

## **A CRITICAL STUDY ON THE VISUAL NARRATIVES OF MASK AND MASK PERFORMANCE: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE VAISHNAVITE MONASTERIES OF ASSAM.**

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### ***Abstract***

*The Mask culture of India is one of the most perplexing and interwoven cultures of the world. Based on different geographical regions, multiplicity of races, languages, religious beliefs and ritual practices and equally intricate social structure have all contributed in creating the exquisite panorama of Mask and Mask performance. In North-east India, the Vaishnavite Monasteries or Satras of Assam are the unique socio-religious and cultural institutions established in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Satras became one of the most influential and revolutionized force in the socio-religious and cultural sphere. In Satras we find the aesthetic effects of Masks and Mask performance derived from the forms and the disposition within the Mask culture. The objective of this paper is to search the cultural aspects of the Satras through the art of Mask and Mask performance and how the visual narrative creates interactive discourse among the varied ranges of aesthetic domains. Mask and Mask performance shows the values of religious beliefs externally, but it carries an internal resistance to the elite art practices through its direct communications with the regional folk. Masks stand as a critique to the so-called norms of cultural stereotypes and rigid religious aspects by making the performance beyond the structure of religion and enhance the benevolence of humanism.*

**Keywords:** *discourse, interactive, mask, satra, stereotype. .*

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

Assam is situated in the extreme north-east frontier of India, and borders on the States of Bhutan, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Arunachal in the vicinage of China and Tibet on the north, of Burma on the east and the south and of Bangladesh on the west. Assam has extraordinary fertile soil, rich in natural and mineral resources and a socio-cultural population of mixed character. *“Hinduism is the dominant religion in Assam. The three popular forms of Hinduism namely, Saivism, Saktism and Vaisnavism are prevalent here. Neo-Vaishnavism movement gained momentum in Assam in the 15th century”* (Neog 1998). The *Vaishnavite* monasteries of Assam called *Satra*, form a unique socio-religious and cultural institutions of the state. Established in the 16th century to carry the *Bhakti* ideals to the people at large, they are heritage institution of Assam, and form a very strong force of social change and development in the state. This new religious cult drew its teachings from the ancient Hindu Holy Scriptures. *“The Satras became the one of the most influential force in the socio, religious and cultural sphere. The Satras in times became revolutionized the entire system of the Satra and associated it with the developmental aspects of Indian life”* (Sarma 1976). The *Satra* is a unique institution with multidimensional socio, religious cultural domain, with its distinctive characteristics, democratic organizational set up and ideological strength derived from the *Bhakti* movement (Borkakoti 2005).

### 1.1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE VAISHNAVITE MONASTARIES OR SATRAS OF ASSAM

Assamese culture is an acculturation of different socio-cultural population of an integrated character that detects its roots more two thousand years old and is traditionally a hybrid one. It is developed due to acculturation of different ethno-cultural groups under various socio-political systems in different periods of history (Gait 2013). Assamese culture is developed during the first millennium AD, under the great dynasties of *Pragjyotisha-Kamrupa*. In the 15th century, a renewed religious and cultural movement swept the entire Assamese society, under the leadership of the great *Vaishnavite* Saint, *Srimanta Sankardeva*. *“This phase generally known as the Vaishnavite period, roughly started in the last quarter of the 15th century, attained its climax during the 16th and 17th centuries and began to able away by the beginning of the next century”* (Datta 2012). *Vaishnavite* movement is a kind of Renaissance in Assam that created an era of socio-cultural context, humanist in content and popular in form, in literature as well as visual. The movement was at once unique in nature and revolutionary in terms of its impact. It did not rest not on discursive reasoning and abstract thinking but its emphasize more social reform, spiritual uplift and ethnic consolidation through a progressive mode of sacred conduct based on indigenous elements of the region. It was revolutionary in the sense that *Vaishnavism* in Assam meant not only a religious faith but a way of life (Borkakoti 2005). To preach his new religion ‘*Eka Saran Hari Naam Dharma*’, *Sankardeva* travelled through the entire length and breadth of Assam and founded *Vaishnavite* monasteries known as *Satras* along with prayer hall or *Namghar* and that was the beginning of *Satra* institutions in Assam. The *Satras* preaches the *Vaisnavism* that stands out among the different *Bhakti* cults of India in terms of its unique and innovative character that shared values of fraternity, equity, humanism and democracy to create an egalitarian civil society. *“This awakening in religion, literary and social spheres was the result of the Vaisnavite movement”* (Sarma 1976). The *Satras* solely believe of taking refuge with the one and only God, Vishnu. *Satra* institutions are accessible to the highest and lowest, men and women alike, irrespective of birth, caste or status and no rigid theocratic laws are to be followed by the votary. There is no Idol worship in the *Satra* institutional domain. *“The four principles of Assam Vaisnavism, namely Deva (worshipful Deity),*

