

Declaration

I hereby declare that the thesis titled 'Masked Performances as Culture and Communication in North-East India' submitted to School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Tezpur University in part fulfilment for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Mass Communication and Journalism is true to the best of my knowledge. This is an original work of research, which was carried out by me, and was not submitted for any research degree in any other university/institute.



(Richa Chattapadhyay)

Date: 29.02.2024

Place: Tezpur



Tezpur University

Department of Mass Communication and Journalism

Tezpur, Napaam - 784028

Certificate

This is to certify that the thesis titled 'Masked Performances as Culture and Communication in North-East India' submitted to School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Tezpur University in part fulfilment for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Mass Communication and Journalism is a record of original research work carried out by Ms. Richa Chattapadhyay under my supervision and guidance.

All help received by her from various sources have been duly acknowledged.

No part of this thesis has been submitted elsewhere for award of any other degree.

Date: 29.02.2024

Supervisor: Prof. Joya Chakraborty

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Place: Tezpur

Department: Mass Communication and Journalism

School: Humanities and Social Sciences

Preface

As a Hindu Bengali from West Bengal, I have experienced masked performances prevalent in the state, such as Chhau from Purulia district and Gambhira from Malda district, and have always connected with the religio-cultural ethos embedded in the performances. Masks, in particular, have always intrigued me, especially when used in performances, as I believe masks reveal far more than they could conceal. They unravel fertile imagination and dexterous articulating power of the performing community; a legacy that is inter-generationally transmitted, collectively practiced, and perpetually revered. However, with the introduction of Chhau in UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, it has become more of a performance of culture than cultural performance, which has impacted the traditional significance as well.

While exploring the Himalayan mask traditions as a cultural enthusiast, I observed scant research in the area, and therefore delved into exploring the masked performances of North-East India by situating the religio-ritualistic traditions at the interplay of culture and communication. I approached the masked performances as a ritual enthusiast rather than a ritual skeptic to understand the larger cultural matrix(es) of the neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist communities, as reflected through the performances. Additionally, I sought to explore whether globalization has influenced the masked performances which are rooted in the remote regions of Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, and Assam.

As a cultural outsider unfamiliar with the religious traditions of neo-Vaishnavism and Tibetan Buddhism, I entered the research areas with a "tabula rasa" mindset, and followed classical ethnography. Each interview with the research participants gradually deepened my understanding, which is why I conducted a large number of interviews. In keeping with the classical ethnography approach, I wrote the thesis in third person, and extensively quoted the religious communities in the findings chapter, as I was always mindful of not misinterpreting their religion because of my ignorance. In order to further emphasize this distinction, I presented my analysis of the traditions in a separate chapter. This thesis therefore documents the emic perspectives as well as the etic interpretations.

Richa Chattapadhyay

Tezpur University, 2024

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