

Abstract

Scholars from the domain of communication studies have always attempted to understand the evolution of human psyche by situating individuals within social, cultural, and religious contexts, as such contexts shape the individual's belief system, experiences, and aspirations. An effective way to delve into the entwined relationship between human psyche and the broader social, cultural, and religious ecology is through study of the communicative practices which are embedded within the socio-cultural and religio-cultural expressions. In human society, masked performances have been such as an example of socio-religio-cultural expressions, which have been serving as a “synthesizing force” that stimulate human imagination and belief system, and facilitate the process of communication. Mask and masking, as an embodiment of “learned conduct” through cultural process, have always been utilized to communicate “cognitive insights” in the forms of experiences, values, beliefs, myths, legends and emotions. It therefore becomes interesting to study the masked performances practiced by different cultural groups across the globe. In a similar endeavor, the present study is an attempt to explore the masked performances of North-East India so as to explore the cultural ecology of the region, which has more than two hundred ethnic and sub-ethnic groups, yet remained as a separate ‘other’ in the broader Indian psyche, owing to geographical remoteness. Although there are folk masked performances in North-East India, the present study explores the Bhaona and Cham masked performances of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, which are part of religious institution based masked performances prevalent within neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist societies.

The study attempts to shed light on 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. The study also attempts at understanding the global context, in order to examine the interplay between the forces of globalization and the 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. Situating the ritual-centric Bhaona and Cham masked performances at the interplay of culture and communication, the present study explores the masked performances through five conceptual frameworks including, interplay between communication and culture from the perspective of communication studies; ritual and performance, power, and globalization; interplay between myth and ritual; importance of religio-cultural symbols; and masks and identity in performance.

The present study adopts a qualitative-exploratory approach to identify the different stakeholders associated with Bhaona and Cham masked performances, foster a broader understanding of the socio-cultural matrix in which the performances are embedded, and analyze the evolved social and cultural functionalities of the masked performances in globalized context. The study also uses ethnography as a strategy of inquiry for the masked performances. The study started with purposive identification of field sites such as Majuli district in Assam, Tawang district in Arunachal Pradesh and East Sikkim district in Sikkim, where the Bhaona and Cham masked performances are held during the Sattras, lay-Namghar and Gompa based religio-ritualistic occasions. Non participant observation, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were used as tools for data collection. In-depth interviews were conducted with diverse stakeholders associated with Bhaona and Cham performances, such as performers, mask-makers, tour agents, and teachers and students in Government Training Centers of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim. Focus group discussions were conducted with the devotee-audiences.

The major findings of the present study delineates that the Bhaona and Cham masked performances are held as part of Sattras and Gompa centric religio-ritualistic occasions through which the neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist societies articulate communal religiosity. The ritual purposes of such performances are to propitiate the pantheon of deities as well as apprise laities to the religio-cultural codes of conduct. The votive masked performances have a series of ancillary rituals in which both the monastics as well as the laities participate, depending upon the religious norms prescribed by the Sattras and Gompas. The institutionalized knowledge transmission process consists of Guru Sishya paramapara, in which the novice bhakats or bhikkhus acquire teachings from Gurus within the sacred precincts of the Sattras or Gompa.

The performers of Bhaona and Cham performances consist of male monastics, and in Bhaona, the male laities are also allowed to perform, with varied social norms of gender and caste circumventing the right to participate in the votive masked performances. The audiences of Bhaona and Cham consist of devotees who are adherents of neo-Vaishnavism or Tibetan Buddhism, and through ritual-viewing of the performances, socio, cultural, religious, and intellectual needs are being fulfilled. The exemplary narratives of the performances are medium through which the religio-cultural codes of conduct are conveyed, and religio-cultural histories are revised. Masks play multilayered functions in the Bhaona and Cham performances, as depending upon the characters being portrayed, masks either help in embodiment or impersonation. The visual conventions of the masks are embedded in neo-Vaishnavite or Tibetan Buddhist belief system and also serve as inherent identity markers of the performances. Costumes, music, songs and dances are also an integral part of the votive Bhaona and Cham masked performances, which play varied roles ranging from evoking desired sentiments in audiences, facilitating the meaning-making processes, to being inherent identity markers.

The votive Bhaona and Cham masked performances are witnessing transition, mainly because of involvement of State and Central Government. Such involvement has created newer performative contexts for Bhaona and Cham, which are of commercial interest, rather than religious. The knowledge transmission process has also been re-institutionalized in academic and Government institutes, which have altered the relationship between the teacher and the student. New media platforms are also being used by the neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist societies to connect with fellow adherents as well as global audience, which will help them to generate appreciation about the neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist philosophies.

The findings of the present study are analyzed with the help of Thematic Analysis, in which the themes emerged from the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with the research participants. In order to answer the research objective on social significance of the masked performances, four themes were identified namely, institutionalization of masked performances and authority of ritual-experts; embodied masked performances and social structure; religious socialization through masked performances; and social integration through masked performances. The study

analyzed that masked performances on one hand integrate the multi-ethnic, caste, and gendered neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist societies in terms of shared consensus on norms, values, and beliefs, and on the other hand, legitimize the existing hierarchical social structure(s) based on caste, gender, and relation to monasticism. In order to answer the research objective on meaning-making process through masked performances, dynamics in performative context, masks-performers-audiences context, and performer-audience dynamics. The study analyzed that the performative context, masks, performer-audience relationship all are responsible for the meaning-making process. In order to answer the research objective on cultural identity, four themes were identified namely, performance space, purpose, occasions and cultural specificity; associated rituals, narratives and cultural ethos and worldview; costumes, musical instruments, dances and cultural specificity; and visual conventions of masks and culture specific belief-system. With the help of the four themes the researcher establishes that Bhaona and Cham masked performances are enkindling cultural identity in neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist communities, and such inherent identity markers are later appropriated when the performance context and performative intent change. In order to answer the research question on globalization and digital technology, four themes were identified namely, heritagization of masks and masked performances; folklorization of masked performances; cultural tourism through masked performances; and connectivity- interactivity-autonomy through digital technology and masked performances. With the help of these themes, the study analyzed that 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 – de-contextualization of masks from the performative traditions, and de-contextualization and de-ritualization of the masked performances. 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.