

## Manifestation of Myths and Mythology in the Odishan Mask: A Critical Observation

Mahesh Singh & Rajesh Bhowmik

### Abstract

Myths and Mythologies are tales that express different religious, social and political issues. These aspects of life, when enacted educate and entertain people in particular culture through vivid performances, which are based on myths and mythologies. Tradition of Mask making practice is also associated with traditional performances. In Odisha mask is widely used in rituals, ceremonies, and festive occasions; mask-makingcraft is also flourishing in the arena of commercial sphere. Usually, mask depicts the gods, demons, animals and mythical characters. Masks are used in different plays and processions like *Ramleela*, *PrahalladNataka*, *PashuNrutya*, *ThakuraniYatra*. Beside human faces, many Odishan masks are made in the shapes of animals. Social customs of Odishan people are expressed through the large number of festivals connected with myths and mythology.

**Keywords:** Epic; Mask; Myth; Mythology; Performance; Ritual

### Introduction

Myths are traditional stories handed down from one generation to another through verbal or written form. Myths express the long held, highly valued beliefs of a certain culture on the various aspects of human condition, good and evil; human origins; his suffering; the meaning of life and death, and of after-life. The word mythology is derived from the Greek 'mythos' meaning story and logos for speech and mythology translates as the 'spoken story of a particular culture'. Every society has different myths; they are especially connected to religious beliefs and rituals. Myths are the sacred narrative of God & Goddesses, also an attempt to explain cosmology and the fundamental mysteries of life and the universe. The study of myths and the body or collection of myths of a particular religion is called Mythology. Myths are integrally related to the religious MORES, therefore rituals and ceremonies are closely connected with it. Rituals and ceremonies are accompanied by dance, drama, music and chant to intensify the ambience of the atmosphere. Although rituals have a close affinity to a myth, there is a paradox extant among the scholars regarding the relationship of myth and ritual. Some scholars argue that "every myth is derived from a particular ritual and that the syntagmatic quality of myth is a reproduction of the succession

of ritual" (Meletinsky, 2000). On the other hand, scholars like E.B. Taylor explained, "myth functions to explain the world as an end in itself. Ritual applies that explanation to control the world. Ritual is the application, not the subject, of myth". Scholars like Walter Burkert believe that both myth and ritual are independent, he also believes both myth and ritual bolsters each other (Segal, 2004).

In Hinduism, mythological texts are the narratives found in Vedic literature. The Hindu epics deal with a wide range of subjects, such as the origin of the cosmos, life, how Gods and Demons originated, battle between good and evil, human values, life cycle and many other aspects. Hindu mythology not only has the interesting characters of gods, demons and humans, but it also has a vast array of animals. In Ramayana, Mahabharata and in the Puranas animals, play a very central role. There are a variety of myths and fables, which narrate the incarnations of gods and goddesses into animal form to accomplish various goals. *VarahaPurana*, *MatsyaPurana*, *KurmaPurana* are only to name a few. There are also religious books that are dedicated to specific animals, such as *Nagamahdimya*, *Nandi-purdoa*, *Mayiratrahimya* and *Pashu-puriltia*. In Hinduism various animals and birds are considered as sacred, as they are associated with particular deities not only as their *bahana*, but also play an important role in battles and adventures like a true companion. For example, Nandi is associated with Lord Shiva; Peacock is with Lord Karthikeya; Mouse with Ganesha; Swan with Saraswati; Lion as a companion of Goddess Durga; Garuda the carrier of Lord Vishnu; Elephant as a *bahana* of Lord Viswakarma (Kamat, 2019). There are countless examples of animals as well as sub-human creatures existing in Hindu Mythology. Consequently, mythological animals are considered as a common subject by Odishan mask makers. They gave them life by following iconography and their own imagination with utmost care. These animal masks are considered as sacred objects as they invested with divine power. Mask of *Grurda*, *Hanuman*, *Ganesh*, *Narasimha*, *Banara*, Elephant, Horse are very popular in Odisha.

Mask is an aesthetical creation of primitive man. While primitive peoples were in fear and unaware about the natural forces around them; they tried to copy the nature in symbols and in forms through painting, sketches and by making objects. The fear of the dynamism of nature leads them to create mask, a tool to create linkage between the known and the unknown natural forces. Ritual develops around this combining costume, dance and music (Guin, 2019). Gradually traditional theatre influenced from this and mask acquired a permanent place in theatre. The earliest specimen of theatrical use of mask was found in Rang Mahal, an early historical site in Sri Ganganagar district of Rajasthan (Pande, 2001). In Odisha mask making

practice is closely connected with local myths, Hindu rituals and ceremonies. Artisans have also been inspired by mythologies and mythical legends and have given them visual form. Masks are depictions of Gods, Demons and different mythological characters. People of Odisha perform different mythological stories from *Puranas*, Epics and from local mythical stories as a part of a ritual and in celebration.