*Nama*(the celebration of worshipful names and attributes as the way unto him), *Bhakats* (the devotees of the Lord) and *Guru* (special preceptor)”(Borkakoti 2005).

## 2.1 DEVELOPMENT OF THE VARIOUS VISUAL NARRATIVES IN DIFFERENT ART FORMS AT THE SATRAS

The propagation of the *Bhakti* movement led to rise of the new faith *Ek-Saran-Hari-Nam Dharma* in the *Satras* of Assam, rooted with the evolution and development of socio-cultural and religious flowering in a new realm. “*The Satras also served as so many centers of literary production and mainly of religious type*” (Neog 1998). It also cultured around the development of the various visual narratives of aesthetical sphere in art and architecture. The art forms acts as visual narratives in the form of manuscripts painting, wood-carvings, mask making and mask performance. “*In Assam, Vaishnavism inspired its adherents to make poetry, drama, music and last but not the least, painting*”(Neog 2004).The Art of mask making is one of the living traditions of Assam till the date. Along with the art of mask making compiles the art of mask performance, known as *Bhaona*. The *Bhaona*, is a ritual play of Assam.”*Bhaona is considered a great act of piety; it is not mere entertainment for the Vaishnavites. It is a sadhana or exercise of the Bhakti religion*”(Neog 2004). The devotion and emotion of the artists up raised the art and the aesthetical forms which were the metaphor of the *Satras* of Assam.

## 3.1 MASK-MAKING

The *Vaishnava* Saint literary and artistic contributions of illustrative manuscript paintings, wood carvings along with mask making are the living traditions in Assam even today. “*Shankardeva is the one who started this mask making tradition in Assam and popularizing their use in religious plays, dance and drama. The religion he preached ‘Ek-Saran-Hari-Nam Dharma’ at the Satras continues to flourish and sustain his legacy*” (Borkakoti 2005).The universe of the mask associated with the *Satra* institutions is the world of imagination. Masks in the *Satra* are included in the ceremonies and festivals which have social and religious significance, and also are used in the plays of dance and drama. Masks in the *Satras* have been designed in innumerable varieties from a good number of materials available in the environment. The materials used such as bamboo, cow dung, potters mud (black clay), cane, wood, cotton cloth, natural dyes and natural gum from trees to create the masks (Neog 1998).

### 3.1.1 SUBCATEGORIES OF MASKS

Based on the usability, the masks are classified into three subcategories:

- *MukhMukha* (Plate-1), covers the face or head.
- *BorMukha* (Plate-2), covers the entire body or sometimes upper body and are not at all flexible, there is no moveable parts.
- *LutukoriMukha* (Plate-3), covers the full body with flexible body parts representing hands, beaks, eyes, jaws, wings, etc.

Masks in the *Satras* are mostly used for religious as well as ritualistic practices of the *Bhaona* or *AnkiyaNaat*, the *Vaishnavite* theatre. Presently in Assam the Mask Artistry is noteworthy in the following *Satras* namely *KhatparSatra* of *Sivasagar*, *BagiAaiAlengiSatra* of *Titabar*, *NatunSamaguriSatra* and *NarasimhaAlengiSatra* of *Majuli*(Neog 2008). Out of these *Satras*, *KhatparSatra* and *NatunSamaguriSatra* 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 back grounds by dint of mask making and mask performance.

