

MASKED PERFORMANCES AS CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

A thesis submitted in part fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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February, 2024

CHAPTER FIVE

Masked Performances in Neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist Traditions of North-East India: Concluding Remarks

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With the help of perspectives from traditional as well as global contexts, the present study attempted to analyze the social and cultural functionalities of Bhaona and Cham masked performances, which are prevalent in the North-East Indian states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim. Firstly, the study intended to explore the traditional contexts wherein the masked performances are embedded in the lived experiences of the neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist societies, and thereby analyze- a) social significance of the Bhaona and Cham masked performances in the contemporary communicative processes of the cultural groups; b) the roles Bhaona and Cham masked performances play in the meaning-making processes of the cultural groups; and c) how the Bhaona and Cham masked performances as medium of communication help in enkindling cultural identities within the respective cultural groups. Secondly, the study attempted to explore the global context to examine the interplay between the forces of globalization and masked performances, which are practiced by neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist societies, who are caught in the labyrinth of extreme geographical isolation and limited yet steady penetration of global forces. In the present chapter, the researcher synthesizes the major findings into three broad themes namely, a) integration-fragmentation braid; b) digital space, neo-performative intent and neo-audiences; and c) government interference – way forward?

5.1 Integration-Fragmentation Braid

Highlighting on the significance of religious rituals within any cultural group, Catherine Bell (1992) mentions that “ritual is a type of critical juncture wherein some pair of opposing social or cultural forces comes together” (p.16). In the traditional contexts, the religio-ritualistic Bhaona and Cham masked performances resonate with the proposition of Bell, as such votive masked performances on one hand integrate the multi-ethnic, caste, and gendered neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist societies, and on the other hand, legitimize the existing hierarchical social structure(s).

According to Stoeltje (1992), the “collective phenomena” or the “participatory ethos” embedded in religious festivals “serve varied purposes rooted in group life”. Likewise, the participatory feature of Bhaona and Cham masked performances help the otherwise fragmented societies to strengthen social bonds and foster fraternal co-existence through “communitas”, where members identify with a single religious community, with shared norms, values, and beliefs. The masked performances thereby become occasions through which affiliation to the respective religious institutions (i.e. Sattras and gompas) are renewed, cultural legacies are passed on to the succeeding generation, cultural identities are reinforced, and religious capital are acquired, which help in inter-generational continuation of meaning-making process.

On the occasions of religio-ritualistic masked performances, the respective neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist religious communities collectively comprehend the symbolic meaning of specific days and places, which are sacred for the communities, as on such symbolic time and ritual-space, the divine could be ritually summoned to subjugate the evil emanations, and deliverance from impediments could be provided by the ritual-experts from the Sattras and Gompas. Therefore, it is on such religio-ritualistic occasions that the meanings of the traditional masks are fully experienced by the neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist societies. The Bhaona and Cham masked performances thereby not only serve as medium for conveying exemplary narratives embedded with altruistic values, such as generosity and compassion, but also serve as medium through which the neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist communities collectively experience communion with the numinous. Therefore, the functionalities of the masked performances encompass structuring the neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist societies around pre-determined social as well as ritual order. Any transgression by the adherents is believed to incur divine retribution from the pantheon of deities, along with enforcement of social exclusion by the inmates of the Sattras and Gompas, who are revered in neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist societies as the representatives of the deities.

The masked performances also legitimize and perpetuate the existing hierarchical social structures in the neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist societies. While the neo-Vaishnavite society in Assam is structured around caste and gender norms, along with relation to the Sattra institution, the Tibetan Buddhist societies in Arunachal Pradesh and

Sikkim are structured around gender norm and relation to monasticism. Defying the egalitarian ethos embedded in Vaishnavism and Buddhism, the chief custodian members from the Sattras and Gompas restrict and circumvent the right to learn and practice the Bhaona and Cham masked performances based on pre-determined norms of the institutional religions. Such differences are experienced through the Bhaona and Cham masked performances, as the votive performances are embedded in the repertoire of institutional religiosity, and ritual-involvement in the Bhaona and Cham masked performances has thereby become an expression of religious authority bestowed exclusively upon the monastics who have acquired the ritual-knowledge through years of immersive learning, under the tutelage of respective Gurus.

