of bamboo are longitudinally divided into a few pieces from which ‘*Bahan Kathi*’ splits are made with the help of a sharp knife (*katari*). These bamboo splits are woven in open hexagonal pattern to make the basic armature of the mask. In this hexagonal pattern of the ‘*Mur*’ splits are woven in three dimensions instead of horizontal and vertical, which creates a pattern of hexagonal mesh of six pointed star. Similar hexagonal pattern is used in basketry technique in Assam from early periods because the mask is weaved like the basket and it is believed to be the place or grace of goddess *Lakshmi* and so, the weaving prototype of the mask is known as *Lakshimi sutra* (plate-5.30).
In second step the woven base of the mask is covered with one or more pieces of old cotton cloth, which is wiped with a fluid of a special type of clay Kumarmati or potter’s clay and water for preliminary covering of the mask (plate-5.31). Then a mixture is made with the cow dung of calves, clay, and water is applied over the mask in two or three layers according to the requirement. In this step, features of the mask become high up. This step is known as ‘chera dia’, which means giving the appearance of character, then it is kept to be dried in the sun (plate-5.32). Before it dries completely, the mask is rubbed and scrapped with a bamboo scraper (karani), which is followed by again drying and then colouring of the mask. Embellishments like hairs, moustaches, crowns, and other required ornaments are finally added to a mask externally according to the character. In early days the craftsmen used natural colours for the beautification of a mask (plate-5.33). Preparation of natural colours is time consuming, laborious, and strenuous process, therefore nowadays the craftsmen use the available chemical colours. Before the modern period, craftsmen kept their colours in the bamboo tubes of different sizes, small brushes were made from pigeon’s feathers or bamboo sticks by affixing goat’s hair as bristles, broad brushes were made by fixing jute fibre with bamboo sticks. Nowadays the mask makers use synthetic brushes. However, still almost each craftsman use perfect broad brush made of jute fibre and bamboo stick. Remarkably, despite the size of the masks these are quite light in weight as masks are made of bamboo, clay, cloth and the above described materials. Morphologically Masks are made on almost all the characters of the Mahabharata, Ramayana, and the Purans. (Sri Hemchandra Goswami, Interview conducted on: 25.10.2013)

It takes around ten to fifteen days to complete a mask. The masks as a result of painting look intense and reminiscent. The size of the masks varies from some that cover only the eyes to those that cover the full body of the wearer and assessed around 115 inches in length by 65 inches in breadth also. As there are three types of masks, Cho or Bor-Mukha (Big Mask), Lutukori Mukha (Hanging Mask), and Mukh-Mukha (Face Mask). The Cho mask is usually the biggest in size, the head and body parts of this mask are made separately, then it is fixed
on the body of wearer by the support of *Adhari* and *Kami* plinth of the Mask. The *Lutukori* mask is quite similar to the Cho mask but smaller in size yet these masks are made in such a way that when the actor wears this mask, his body parts like leg, hands, head, mouth, and eyes can function freely with mask. The *Mukh-mukha* or face mask is the mask to cover the face only. The *Natur Samaguri Satra* is still conscientiously involved in the art of mask making since its beginning. The tradition of mask making of the *Satra* is carried out from the ‘Prachin (elderly) *Samaguri Satra* from where it has been originated and the par excellence in mask making of the earlier and the present *Satradhikars* of the *Natur Samaguri Satra* like Tankeswara Deva Goswami, Moksheswara Deva, Raseswara Deva, Chaitanya Deva, Saisava Chandra Deva Goswami, and others will be always remembered for contribution in the field. (Medhi & Arifurjaman: 2013)

5.5 Types of Masks practiced in Majuli

The *Mukha* (masks) of Majuli are mainly divided into two broad themes are ‘*Laukik Tsumukha*’ (worldly and natural Masks), the masks which are morphologically influenced by the natural forms like animal and human, are called ‘*Laukik Mukha*’ whereas the ‘*Oloukik Tsumukha*’ (Unworldly and supernatural Masks) are the interpretive images of the super natural and super human being like God, Goddess, Devil, Demons, and the anthropomorphic forms which could not be observed in the visible reality. Further these masks are spread into three main branches according to their size.