### 3.1.2 THE PROCESS OF MASK MAKING AT THE SATRA

The basic ingredients required to create a traditional Assamese Mask are bamboo, cane, potters clay (sticky soil), wood, cotton cloth, natural dyes or synthetic enamel paints, gun (adhesive). There are different species of bamboo found in Assam but only two kinds of bamboos namely *jati bah* and *bijuli bah* are used in the traditional masks process. A bamboo shoot between the ages of two to three years is used to cut out thin strips. These strips are called *Kathis*. Firstly the strips are precisely woven into a hexagonal pattern using six individual *kathis*. Then latter this pattern is continued to be woven, and after a laborious process of twisting and turning in a desired shape is acquired with the three dimensional quality of the *hoja* or the skeleton of the mask. As the base of mask is formed by the bamboo skeleton, then the next step to proceed is to cover the mask with small pieces of cotton cloth dipped in a solution of mud (potters clay) mixed with a small amount of water. This acts as the skin on the bamboo skeleton. Then cow dung or *Gobar* which is mixed with lime stone powder or kerosene (so that to prevent from fungus and other damages) and is mixed properly to form a fine paste that is applied on the skin of the bamboo skeleton. The cow dung used should be of a calf aged four to five feeding on grass. This form of cow dung creates a gummy or adhesive nature in shaping the mask. Thus the basic layer of the mask is formed and then the facial characteristics are shaped with handmade tools. Then it is carefully semi dried in the sun and again worked on finally giving it a finishing touch to the facial characteristics. Later on it is completely dried up and holes are made in the nose to breadth and in the eyes to see. Again, a second layer of cotton cloth dipped in mud mixed with water solution is applied to strengthen and captivate the shaped facial characteristics. Finally giving a finishing touch with local handmade tools and is dried in the sun and then painted. In early times natural dyes are used such as *Hengul*, *Haital*, *Khorimati*, etc. But, now-a-days synthetic enamel paints are used as they are easy to be obtained (Neog 2008).

### 4.1 MASK-PERFORMANCE

Along with the art of mask making, the mask performance adjoins the *Satra* culture as *AnkiyaNaat* or *MukhaBhaona* (Plate-4) usually takes place within the confines of the *Namghar* or the prayer hall. The *Namghar*, is a huge structured hall that enshrines the *Manikut* and the Holy Scriptures and also acts as a theatrical hall. At the east end of the *Namghar* is the *Manikut* which houses the sacred throne of the deity, *Guru Ashana* and the sacred text. Entrances are made at the (open) end opposite the *Guru Ashana* and the theatrical progress down the passage way in a slow ritual dance toward the sacred text to begin most performances (Neog 1998). “*The plays were compressed into one act only, and that is why this new type of play came to be known as Anka, Yatra or Ankiyanata*” (Nath 2009).

#### 4.1.1 SALIENT CHARACTERISTICS OF MASK-PERFORMANCE

The chief characteristics of *Bhaona* or *AnkiyaNata* :

- The plays are written in the *Brajawali* language.
- The *Sutradhar* plays a depictive character in *Bhaona*. He introduces the characters of the plays while remaining on the stage throughout the performance. He also portrays the play and provides links between potential gaps of the plot. This act of performance is one of the common lineaments of folk performance.
- The plays are devoid of any sections or divisions. That is why *AnkiyaNaat* or *Bhaona* is considered as containing only one act.
- Interlard with prose-dialogues, the plays are notable for their lyrical and rhythmic solicitation (Neog 1998).

