



# MASKS OF BENGAL











As the world shelters behind masks due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the traditional mask makers of Bengal have been rendered jobless, as the masks they make are primarily for folk dance and folk theatre performances, and there are no dance or theatre shows taking place right now.

The making of masks or the *mukhosh* is an ancient craft that dates back centuries. There are many legends about the origin of masks in Bengal. According to a popular folklore, the practice of wearing masks was started by the witches, who did not wish to be exposed to the people. They hid behind





colourful facial masks made from wood and paper, and used the attractive camouflage to attract innocent victims. The naïve people who fell for the bait were then sacrificed so that the witches could gain immortality. According to another theory, the wearing of masks possibly started during the great migration that took place during pre-historic times in the Bengal delta, where diverse civilizations and cultures met. Masks were of religious importance too, and worn by tribal priests.

Folk dances and folk theatre of Bengal uses masks extensively. Masks can be made of bamboo, wood, sponge wood, clay, paper, terracotta or even metal. The most famous masks of Bengal are the gorgeous masks worn by the *Chhau* dancers of Purulia. The *Purulia Chhau* dance combines folk and martial traditions. The masks are made from ash powder, soft paper dipped in diluted glue, clay and cloth, using specific moulds for creating the different characters. The masks are coloured brightly and embellished with different kinds of sequins and tinsel to make them attractive. The scary masks of the *Gamira* dance or *Mukha Khel* are made from the wood of the *Gamar* tree. The *Gamira* dance of the North and South Dinajpur districts is dedicated to *Gramchandi*, the village deity who is the protector of her people. The tri-headed mask used to depict *Mahiraban*, believed to be the brother of *Ravana*, is used in *Mukha Khel*, popular in South Dinajpur. Another popular mask of the region is the *Shiknidhal* mask, a gigantic wooden mask used in war





dances. The gilded mask is a wooden mask from Kushmundi in South Dinajpur. It is made of bamboo and wood and covered with gold coloured metal leaves hammered into thin sheets. Bamboo masks, made from a single piece of bamboo stick, also originated in Dinajpur. The *Gambhira* dance of Malda district uses masks of mythological characters made from the wood of *neem* and fig trees, and sometimes

from clay. The *Bagpa* dance of North Bengal, presented by the Buddhist Lamas as an auspicious beginning to all religious and social occasions of the *Tamang* community, has special kinds of masks for different characters crafted from wood. The *Bagpa* masks use three main colours – red, blue and white – other colours are used for detailing work. The very popular folk theatre form of the Sunderbans, *Bonobibir*



*Pala*, in which *Bonobibi*, the goddess of the forest, fights the demon king *Dakshin Ray*, uses interesting masks of tigers and crocodiles. The art of making masks from *shola* or sponge wood is popular in Murshidabad district. Clay masks are made in Kolkata's Kumartuli area, well-known for making clay idols of gods and goddesses. In Nabadwip, *Shiva Mukhosh* is a popular clay mask. *Dokra* masks are made through metal casting by the lost wax process, and used as an artifact for home décor. The *Rabankata* masks are used in the *Rabankata* dance that is performed during Durga Puja in Bishnupur of Bankura district to celebrate the triumph of good over

destructive evil. *Durga*, representative of good vanquishes the evil *Ravana*.

EZCC conducted a mask making workshop at Srijani Shilpagram. Contemporary mask artisans took elements from the different styles of mask making in the different districts of Bengal and created a set of contemporary masks, which can be used as home décor as well as to create installations. The masks are vibrant, have used scrap material that is normally thrown away, and are an expression of the talent and creativity of our artisans.











# Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre

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