Bhaona performances being relatively less complex in terms of ritualism, has incorporated the participation of lay-adherents, but the complex ritualistic procedures of deity embodiment in Cham has proscribed lay-adherents' participation as ritual-performers. However, owing to the reverence of Sattras institutions in neo-Vaishnavite society, the performers belonging to the Sattras are positioned at the top rung of the "prestige hierarchy", and despite possessing the caliber as a performer, the lay-adherents could never achieve that social status through ritual-participation in Bhaona.

In neo-Vaishnavism and Tibetan Buddhist communities, the Bhaona and Cham mask-making traditions serve as unifying cultural phenomenon, with less stringent religious norms, and apparently facilitate inclusivity by allowing participation of both monastics and lay-adherents. However, while the distinctions between monastics and male lay-adherents blur in the context of Bhaona and Cham mask-making, the cultural phenomenon does not bring the artisans on the same plane, as the functionality of the masks are embedded in the votive performances, and the ritual-authority to consecrate the masks remains with the ritual-experts from the Sattras and Gompas. Moreover, gender norms also govern the knowledge transmission process, which proscribe Vaishnava and Buddhist women from becoming mask-makers, and emphasize the transmission of the tradition through patrilineal acquisition of the religious knowledge.

The denial of religious rights of the Vaishnava and Buddhist women to become ritual-performers of the masked performances exposes the hierarchical social structures, governed by the gendered religious institutions such as Sattras and Gompas, which prefer

ordination of male laities into monasticism. Instances of such “institutional androcentrism”, as mentioned by the scholar Alan Sponberg (1992), could be attributed to the embeddedness of the performances as symbolic modes of articulation of institutional religiosity, wherein the ‘pure’ bodies of the male inmates could propitiate the deities, and the ‘impure’ menstruating bodies of women are deemed ineligible. The argument could be supported by the fact that after repeated pleading⁶⁹, the Vaishnava women are now-a-days allowed to perform Bhaona held outside the ‘sacred’ precincts of the Sattrā and lay-Namghar, and such endeavors are interpreted as instances of turning the table in an era of women’s revolution. The “ascetic misogyny” has also conditioned the Vaishnava women in Majuli, and the Anis in Tawang and East Sikkim to believe that in order to become devoted Vaishnava or Buddhist women, they must adhere to the restrictions laid down by the revered Sattrā or Gompa institutions; although they would be elated to become participant of Bhaona (held inside the Namghar) or Cham (other than *Dakini* Cham), they will not challenge the existing religious norms.

It is also imperative to underline that when it comes to religious traditions that are spread across wide geographical areas, and have different schools of thoughts and practices, a generalized statement could not be framed from the perspectives shared by the research participants of a limited ethnographic exploration. Therefore, it is important to highlight that along with existence of willingly subservient Vaishnava women in Majuli, there are also Vaishnava women throughout Assam, advocating for allowing women to enter the Sattrā-Manikut in the reputed Barpeta Sattrā⁷⁰, and the adherents of Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha⁷¹ have been proactively training Vaishnava women for votive Bhaona performances, which could be held inside the Namghar. Similarly, in Tibetan Buddhism, the willingness of Dalai Lama to re-introduce the Gelongma ordination⁷² could potentially alter the subordinate status of Buddhist women, allowing them to become ritual-experts of Cham performances held inside the Gompa institutions.

⁶⁹ Please refer to Section 4.1.13 c – Introduction of Vaishnava women as performers in Bhaona.

⁷⁰ Barpeta Sattrā, located in the Barpeta district of Assam, belong to the Nika Samhati, and was established by Madhavdeva in 1505 CE. According to the religious norms in Barpeta Sattrā, women (as polluted menstruating bodies) are not allowed to enter the Sattrā-Manikut.

⁷¹ Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha was established in the year 1930 with a vision to address regressive practices that has crept into the Eka Sarana Naam Dharma, and is devaluing the egalitarian ethos of neo-Vaishnavism.

