

Gomira Dance Mask



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The craft of Gomira dance masks is practiced in a specific area in North Dinajpur district of West Bengal, in and around the village of Mahisbathan (Khunia Danga) located approximately 50km south-east of Raiganj, the district headquarter. North Dinajpur district lies in the Gangetic plain.

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Origin and Tradition

The word *Gomira* is a colloquial form of the root word *Gram-Chandi*, a female deity. The Gomira masks are inexorably linked to the Gomira mask dance prevalent in this area. The exact origins of this craft and the dance are not exactly traceable and lie somewhere in the hoary past. One of the craftsmen claims it is at least as old as the beginning of *Kaliyug*, which does seem unlikely.



Gomira Dance

The Gomira dances are organized to propitiate the deity to usher in the 'good forces' and drive out the 'evil forces'. It is usually organized within the months of *Baisakh-Jyestha-Asarh*, corresponding to mid-April to mid-July. There are no fixed dates for organizing these dances, but each village organizes at least one Gomira dance during this period according to their convenience, at a central location.

Another occasion for arranging Gomira dance is during the puja of *Amat Kali*, which coincides with the harvesting of mangoes, usually in the month of *Jyestha*. Such dances are also organized during puja of *Smasan Kali*, which does not have a fixed time.

Amat Kali and Smasan Kali are local deities, closely related to and derived from the Goddess Kali, basically a form of Shakti. The traditions are an amalgam of animist traditions, which have been absorbed in the Shakti cult, with its predominant female deity. The Shakti cult is deeply entrenched and every village has its own small temple devoted to Shakti, in her many forms, as the guardian deity of that village.

Every village of reasonable size, say a thousand inhabitants, has its own Gomira dance troupe. The dancers usually perform dances during the 'season', to supplement their income, but have other vocations relating to agriculture and business or crafts such as smithy, carpentry. The dancers are all male, without exception, and portray one or many characters, male, female or animal.

The Gomira dances have two distinct forms. One is the **Gomira** format, which has characters with strong links to the animist tradition. The characters are *Buro-Buri* (Old man-Old woman), *Smasan Kali*, *Masan Kali*, *Dakini Bishwal*, *Signi Bishwal*, *Bagh* (Tiger), *Nar-Rakhas* and *Narsingha Avatar*. The other format is the **Ram-Vanwas**, which derives its characters from Ramayana, with special reference to the **Van-Kand**. The characters are *Ram*, *Sita*, *Lakshman*, *King Dasarath*, *Kaushalya*, *Kaikeyi*, *Sumitra*, *Angad*, *Jatayu*, *Hanuman*, *Sugriv*, *Jambavan*, *Surya-Bhanu* (Sun) and *Ravana*. Some animist characters have also crept in to this format - *Yamdoot* and *Kaaldoot*! Interestingly, the Ram-Vanwas dance is not linked to any season and is actually organized year-round, but is more popular during October- November, closely matching the times for Durga Puja and Kali Puja.

Traditionally, the Gomira dance starts with the entry of two characters **Buro-Buri**, who are actually the human forms of Shiva and Parvati.



According to the Gomira tradition, these gods took human shape and descended on earth so that they may bless the humans and help them to fight the forces of evil and establish a righteous way of life. They appear in the dreams of people and remind them to worship Gomira and lead a righteous life. In the dance proper, they dance to the accompaniment of *Dhak* (percussion drum ethnic to rural Bengal) and *Kansar* (bell-metal disk used as cymbal). After the initial round of dancing, characters are called on to the arena or stage. The last and perhaps the most powerful character is **Narsingha-Avatar**, symbolically showing the ultimate triumph of good over evil.

The interesting aspect is that the total absence of any vocal or oral part in the dance. There are no songs or chants. The dancers choose their own movements, which include

gyrations and hops. An interesting feature of these dance performances are the trances, probably due to autosuggestion. Some particular members of the troupe are entrusted with the job of restraining the member in the frenzy and breaking the trance by sprinkling water consecrated with **tulsi** leaves and white **togore** flowers.

Gomira Masks

Villagers pledge a certain type and number of masks to their favoured deity when they put forward a wish to be fulfilled. Thus the craft of Gomira mask-making, in its pristine form, catered to the needs of the dancers and any villager wishing to give a mask as an offering to the village deity. A villager makes a 'promise'- called '*manat*', to offer a mask to a deity if his or her wish is fulfilled.

The wood crafted Gomira masks represent the characters of the two distinct forms of dance - the **Gomira** and the **Ram-Vanwas**. Most Gomira face masks have subsidiary characters crafted along the periphery of the main character. So, the mask is a composite of a principal character, surrounded by the subsidiary characters, both of which always have a mythical link between them. For example, the character of Dasarath always accompanies the mask of Jatayu. This can be seen in the fourth photograph; on the left Jatayu carries a middle-aged Dasarath on his head while on the right a young Dasarath. The friendship of Jatayu with King Dasarath is well documented in Ramayana.

Masks from *Ram-Vanwas* pantheon are not given to deities as offering.



Photograph 1 above depicts *Jambuban* (L) and *Hanuman* (R). The vivid colours are due to the use of modern enamel paints.

Photograph 2 has two characters, *Hanuman* (L), with the subsidiary character, seated his head, which is *Adyashakti (Tilottama)*. The mask on the right is that of *Naro-rakhsha* with two incarnations of Kali- *Smasan Kali* and *Masan Kali* on his earlobes.