5.5.1 ‘*Mukh-Mukha*’ or Face masks (Normal sized Mask) these kinds of masks are generally made to worn over the head or to cover the face so they are popularly called *mukh-mukha* or face masks (plate-5.34). There are two types of *mukh-mukha* one which covers the whole head and another which hides the front or half of the face only. Models of *mukh-mukha* are the masks of Lord Brahma, Vishnu, Krishna, common devils old man and women, face of lions, cows, birds, and other normal creatures.
5.5.2 ‘Lutukori-Mukha’ or Hanging masks the word ‘lutukori’ derived from two words one is ‘Lutu’ means hanging and another ‘Kori’ means hands. Thus it means the masks with hanging or movable hands. This mask is made in such a way that, when the actor attires this mask he could move his body parts like head, hands, legs, mouth, and eyes in connection with the relative limbs of the mask. And the mask makers employs some hinges of cane and bamboo with particular technique accordingly to join the different limbs of mask and to make it functional with the limbs of the actor, moreover the masks are made by following the certain measurements of wearer. Models of these masks are comprises the masks of Botu-Baman (full figure of dwarf Brahmin), Kumbhakarana, Surekha Rakshasi, (common and giant devils and demons) elephant and big serpents (plate-5.35).

5.5.3 ‘Bor-Mukha’ or Cho-Mukha (Huge masks) are the giant ones which can sometime envelopes the whole body of the wearer. To make such kind of masks, andhari (rings of cane) and Kamis (smooth flat plinth of Bamboo sticks) are tied along the body to carry the mask, and function with it properly due to huge size (plate-5.36). Similarly masks are supported with ‘Kandhamani’ (separate sticks to lift it on shoulder) from inside which can be affixed on the body of the wearer to move and dance with it during the performance. In order to make the mask durable and functional as per size it is woven by using two layers of bamboo Kathi. Models of such masks are Varaha, Narasimha (giant boar and lion anthropomorphic Incarnation of Lord Vishnu respectively), giant Ravana with ten heads and several hands, and other supernatural characters.(Sri Hemchandra Goswami, interview conducted on: 25.10.2013)

5.5.4 Wooden masks: These types of masks are made by cutting and chiselled the logs of wood which fixed by each other with screw and hinges. The detailed features of the face like nose, ears, mouth, and eyes are made separately and then fixed on the basic structure. Mostly single kind of masks that is Mukh- Mukha (face masks) is made by wood and this technique in Majuli. And that may be of two types one which covers the half or side of the face only and another which worn over the head or complete head mask. After preparing the
masks it has been painted by selected colours according to the requirements of characters. This type of masks is difficult to make and not much feasible to use, thus not made frequently.

5.5.5 **Kaporar Mukha** (Masks of clothes): are made by mainly three materials that are cotton fabric, cotton, and thread. Initially the basic shape is made by stitching the clothes together like a pillow cover, then envelop of cloth is crammed by cotton according to the shape and size followed by stitched and bunged up by all the sides. After that hairs, moustaches, eyebrows, nose, teeth, nails and ears are fixed superficially. Generally two kinds of masks made by this technique are *Mukh-Mukha* and *Lutukuri Mukha* but merely in specific requirement and that of masks of common size and shape as these are not much durable and relevant to the moist climate of the region.

### 5.6 Stylistic analysis:

**Theme:** It is considered that our face is the index of our mind and mode of communication for each and every emotion like happiness, grief, laughter, anger, affection and many others expressions. Our face regularly expresses itself, by the lines, colours, grains, and the changeable forms of the face beneath different situations. Though other limbs of the body are supplementary and vivacious in expressions, but face is primary and vital in visual and acoustic art of acting, which mostly depends upon it. Thus the masks of Majuli are basically the delineation of each and every expression of human life and a step ahead representational visual form of classic Indian Sanskrit literature and its vivid and imaginary characters as the masks persist the high quality to express and evoke the particular emotions, for which it made through all its facial elements like gesticulation and morphology of eyes, eyebrows, nose, ears, mouth, lips, teeth, tongue, lines of forehead, colour and texture of skin, are the remarkable silhouettes of epics and scriptures. Therefore the theme of masks of Majuli is entirely spiritual so as to base upon the imaginative characters of Ramayana,
Mahabharata and *Purans*, depicted initially in the plays of Sankardeva and Madhavadeva and continued in the later trends of Vaisnavism.

**Technique:** The masks of Majuli are broadly made of Bamboo, clay, dung, cloth, cotton, wood, and other available indigenous materials. Remarkably the basic technique and idea of weaving armature in different shape and size is unique itself, moreover the process of giving expressions *‘Chera dia’* through covering of cloth, fixing jute for hairs, *kuhila* plant for nails and teeth. Colours and their application, is completely ingenious and amalgamated with indigenous folk flavour. It has been observed that the masks are made in different variety and sizes as mainly it has been divided into three categories of face mask, hanging mask and huge mask variably consist of particular techniques of making as these mask light in weight and comfortable to carry and perform.