⁷² Please refer to Section 1.4.7 – position of women in Tibetan Buddhism.

5.2 Digital Space, neo-Performative Intent and neo-Audiences

In Digital Era, wherein connectivity and interactivity through digital media has expanded the ‘performance space’ of Bhaona and Cham masked performances, the ‘performative intent’ has also altered. Transcending the confinement of religious institutions-based votive performances, Bhaona and Cham have reached national and global audiences; the ‘performative intent’ being the strategic representation of identity by highlighting the inherent identity markers (such as masks, costumes, values, etc.) in the masked performances, and generation of appreciation in the imaginary of global community through appropriation of such identity markers.

The endeavor to reach wider audience through sharing of videos and photos on digital platforms have pro-actively engaged the traditional audiences; thereby in the evolved communicative context, such audiences play a significant role, akin to the performers, in terms of proliferation of neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist culture. Although the enhanced visibility of Bhaona and Cham masked performances on digital platforms have increased the possibility of every user of new media to become an audience, their roles are different from that of the traditional devotee-audiences. Contextualizing Richard Schechner’s (2003) efficacy-entertainment braid in digital space, it could be argued that as mediated Bhaona and Cham masked performances are dominantly means of entertainment for the global audiences, the global audiences individually ‘watch’, ‘appreciate’ or ‘criticize’ the mediated masked performances, unlike the devotee-audiences who collectively ‘participate’ and ‘believe’ in the votive Bhaona and Cham masked performances.

5.3 Government Interference – the way forward ?

In the traditional ritual context, the Bhaona and Cham masked performances are continuing as significant communicative medium for articulating and fulfilling the social, cultural, and religious aspirations of the neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist societies. However, with the recognition of religio-ritualistic Bhaona and Cham masked performances (by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India) as the Intangible Cultural Heritage, newer performative contexts and involvement of new agents are being perceived that are consequently altering the functionalities of the votive performances.

The endeavors by the State and Central Government of India to ‘heritagize’ the votive Bhaona and Cham masked performances are based on varied visions, such as preservation of the tradition through performance in sponsored festivals, encouraging youth to develop skills in traditional crafts, tapping employment and income generating potential of the cultural heritage, and proliferation of cultural exchange at national and international level. However, the endeavor to heritagize the Bhaona and Cham masked performances have affected the religio-cultural expressions mostly in two ways –

- a) de-contextualization of masks from the performative traditions
- b) de-contextualization and de-ritualization of the masked performances

Along with the inmates of the Sattras and Gompas, learning of the craft of mask-making has also been an integral part of the neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist lay-adherents’ way of life; however, such inter-generational acquisition of knowledge is more organic in nature, with eventual adoption of the cultural ecology in which the living heritage(s) are embedded. Rather than time-bound vocational training in Government institutes, the traditional transmission of knowledge system encompasses acquisition of liturgical training, where the connection between the Guru and the Sishyas is as important as learning the craft. Moreover, the endeavor by the Government to encourage the youth in order to develop a skill in fine arts that could be traded as capital in the Bourdieuan sense (1967) for economic gain, facilitated ‘souvenirization’ of the masks, which in the ritual context serve as divine and demonic referents that establish communion with the numinous as well as apprise the respective religious communities about the codes of conduct, in order to become a devout Vaishnava or Buddhist. The selling of Bhaona and Cham masks in Government emporiums and curio shops for tourists who are uninitiated into the neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist religious traditions, have commoditized the ritual-paraphernalia into decorative artifact, lacking the communicative power to articulate the religio-cultural histories and aspirations that are steeped in myths and meanings. Souvenirization has therefore tapped the revenue generation potential of the Bhaona and Cham masks, serving as sources of livelihood for the youth of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim. However, being de-contextualized from the performative tradition of Bhaona and Cham, as decorative artifacts, there is a potential loss of meaning, which resonates with the anguish of Jong (1999) when regarding African masks he commented, “In order to understand the meaning of masks

in their original cultural context, it is essential to analyze mask performances, not masks as objects”.