#### 4.1.2 THE CRITICAL REPRESENTATION OF THE VISUAL NARRATIVES OF MASK AND MASK PERFORMANCE

The Mask, which is generally an elegant form of craft become an important object of art in the visual narrative of the Mask performance. Mask or *Mukha* metamorphosed itself into an object of utility, ethnicity as well as a sociological factor. The evolution and origin of mask making itself provokes the evolution of human being. Since the ancient times the masks transforms the natural aspect into sociological aspect and in turn transforms into cultural aspect. The utility of masks can be classified into socio-religious sphere, theatrical performance, decorative realm, as well as festive and funerary purpose. Masks cover a wide range of frame work compiling every emotions present in human as well as animals. Mask provides an immense reaction, response, and idea to the spectators while visualizing a mask. It ascertains the spectators of the reality of emotion. Masks in the *Satras* are mostly used for religious as well as ritualistic practices of the *Bhaona*. The origin of the Mask performance or *Mukha Bhaona* traces its roots since the creation of dramatic narratives of *Deodhani Nritya*, *Putala Nach* and *Oja-Pali* in ancient Assam (Barua 2009). Among them *Oja-Pali* was the most popular and even today it prevails in Assam. *Oja-Pali* is an ancient folk performance of Assam where the *Oja* is the leader that narrates and *Palis* are the assistants that assists him. This art form has many similarities with the *Vaishnavite* Theatre or *Bhaona*. *Oja-Palis* performed with various narrative lyrical-rhythmic and dramatic interludes that depict the stories of the *Vaishnavite* Holy Scripture. “It is crystal clear that the major semi dramatic asset of Assamese folk culture which was taken by Sankardeva for the creation of his new theatre is the *Oja-Pali* function of Assam which was widely practiced during his time. It is once again repeated that this one is the main function through which the Saint got the inspiration for innovation of his theatre” (Bhuyan 2014). Therefore the *Vaishnavite* Saint organised the dramatic performance known as *Cihna-Yatra*, which later on developed into lyrical-rhythmic, dance and drama performance *Ankiya Naat* or *Bhaona*. He then transformed, metamorphosed and constituted this concept of *Oja-Pali* into an innovative and exquisite lyrical-rhythmic, dance and drama form of visual narrative in the *Ankiya Naat* or *Bhaona*. “*Ankiya Naat* is a generic term in Assamese and means dramatic compositions in a single act depicting the articles of *Vaisnava* faith” (Barua 2009). The *Ankiya Naat* is unique in its character, as it is one act play. The whole performance is narrated by *Sutradhar*, who owes a special place in Assamese *Bhaona*. In other Sanskrit dramas, the *Sutradhar* disappears altogether after the invocatory opening or introduction of a performance. But here, the *Sutradhar* remains throughout the performance. Further, the *Sutradhar* relates, repeats, even forecasts the performance along with orchestral dances, opening the play by the recitation of several verses, introducing characters in the performance, providing them directions, even by making announcements of entry and exit of the performers in a mesmerizing way. Equally, delivering speech in brief discourses on the philosophical, ethical and spiritual realm and together with supported by lyrical song, rhythmic dance wave spreading the performance domain with wild forest fire. The subject matter or thematic review of *Ankiya Naat* or *Bhaona* is mostly derived from the Holy Scripture. The characters in the performed in the *Bhaona* are limited; they are confined to certain limits. In *Bhaona*, the characters play at a rhythmic space from the very beginning to the end, with special *mudra*'s or gestures, following certain norms of appropriate dance step (Barua 2009). Another remarkable feature of *Bhaona* is the expressive lyrical nature that gives an overwhelming notion. “In these plays through a plethora of songs and verses the playwrights underline the message of the play with more of passion than of logic. Many situations and incidents are suggested by mere machinery of descriptive verses uttered by the *Sutradhar* instead of being represented through action and character” (Barua 2009). The plays of *Bhaona* are written with a mode of religious conduct

and motive rather than secular entertainment. They are hosted in the prayer hall or the *Namghar*, facing the *Manikut*, where the main deity resides. The *Bhaona* is occasionally held in sacred occasions like *Jamnastami*, *Nandotsava*, *Dol-yatra*, *Rasa-purnima* and also on *Vaishnavite* Saints auspicious accounts.

Besides the performance part, the performers also have some special type of costumes. These costumes are preserved in the custody of *Khanikar* or painter in charge of creating these artifacts. He even prepares the different types of masks used in the performance. He provides arrangements for the inevitable costumes required in different performances, also along with that he prepares necessary equipment's used in the performance by the actors such as sword, shield, bow, arrow, discs, spear etc. The costumes worn by the *Sutradhar* also acts as a visual narrative in the performance. He is seen portraying in white *ghuri* or flowing skirt to ankle length with broadly laced-buttoned, a *phatau* or a vest with or without sleeves supported by a colorful *karadhani* or a band worn on the waist, together with a traditional Assamese white turban adorning his head. Other than *Sutradhar*, the *Gayan-Bayan* or troop of dancers and musicians also have their way of own costumes, wearing a white *dhuti* and a waist-coat. The female performers wear traditional Assamese *Mekhla-chadar*, *riha* adorned with traditional ornaments. While for *MukhaBhaona* or mask performance, the performers wear masks compiling the costume with the representation of the character. The performers use paints for make-up supplied by natural ingredients but now-a-days due to lack of the supplement of natural ingredients some artificial dyed products found in market place are used. But earlier, natural dyes such as *Hengul*, *Haital*, *Khorimati* are used.