The texture of the surface or skin and colour treated according to character like rough and dark skin for demons and animals, whereas smooth and mild skin of deities, sages and females. The mask of *‘Bogoli’* (white crane) used in *‘Ras Lila’* performance is technically unique as it is made of using all the above equipments, methods and tools. The head of mask is made of wood with beak, the neck is of cloth, the body is of bamboo sticks and splits, the feathers are of paper, cotton, jute and the nails are made of *‘Kuhila’* plant. Hanging masks and huge masks are also mile stone in this category as technically they function so well with the body parts of the wearer and cover the whole body of the performer respectively (plate-5.37, 5.38). Use of hinges and joints between two parts or limbs of the mask are adorable as during the performance when a performer dance with the mask it moves so flexibly with the performers body and creates such an aura that the spectators felt breath taking connection with it, and not for a single moment they recognise as it is an mask or an object are being observed, it is so evocative and mesmerizing that the expression of fear, comedy, laughter, grief, affection and other depicted emotions of masks, can be clearly observed on the face of audience.
**Function:** Masks of Majuli has been made on the variety of characters of the epics and *Puranas* to be worn in Vaisnavite theatrical performances. Apart from the exceptions these masks are primarily persuade the Vaisnava ideology. As the masks are based upon the mythology thus created and utilized to depict the features of the mythological beings in the religious dramas which generally cannot be observed in the world and merely difficult to depict them with the bare faces (plate-5.39). Therefore the morphological features of the masks are based upon the super-human and inferior-human beings or anthropomorphic forms, including some of the animal, and mundane human forms and exceptionally on abstract. Customary, funerary, commemorative, magical and therapeutic functions of masks has not been practised with these particular Vaisnavite masks of Majuli, even in the folk rituals and festive uses, these masks are confined to the dramatic episodes organised in the particular festive occasions. At the very outset these masks specifically created for the tradition of Vaisnavite theatrical performances and incorporated as the vital attribute of *Ankiya-nat*, ‘*Bhaona*’ and dramatic performances to represent the visual and symbolic values of the vivid dramatic characters, and prevails the profound consequence with the socio-cultural milieu of the Vaisnavite ideology.

**5.6 Conclusion**

Majuli has been a centre of rich heritage and vivid culture of masks or ‘*Mukha*’ which is deeply persuaded by the cult of Neo-Vaisnavism of Sankardeva in the fifteenth century represented a distinct and noble scenario in Assam in the various aspects including Art and culture, opened the distinct arena of creation in visual culture. These masks are having a unique essence of indigenous socio-religious culture, and morphologically represent the high resourcefulness of the local materials and the theme of Vaisnavism.

The masks are made in different variety and sizes as they are mainly divided into three categories of face mask, hanging mask and huge mask, variably permeates the particular techniques of mask making as these masks are light in weight and comfortable to carry and perform by the wearer similarly.
persists the high aesthetic values. Consequently these masks are made for almost all the characters and narrations of the Mahabharata, Ramayana, and Purans and in all over the state masks of both bamboo and wood are used in various religious theatrical performances.

Through the utilization of masks, it became captivingly possible to depict and to make understand the various features of the interpreted characters among the each every group of the society. During the research it has been observed that masks are the indispensible device of the ‘Ankiya bhaona’ performances, and an integral feature of the Vaisnavism of Sankardeva. Most of the artisans who still prepare these masks are the inmates of the Satras as Samaguri Satra of Majuli. The tradition of mask making is a hereditary skill passed down from father to son or mentor to disciples in the Satras of Majuli and still convincing the spiritual and creative urge of the artisans as well as the spectators beyond the age, gender, caste and social discrimination. Noticeably these masks beside progression to their aesthetic sensibility and serving to heighten the sense of morality and social integrity, are also struggling to survive, against day by day emerging modern trends of communication and amusement.
Plate 5.19 Chhau Mask of Purulia

Plate 5.20 Cham Mask of Tibet

Plate 5.21 Naga Mask, North-east India
Plate 5.22 Old ‘Titan’ mask preserved in Auniati Satra, Majuli
Plate 5.23 Collection of Masks, Samaguri Satra, Majuli

Plate 5.24 Collection of Masks in State Museum, Guwahati
Plate 5.25 Samaguri Satra, Majuli

Plate 5.26 Researcher in discussion with Artisan of Samaguri Satra, Majuli

Plate 5.27 Collection of masks in Samaguri Satra Majuli.
Plate 5.28 Mask making Studio, Samaguri Satra, Majuli

Plate 5.29 Sri Hemchandra Goswami, Samaguri Satra, Majuli

Plate 5.30 Process of Mask making, armature of Mask (Mur).
Plate 5.31 covering of Armature with cloth and clay

Plate 5.32 ‘Chera-dia’ (giving expression and gestures)

Plate 5.33 colouring the Mask
Plate 5.34 Mukh-Mukha (Face Mask) of Hanuman, during Performance

Plate 5.35 Lutukori mask
Plate 5.36 Mask of Narasimha

Plate 5.37 Giant Crane Mask

Plate 5.38 Giant snake Mask during Bhaona performance

Plate 5.39 Giant Bull Mask during Bhaona performance
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