Heritagization of the Bhaona and Cham masked performances have led to the incorporation of the votive performances in varied cultural shows, which are organized for attracting tourists, honoring dignitaries, celebrating days of national importance, etc. It could be argued that in contrast to the traditional ritual context wherein the Bhaona and Cham masked performances act as medium for articulation of institutional religiosity, the newer performance space serve as commercial context, wherein the masked performances are creatively constructed and exhibited as cultural signifiers of the heterogeneous groups, so as to earn currency in terms of revenue and image building.

Such strategic performance of culture, as demonstration of neo-Vaishnavite heritage and Tibetan Buddhist heritage, assist the regional bureaucrats in situating the respective states in the cultural map of India, and also aid the national bureaucrats in proliferating India’s soft power at international level by reminding global community of Indian values (such as generosity, compassion, etc.), and Indian spiritual paths (such as Vaishnavism and Buddhism); thereby boosting the scope for short-term cultural dialogues through religious tourism, as well as long-term cultural dialogues through enrollment of foreign enthusiasts in courses for learning Bhaona performances.

However, de-contextualization of Bhaona and Cham masked performances have raised concern among the chief custodian members from the Sattras and Gompas, and mainly among the ritual-experts of Tibetan Buddhist religious tradition. Therefore, the ritual-experts from the Gompas have mostly withdrawn participation from cultural programs that are sponsored by the State and Central Governments, with certain exceptional cases in which the inmates perform Cham despite reluctance. In the context of such an evolving politics of culture, the chief custodian members from the Sattras and Gompas are apprehensive of a future in which the neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist ethos and worldviews would disintegrate. The tradition bearers, therefore, believe that the presentation of votive masked performances in commercial contexts for schematic consumption of ‘exotic’ culture by spectator-connoisseurs would turn the devoted ritual-experts into profit-driven heritage practitioners, transform ritual-knowledge about deity propitiation and deity embodiment into heritage-centric performing arts, and replace the

efficacy of the masks and masked performances with de-ritualized and aestheticized sites for assertion of regional and national identity. The apprehension among the traditional custodian members from the Sattras and Gompas regarding the involvement of neo-custodian members (State and Central Government) in Bhaona and Cham masked performances raises contemplation, such as within the evolving neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist societies, how long will the traditional custodian members retain authority in distinguishing between sacred masked practices in ritual context and profane masked performances in commercial context, and in such evolved context(s), what will become sacred, and what will remain profane in the neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist societies.

5.4 Limitations of the Present Study

Despite the sincere endeavor of the researcher to explore the dynamics of Bhaona and Cham masked performances from the traditional as well as global contexts, certain limitations are identified.

- Locating the present research in the domain of communication studies, the researcher explored the traditional contexts of religio-ritualistic Bhaona and Cham masked performances, and the corresponding social, cultural, and religious implications of the masked performances in terms of reinforcing social structure, enkindling cultural identity, and articulating religious beliefs. The study also explored the alteration in the functionalities of the masked performances when performed in newer contexts, owing to heritagization policies brought in by globalization. However, the context of politics has remained beyond the scope of the present study. The Indian state of Assam has witnessed insurgencies, and harbors sub-nationalistic aspirations even in recent times. Similarly, with the annexation of Tibet by China, the adherents of Tibetan Buddhism harbor sub-nationalistic aspirations, mainly to re-gain religious rights. Therefore, incorporating the context of politics could have enriched the research in terms of analyzing how the Bhaona and Cham masked performances negotiate in the interplay between religion and politics; whether and how the masked performances are appropriated to enhance the visibility and viability of the performances in order to assert the identity politics; etc.