## 5.1 GLIMPSES OF OTHER VISUAL NARRATIVES PRACTICED AT THE SATRAS (a) MANUSCRIPTS PAINTING

The culture of manuscript painting flourished as a necessary response to the movement that significantly aimed on worshipping of Holy Scriptures instead of a deities idol. "The *Vaishnava* religion revolves round the worship of the supreme god *Narayan-Visnu* and his numerous manifestations. The epics and the *Puranas* do not differentiate between *Narayan* and *Visnu*, both the names designate the same God who is considered highest by his worshippers..." (Jaiswal1981). The devotees offer their prayers to the Holy Scriptures enshrined at the *Namghar* or the prayer hall that houses the *Manikut*, the actual shrine or the *Garbha-griha*. The manuscript paintings are done on *sanchipat* or *tulapat*, which contains illustrations with descriptions that have certain independent characteristics of their own and are collectively grouped as The Assam School of Painting. Since, it was the *Satra* institution of *Sankaradeva* which raised this school and acted as stronghold considerable part in its growth, preservation and popularity (Kalita 2008). The earliest surviving specimens of manuscript paintings that reflect the visual narratives are: The *Chitra-Bhagawata* (Plate-5) of *Narowa Bali Satra* and The *Anadi-Patana* (Plate-6) of *NarowaKujiSatra*.

The earliest extant example of an illustrated manuscript of the *SatriyaSchool* is the *BhagawaatPuran*, book X popularly known as The *Chitra-Bhagawata* from the *Narowa Bali Satra*, Nagoan, Assam, 17th century. Regarding this matter, Eminent Historian and Researcher Dr. NarenKalita explains, "*Chitra-Bhagawata* is remarkable for simplicity in expressive faculty, nicety of execution and fluency in the dynamics of movement of figures endowed with elegance". It is illustrated in *tulapat* or hand-made pressed cotton. Figures are full of elegant and animated forms that arises the feeling of vitality. The placement of the figures ensured movement by placing the figures in a slanting position with dancing posture and the repetition of figural forms reduced the visual monotony. Sometimes in order to represent the series of events some dramatic narration and repetition of some similar

occurrences are depicted in the same panel. The hand gestures are also one kind of primary medium that expressed the boldness of each character. In the male figures the representation of the beard and the headgear resembles to that of Mughal style, and sometimes in the representation Jain. *Pahari* and *Rajput* influences are also reflected. The conventions are the mainstay of the pictorial style. The drawings are free and spontaneous. The red and blue colour primarily dominates in the background of the manuscripts. In addition Dr. Kalita adds, "However, the paintings of the *Chirta-Bhagawata* belonged to a period earlier than the paintings of the *Anadi-Patana*". The paintings of The *Chitra-Bhagawata* transfigure the verbal images embedded in the text.

Another important illustration manuscript of the late 17th century is The *Anadi-Patana* of The *NarowaKujiSatra, Nagoan, Assam*. Presently it is preserved in the Assam State Museum, Guwahati and is considered as the largest manuscript of the Assam school of painting. "The *Anadi-Patana*, which means the beginning less process of evolution of the cosmos, is an interesting treatise on the metaphysics of the Hindu myth of creation" (Kalita 2013). It is also illustrated in *tulapat* or hand-made pressed cotton narrating the creation myth of the universe. Although the *Anadi-Patana* and the *Chitra-Bhagawata* belongs to the same era but its representation of figure, pictorial composition, arrangement of forms and background, decoration configuration and theme is completely different. It has some kind of abstract representation with some foreign influence. Jain influence is also seen in the representation of the landscape. The composition and decorative configuration of the figures are well arranged in a limited space that maintains pleasant symmetry (Kalita 2013). The presence of alteration of attitude is seen in each figure and the artist precisely illustrates. Colour density is one of its basic features with several bold lines in white.

