



MASKS OF

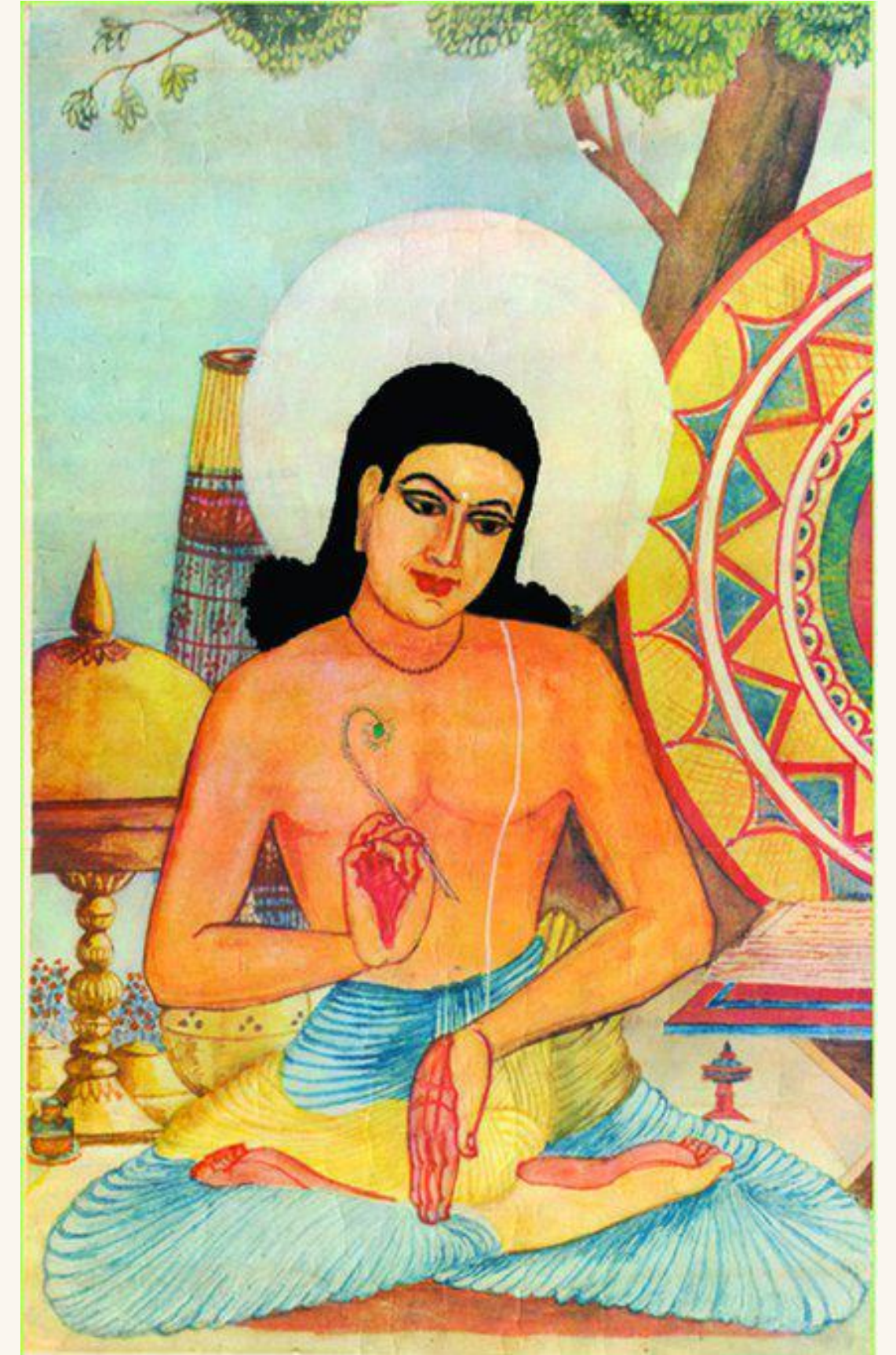
# MAJULI

A RIVER ISLAND IN ASSAM



# History

The river island of Majuli in Assam is not only a remarkable geographical wonder but also a cultural treasure trove deeply rooted in the traditions of Neo-Vaishnavite culture. At the core of this vibrant heritage lies the art of mask-making, which finds its origins in the visionary work of Srimanta Sankaradeva, a Vaishnavite Saint from the 15th-16th century. Sankaradeva's establishment of Sattras institutions paved the way for the preservation and practice of Neo-Vaishnavism, while also creating a space for performing arts to connect with the masses.