- The attempt of the researcher to explore the symbolic meanings embedded in the ancillary rituals and visual conventions of the Bhaona and Cham masks has been limited because the researcher did not incorporate semiotics as a lens to explore the Bhaona and Cham masked performances. Adoption of semiotics as a method for studying the masked performances could have enriched the interpretation by bringing in deeper understanding in terms of what the masks signify in the neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist societies; how meanings are constructed and communicated through the visual conventions and structural interrelations among masks; how the masks are construed as a symbol of identity and religio-cultural historicity; how the visual conventions and associated meanings have evolved over the years; how changes in the iconography of the masks represent alteration in the meaning-making processes of the neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist societies; etc.
- One of the research questions in the present study was to explore how Bhaona and Cham masked performances have created opportunities for appreciation of the neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist philosophies in the global context. The present study attempted to answer the research question from the emic perspectives shared by the performers of Bhaona and Cham masked performances, mask-makers, and tour agents within the neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist communities, who either in individual capacities or in collaboration with the Government officials, negotiate with the traditional custodian members to host tourist-based Bhaona and Cham performances, and also accommodate the curio shops and Government emporiums in travel itinerary to facilitate buying of masks by tourists. However, the present study lacks the etic perspectives from the tourists (who are neo-audiences of Bhaona and Cham mask traditions) which could have shed light on the effectiveness of the measures adopted for cultivating appreciation among such ‘cultural outsiders’.

5.5 Future Scope of Research

In order to broaden nuanced understanding on masked performances, the following research could be undertaken:

- Semiotic analysis of the Bhaona and Cham masks.
- Exploration of Bhaona and Cham masked performances with an emphasis on the political context(s).
- Exploration of etic perspectives on the effectiveness of using Bhaona and Cham masks as well as masked performances, as communicative tool for cultivating appreciation among cultural outsiders for the neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist philosophies.
- Transnational study on the Cham masked performances as practiced in Dharamshala⁷³ (in Himachal Pradesh) and Bhutan⁷⁴ to compare and connect the social, cultural, religious, and political implications of Cham masked performances in two heterogenous settings.
- Exploration of the folk masked performances prevalent in North-East India, such as Kieng Cham, Yak Cham, Singhe Cham, Aji Lhamo, Dhuliya Bhaona, Khuliya Bhaona, Bharigaan, Khampti dance, Igu dance, etc., in order to gain insight on the cultural ecologies of the groups yielding the traditions.

5.6 Recommendations

Based on the ethnographic exploration in the states of Asaam, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, and the understanding developed in the course of the research process, the following recommendations are suggested:

- With an endeavor to sustain culture, the Government of Arunachal Pradesh and Government of Sikkim are encouraging to develop skill in traditional mask-making

⁷³ Since 1960, Dharamshala, located in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, hosts the Tibetan Government-in-exile, along with a huge population of Tibetan community.

⁷⁴ Bhutan is a Buddhist kingdom, and the Bhutanese are adherents of Tibetan Buddhist religious tradition.

by offering fellowships to young students enrolled in the two-year vocational program. Although the acquired skill might help the students in generating livelihood, concerns arise regarding the long-term sustainability of income generation and the sustenance of cultural traditions. Therefore, if Government schemes could be developed to offer financial support to artisans who are proactively preserving the tradition of mask-making through inter-generational knowledge transmission, it would be more sustainable in terms of revenue generation and sustenance of culture. Existing initiatives such as Silpi Pension Scheme of Assam, Scheme for Financial Assistance for Veteran Artists (Ministry of Culture, Government of India), etc. offer pension to artists aged sixty and above. Introducing a similar scheme for the youth who are being traditionally inducted into mask-making would be more beneficial.

- During the ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the states of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, it was noted that the Assam State Museum (Assam) and Namgyal Institute of Tibetology (Sikkim) have Bhaona and Cham masks, but most of the masks lack proper labeling. It is imperative to label the masks and provide detailed descriptions of the performative tradition in which the masks are embedded. Without this, the purpose of archiving gets compromised.
- Cultural mapping provides “an integrated picture of the cultural character, significance, and workings of a place” that facilitates the communities to recognize, celebrate, and support cultural diversity so as to bring in socio-economic developments (Pillai, 2003). In order to make the masked performances of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim more visible, comprehensible, and documented, cultural mapping of the Sattras, Gompas, performers, lay-artisans, etc. must be conducted, and digital database should be maintained.