Photograph 3 shows three unpainted masks, from the left, *Bishal*, *Hanuman* and *Signi Bishal*. In this mask of Hanuman, the subsidiary character *Bhanu* can be seen placed on the head of Hanuman.

The interesting point to note is the portrayal of the same mythical character of Hanuman in so many ways with such radically different features.

The Gomira craftsmen do not belong to any particular caste, although they might be followers of either the Vaishnav cult or the Shakti cult. Their tribal or original family surnames have been lost and most of them use Sarkar as their family name. The women folk have never been a part of mask-making, but they do practice natural fibre-weaving on simple home-made looms and these naturally dyed mats, called 'dhokra' are sold in the local 'haats'.

The portrayal of characters through the mask depends upon the craftsman and the tradition he has inherited. The Gomira masks are crafted from wood, but any villager who cannot afford a wooden mask, usually offers a mask made from *shola pith*, which is a cheaper alternative.

Evolution

The contrast between the traditional style and the current, evolved style is evident in the picture below, one from a Kolkata-based artist and connoisseur and the other a 'Modern Mask: Mahishbathan'. Both the masks portray the character Bishal. The finesse of the facial features and the vivid palette, seen in the modern mask is entirely missing in the traditional mask, even though they both portray the same mythical character.

The craft itself is evolving. The exposure to the outside world influences the craftsman and is later reflected in his work. Their visits to trade-fairs and handicraft-fairs bring them in contact with other art forms and artists of other traditions and regions.



Materials & Process

Historically the masks were made from 'pure woods' such as *neem*, as per Hindu mythology. Later locally available and cheaper wood such as mango, *pakur*, *kadam*, *gamhar* and teak came to be used. The craftsmen choose the appropriate wood depending upon the ability of the customer to afford them.

The wood is usually purchased from a nearby sawmill or sometimes cut from a tree by the craftsman himself. The village craftsmen are very conscious of the environment and always plant one tree for trees cut down, usually of the same species.

Originally the Gomira masks were painted with natural dyes. Red dye was made from *segun*, green from *seem* (a form of bean), violet from *jamun*, and black from *jia* tree.



However, these dyes were not permanent and tended to fade with time and were very time consuming. The craftsman had to gather the material, grind it, and mix with water and strain through cloth before use. Slowly the use of chemical dyes and even enamel paints have gained acceptance mainly because of ready availability and permanence, which is not very appealing to traditionalists.

The other important raw material is varnish. Many customers want the pristine shape with only varnish. The performers however use coloured masks. The mask making begins with cutting the log of wood, given the sizes of masks, the initial piece of wood is about 18" to 24" long. This is then immersed in water for seasoning, which renders the wood soft and thus, subsequent cutting and crafting becomes easier. The basic form emerges first with the use of the adze, followed by emphasis on facial features. Once the basic shape has emerged, they use the broad chisel and heaviest hammer to bring out the final shape. As the work progresses, the narrower chisels and lighter hammers are used. Once the front of the mask is complete except for finer finishing, the reverse side of the mask, where the face of the wearer is expected to fit, is scooped out very carefully. The router chisels are used to gouge out cavities such as the opening of the mouth and eyes. If the mask is to be used for the purpose of dancing, only then the eyes, mouth etc are hollowed out.

The final procedure involves fine chiseling of the entire mask. This whole process takes about 4-5 days, or more depending upon the complexity of the mask. Once the mask is complete, then comes finishing; the first step to which is smoothening of the mask, which is done by using sand papers of various grades. Next, the mask gets a coat or two of varnish, which provides smoothness to the mask and ensures durability. Many a times the masks are sold in this condition itself. In case the masks are to be sold to the Gomira dance performers, they need to be hand-painted, in colours particular to the characters to be portrayed. For example, the character of *Jambuban* is always painted in deep violet.

Current Practice

The craft was studied at the Mahisbathan Gramin Hasta Shilpa Samabay Samiti Limited. This center operates as a cooperative of craftsmen and artisans who live in the nearby villages and are devoted to this craft of Gomira mask making. The center is trying to resurrect this art, which is on the verge of extinction, by giving the craftsmen a place to work, ensuring payments for work done and promoting the sale of masks and other artifacts. The masks are made at the center from wood and material purchased centrally. The center pays the member-artisans based on the quality and quantity of masks produced and mutually decided



rates. For most of the artisans, mask making is a supplementary source of income, since they

share their time with other vocations such as agriculture, animal husbandry or running of small shops in their villages.

A notable exception is the master craftsman, Mr. Shankar Sarkar who has devoted his life to the craft of making Gomira masks and this is the only source of income for him. Individual craftsmen are able to produce about 6 to 7 masks per month and are paid according to the size, complexity and time taken. On an average, the Samiti is able to deliver 90 to 100 masks per month, where the selling price varies from Rs. 700/- all the way upto Rs. 3000/-, depending on the complexity.

In recent times however, to augment their product range, newer products have been adopted from the adivasi culture, which include the *bas relief* decorative panels or *chodol* and the *ektaras*. Chodols are fabricated palanquins, an art which strangely, the adivasis have themselves forgotten and buy them from the Samiti or such craftsmen instead, for their marriages and ceremonies. With the increasing efforts from some artists and connoisseurs, this craft has found meaning with some discerning buyers. Hope these endeavours pave a judicious way forward for this rich performing art !!

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