## (b) WOOD-CARVING

The art of wood carving along with the manuscript paintings also excelled under the influence of *VaishnaviteSatras* of Assam. The *Satras* have preserved some ancient specimens of wooden objects of art. The present study is undertaken to focus on the excelled arena of wood carvings belonging to the 18th century of the *Bardowa Than* or *Satra* holds back within a considerably big repertoire of wood carvings from the past. Presently the wooden artifacts have been recovered and preserved in the mini-museum now run by the Directorate of State Museums at the *Than* premises. Among the exquisite artifacts: the Lion Throne or the *Simhasana*, the facade and the door panels well carved and designed with mythical creatures (Plate-7), laboriously carved figures of Gods and Goddesses, the colossal Totemic figures of the deities (Plate-8), celestial sculptures primarily of *Garudra* (Plate-9), rare illustrative pillars of decorative birds, floral motifs and hybrid animals. The wood workers attained considerable skill and excellence and produced a great variety of articles for the use of the nobility, the court and the members of the royal family, and also for the common people. "The wooden artifacts in the *Satras* were parallel developed along with the illustrated manuscript painting tradition and the subjects carved are narrated in the *Religious scriptures*" (Kalita 1985).

The artifacts greatly accompanied the visual narrative of the past tradition. The persistent belief around the objects was that they were representations of *Bhakti* that the human beings could visualize on earth. This was the reason for the display of the objects in the *Satras*. In order to understand the socio-religious significance of the display of the aesthetic objects that captivate and explore the mind of the beholders "The method followed by the *Khanikars* or artists of *Satras* in carving the sculptures was one of deep incision inside the wooden panel. It is known as *charaikhuliya* in which *charai* and *khuliya* stand for bird and carving

*respectively: it is similar to the woodpecker's method of digging holes in the tree. In this method, the uncut portions of wood remain raised to give the pattern of the objects"* (Kalita 1985). Along with that there are another two primary stages of wood carvings in the *Satra*. The first stage is known as *khondowa* means slicing off the surface in flakes and in the second stage the *Kanikars* work on shaping up the patterns. Finally, the sculptures are painted with natural ingredients to give it a final finishing touch. The most significant feature of the sculptures mostly cylindrical in nature and some are relief base with foreign influence of somewhat Totemic and tribal. This intensive practice of carving sculptures in wood was primarily a phenomenon of the *Satras* which conceived the techniques, a style and the subjects of carving (Kalita 1985).

## CONCLUSION

The present research is based on both historical as well as empirical research. The *Vaishnavite* renaissance concealed the socio-cultural and spiritual realm and contributed a lot towards the development of the Assamese society. The *Satras* are the monument of socio-cultural and religious domain that should be treasured. The Government must make a detailed inspection on the preservation and protection of these worthy ancient treasures. Along with the other art various forms of visual narratives must be secularized. The art of making mask is not academically explored and there are lots of aesthetical and philosophical aspects of this art that are yet to be acquired and explored. The Mask, which is generally considered as a form of craft become an important art object in the visual narrative of the Mask performance. Visual Narratives of Mask and Mask performance shows the values of religious beliefs externally, but it carries an internal resistance to the elite art practices through its direct communication with the regional folk. The Mask and Mask performance resists the hierarchical practices of mainstream arts and has challenged the occupation of galleries over the visual psyche of the common people. The intention of the visual narratives is also to search in conventional medium against such stereotype high or classical art which is generally practiced in the urban culture. Mask performance stands as a critique to the so-called norms of cultural stereo types and rigid religious aspects by making performance beyond the structure of religion and enhance the benevolence of humanism. Above all, these visual narratives are based on elements of cultural aspects of the *Satra* institutions and therefore they should be preserved and protected.

**LISTS OF PLATES**



Plate-1 *MukhMukha* Plate-2 *BorMukha*



Plate-3 *LutukoriMukha*

(Courtesy: *KhatparSatra, Sivasagar*)



Plate-4 MukhaBhaona  
(Courtesy: Khatpar Satra, Sivasagar)



Plate-5 Chitra-Bhagawata  
(Courtesy: Bali Satra, Nagoan)



Plate-6 Anadi-Patana  
(Courtesy: Assam State Museum)



Plate-7 The facade and the door panels, carved and designed with mythical creatures.



Plate-8 Colossal Totemic figures Plate-9 Celestial sculptures of *Garuda*

(Courtesy: *Bordowa Than, Nagoan*)

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