In 1468, Sankaradeva introduced the use of Mukha, or masks, in the theatrical performances known as Bhaona. These masks became a powerful medium to portray the diverse expressions of mythological characters, allowing the actors to bring the narratives to life. Sankaradeva meticulously crafted masks of Brahma, Garuda, and Hara for his inaugural one-act play titled Cihna Yatra. This historic tradition of mask-making in the Sattras of Majuli represents an artful means of interaction through performance, enhancing the overall cultural experience.



# Types of Masks

The masks created in Majuli serve both morphological and structural purposes, highlighting their versatility and significance. Morphologically, these masks are categorized as Loukik (worldly) and Oloukik (supernatural). Loukik masks represent human beings and animals, while Oloukik masks are exclusively reserved for supernatural characters, bringing mythological narratives to life. Structurally, three types of masks exist: Mukh mukha or Mur mukha, which covers the face of the actor; Bor Mukha or Su Mukha, which envelops the entire body of the performer with the head portion called Mukha and the body referred to as Su; and Lutukai or Lutukori Mukha, a smaller mask compared to Su Mukha.







Bor Mukha or Su Mukha



Lutukai or Lutukori Mukha



Mukh mukha or Mur mukha



# Mask Making

What sets the masks of Majuli apart from other folk masks across the country is the exclusive use of indigenous materials found on the island. The Sattriya masks, or Mukha, are created using biodegradable raw materials that highlight the craftsmen's commitment to sustainability and traditional practices. Unlike masks made from Plaster of Paris and synthetic colors, the craftsmen of Majuli pay special attention to intricate details and technicality, incorporating movable jaws for easier dialogue delivery. Bamboo, cane, potter's clay, cow dung, jute fiber, paper, cotton cloth, shola pith, and natural colors are meticulously selected for their authenticity and connection to the environment.







### **Making of the bamboo frame**

The craftsmen follow a sequential order to bring these masks to life, starting with the creation of a basic structure using two to three-year-old jaatibaah bamboo arranged in a hexagonal shape. This structure is then covered with a cotton cloth dipped in potter's clay, which is further reinforced with a mixture of clay and cow dung. This provides the foundation for adding intricate details and depth to the mask. Jute fibers and water hyacinth are skillfully incorporated for creating beards, mustaches, and hair.





**Frame covered with mud and cloth**



**Tool used**



**Features skillfully crafted**



**Cloth and mud layer**

Once the mask is complete, it undergoes a finishing process where a bamboo file, known as a Kordhoni, is used to burnish the mask. As the mask is completely dried, it becomes a canvas for the artists to paint using natural colors. The final touch is given through deft painting, where vegetable dyes and colors derived from Hengul (red) and Hentul (yellow) stones are preferred. The entire process showcases the craftsmen's expertise and attention to detail, resulting in masks that captivate the imagination and reflect the rich cultural heritage of Majuli. This attention to detail and use of organic materials ensures that the masks of Majuli remain light in weight and comfortable for performers to wear, enhancing their overall theatrical experience.





Painting after drying



Decorative pieces



Display at the centre

Over the past centuries, the traditional mask-making culture of Majuli has become a significant feature of our intangible cultural heritage. It is an artistic interpretation introduced by Srimanta Sankaradeva within the broader context of Sattriya culture. The expertise involved in this age-old tradition is passed down from one generation to another, ensuring the continuity of this magnificent craft. In addition to traditional theatrical performances, these masks now find their place in modern plays, home decorations, and museum displays, expanding their reach and significance.



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Location: Mask Making Centre and Temple, Sri Sri Samaguri Satra, Majuli, Assam-785110



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