*Chitrkaris* the designation entitled to the mask makers in Odisha. To make mask *Chitrakars* use wood and *papier-mâché*. Masks created out of *papier-mâché* are handy in use as they are light weighted. Comparatively wooden masks are a bit heavy but the makers of masks use *mahalimba* tree for it, which also has a mythological foundation and masks made out of this tree is light. In order to make mask live and representative of a character, mask is decorated with motifs, symbols and iconographical colours. Specifications are also given attentive importance as earrings; nose rings and necklace are also put accordingly. In case of nose, ring is usually used to the left part but there are exceptions also. Ostracizing few masks of *asura*, all other masks carry headgear or crown. Floral motifs are witnessed on ear and nose rings. Cases in point, floral motifs are also used on chin to exaggerate beauty. Floral designs of specific kind are designed above eyebrow and sometimes below eye slit. Forehead symbols are of worth importance as it helps to depict or assume from the mask to comprehend whether it is of a Demon or God. Etching of third eye depicts *Shakti*. In addition, on other cases *chitais* designed on forehead. Crowns are often monumental in nature born out of the imagination of creator. However, there are no hard and bound rules for the upper part of the mask but lower parts are almost same in maximum cases – petal of lotus designed. Interestingly, few crowns are adorned with *amla* of Odishan temples.

Mask is an essential object in some folk performances, such as “*Ramleela*”, “*PrahalladNataka*”, “*PashuNrutya*”, “*BaaghNacha*” “*ChaitiGhodaNacha*” “*ThakuraniYatra*”, “*ShahiYatra*”, “*SnanaYatra*”, “*LankapodiYatra*” and “*MedhaNacha*”. These folk performances are known as “*Jatra*” or “*Nata*” in local languages. Some very popular dramatic persona in “*Jatras*” are *Ravana*, *Angada*, *Rakshyasa*, *Hanumana*, *Banara*, *Jambuman*, *Nrusingha*, *Garuda*, *Surpanakha*, *Durga*, *Mahisasura*, *Lion*, *Tiger* and *Horse*. There are many varieties of masked performance and each has its own cultural significance. “*Ramleela*” is an open theatre performance based on the epic of *Ramayana*. It is performed all over Odisha during the festival of *Rama’s* birthday, in the month of *Chaitra* (March-April), *SuklapakshaNavami*. *Ramleela* is particularly focused on recalling the battle between *Rama* and *Ravana* and consists of a series of dialogues between the Gods, sages, Demons and the faithful. Wooden masks of *Banara*, *Hanumana*, *Angada*, *Surpanakha*, *Garuda*

and *Ravana* wore by the actors of folk theatre to perform the story of *Ramleela*. "*Sahi Yatra*" is performed in Puri during the month of *Chaitra* (April) on the day of *Ramnavami*. The actors present *Ramayana* in different episodes. The actors of each *shahi* wear huge and elaborate masks of ten headed *Ravana*, *Navasira*, *Saptasira*, *Trisira*, *Panchamukha Ganesh*, *Hanuman*, *Sugrib*, *Angad*, *Nrusingha*, *Ardhanariswara* and of various deities and demons. When the idols are taken out in procession, mask dancers join the procession. The procession halts at market places and road crossings, thereby allowing showing their acrobatic and martial skill. The actors wear huge masks of Gods, Demons, King and the Queen. *Devi Thakurani* is the chief deity of the *Dera* community. "*Thakurani Yatra*" started when the main priest of the *Thakurani* temple requested the deity to return. When the deities are out on a procession performer become animals, they wear a life-size Tiger mask along with other animals like Bull, Horse, Lion, Deer, Peacock and Duck and performs. They form a procession with the rhythmic sounds of *Changu* and *Kahali* played by traditional drummers and players. "*Snana Yatra*" takes place in the month of *Jestha*, sixteen days before *Ratha-yatra*. It is also known as the *Deba Snana Purnima*.

During *Snana Yatra*, Lord *Jagannatha* and Lord *Balaram* dressed like an elephant, and Goddess *Subhadra* wears a lotus flower *vesha*. This *vesha* is known as *Hati Vesha*. "*Prahlada Nataka*" is based on the great devotee of Lord *Vishnu* named *Prahlada*, goes against his father *Hiranyakashyipu*. His father has taken several attempts to kill him but all his efforts went in vain. Finally, Lord *Vishnu* in the form of *Nrusingha* saves *Bhakta Prahlada*. *Nrusingha* is the half-man, a half-lion avatar, who came out from a pillar and killed *Hiranyakashyipu*. Only the character *Nrusingha* wear lion mask to portray fear and aggressiveness. "*Chaiti Ghoda Nacha*" is a popular folk dance of the *Sakti* cult of coastal districts of *Cuttack* and *Puri*. This festival is observed by the *Kaibartas* in the month of *Chaitra* in honour of their caste deity *Vasulidevi*. As the Goddess *Vasuli* is believed to be horse-headed, the dummy-horse dance becomes a necessary part of invoking her. "*Medha Nacha*" is a religious procession that uses masks and is quite popular in the coastal districts of *Odisha* during *Dusserah*, *Dol Purnima (Holi)*, *Kali Puja* and *Rama Navami*. Animal Mask Dance is locally known as "*Pasu Mukha Nruty*" is one of the ancient dance forms which prevailed in the district of *Ganjam* and *Koraput*, *Odisha*, especially in *Bhanjanagar* sub-division. The Northern part of *Ganjam* is the most inhabited area of tribes. Moreover, Goddess *Byaghra Devi* and *Thakurani Devi* is worshiped by the tribal as their deities.

Thus, the masked performances of *Odisha* represent a vivid scenario of how myths and mythologies are associated with tradition. Mask may seem artificial, it is used extensively and diversely in rituals and mythological

performances to attract and draw common people's attention on Hindu religion, to promote Hinduism, to show the triumph of good over evil, to spread the glory of God and to educate people. These mask dances projected the sacredness, mythology, history, philosophy and social customs those who are alive with the mask.

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