CHAPTER ONE

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

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1. Introduction

"Society exists not only by transmission, by communication, but it may fairly be said to exist in transmission, in communication" *(Dewey, 1916)*

Culture, as being manifested through social behavior is "partly material, partly human and partly spiritual" (Malinowski, 1944, p.36); it represents "the totality of socially transmitted behavior pattern" and all other tangible and intangible products of "human work and thought, characteristic of a community or population" (AHED, 1992). In the words of anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1944), whatever the composition of culture may be, the elements of individual achievement are ought to be formulated into a tradition that can be communicated with other members of the group and passed on to future generation. In the process of transmission, every member of the group becomes aware of the embedded meaning of the socio-cultural activities and eventually becomes culturally rooted.

The tradition of mask and masking were a significant cultural component conceived by "primitive" men of diverse cultures around the world since the prehistoric period which testifies their fertile imagination and dexterous articulating power. Masks were a "synthesizing force" that stimulated human imagination and beliefs and facilitated the process of communication. Mask and masking, as an embodiment of "learned conduct" through cultural process in a particular society, were being utilized to communicate "cognitive insights" in the forms of experiences, values, beliefs, myths, legends and emotions. Masks as "symbolic voices" delineate the socio-politico-economic, cultural and religious milieu of any society. Masks, similar to myths, use the "illusion of metaphor" or symbolic imagery as a means to articulate the profound mysteries embedded within human existence (Bell, 2010).

According to Eldredge (1996), humans started donning mask nearly fifty thousand years ago, and since then, masks have retained significance for humanity (p.3). The root of mask culture can be traced from the rock arts and cave engravings of Upper Paleolithic Period found in different sites of the world such as Caverne du Volp of France, Altamira caves of Spain, Kundusi of Tanzania, Algeria, Libya, Kazakhstan, New

Mexico, Sweden, Siberia, Canada, Peru, Bhimbetka in India, etc. where paintings of hunters are found with their faces covered by animal masks. It is believed that the primitive world had conceived masks as a medium for mediation between the two realms – the world of humans and the world of supernatural forces. In the book "*World of Other Faces: Indian Mask*" (1986), Pani elaborated:

> "…primitive society developed its own masks to minimize the feeling of vulnerability. At the time scientific reason did not develop to explain the various phenomena of nature…He could see that the forces of nature...are basically of two kinds: the benevolent, and the malevolent. The former, he thought, are the acts of the gods whereas the latter, that of the demons and evil spirits. Thus he started creating myths and…tried to materialize these supernatural powers so that, through appropriate rituals which are but enactments of myths, the gods could be pleased and the evil spirits appeased. As a result, from his mythmaking faculty were born many idols, images and icons. And mask was born as a special kind of icon". (p.1)

Thus, in an endeavor to personify the occult forces of nature in the form of cult icons (like deities, demons, etc.), primitive men had started crafting masks. As mask enchants the wearers and onlookers by inculcating a sense of mystery, it eventually developed as an indispensable part of rituals, festivals, ceremonies, dances and theatres. Thus, quoting from "*Fictions and Parodies: Masquerade in Mexico and Highland South America*" (1994) by Shelton:

> "The circumstances under which masks were worn or exhibited - funerary bundles, deity impersonators, warriors, court entertainers, during ceremonies or displayed as tribute – combined religious and political significance. Pictorial conventions of representing masked persons that enable both the natural face and mask to be seen…and the greater popularity of head-dresses and face paint, suggest they were meant to allude to the co-existence of multiple human, natural and supernatural qualities within the same body". (pp.82-105)

Masks symbolize the dual existence of "faces" in human physiognomy (Shelton, 1996). As an "aesthetically sublime" and "culturally functional symbols", masks help conceal one's identity, to elevate out of one's social existence, to transform into a different being and enkindle a state of exhilaration in the process of transcendence. In different parts of the world, there are several rituals of indigenous communities in which masks are being used in magico-religious purposes to "represent the evil or the malignant spirits" and to keep "evil at bay" (Narayan, 2004, p.64). It is perceived that the wearer of mask maneuvers his behavior according to the characteristics personified by the mask as "to put on another face is to admit another spirit" (Sachs, 1963, p.132). Thereby during ritualistic performances, the wearer of the mask identifies oneself with the spirit embodied in the form of mask and is believed to have been possessed by the magical power of the deity or demon the mask is personifying which in turn "sensibly stimulates the emotions of the spectators" (Subbiah, 2013).

Eventually masks became an influential medium of communication in theatrical performances as the visual imageries of masks possessed by physical, metaphysical and symbolic forms enhance the limits of expressions during performances. Masks being "more subtly, imaginatively and suggestively dramatic" in comparison to human faces, have been considerably first conceived as an attribute of theatrical performances by the Western civilization being influenced by religious and ritualistic praxis prevalent in ancient Greek society. The 6th century Greek poet, Thespis is accredited with introducing tragedy, where the religious performers during the worship rituals of Dionysus, the god of fertility and harvest, attempts to impersonate and masquerade as the Dionysus by donning goatskins which eventually developed into the sophistication of masking for disguise with a "white linen mask hung over the face or a attire which enabled the performers of the ceremony to make the manifestation of god" (Foreman, 1997). The referential verisimilitude of masks with the personified character triggers "willing suspension of disbelief" among spectators. Underneath the rapt emotional engagement of the audience lie cultural and psychological factors which lend realism to the "highly unrealistic" piece of art. In a definite cultural context, masks are embedded with symbolic meanings and the audience being able to decode the layers of meanings effectively, respond emotionally to the signals (in the forms of connoted colors, exaggerated facial features, etc.) in the mask even "beyond conscious reasoning".

Etymology of Mask

The term 'mask' traces its linguistic roots in the French word 'masque', meaning 'covering to hide or guard the face'. Masque had been derived from the Italian word 'maschera', and the Medieval Latin word 'masca' meaning 'specter or nightmare'. According to some scholars, mask is believed to have been derived from the Arabic word 'maskharah' meaning 'buffoon' or from the verb 'sakhira' meaning 'to ridicule'. The Spanish origin suggests it to be derived from 'mas que la cara' meaning 'more than the face' or 'added face'. In ancient Rome, the term persona denoted 'a mask'. Masks have played a crucial role since the dawn of history in the shaping of understandings about 'what it means to be human', because masks facilitate the imaginative experience of 'what it is like' to be transformed into a different identity altogether.

Morphology of Mask

The visual and symbolic morphologies of masks have been shaped by natural forms as well as mythological representations; masks with human features are called anthropomorphic, while masks with animal features are known as zoomorphic. Adhering to religious and ritualistic norms, masks have been designed in innumerous varieties while some masks cover the head, some covers the face, and some even cover the entire body when worn. Varied resources like clay, cloth, com husks, feathers, fibres, furs, hom, ivory, leather, metal, paper, shell, stone, wood, etc. are being used by the makers to give shape to their imagination whose manifestations ranges from "roughed minimalism to convoluted details" with colorful embellishments. Masks are generally worn with combination of specific attires embedded with symbolic meaning within a cultural context. Consequently, along with costume, masks cover the entire body of the wearer, presenting the distinctive identity being portrayed.

1.2 North-East India and Masked Performances

North-East India (also known as North Eastern Region) is the easternmost region of India, which comprises of eight states namely, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur Meghalaya, Mizoram, Sikkim, and Tripura. The region occupies a strategic position in terms of geo-politics as it shares international border with five nations namely, Nepal,

Bhutan, China, Myanmar, and Bangladesh, and is geographically connected to the 'mainland' India through the Siliguri Corridor[1].

Being geographically remote from the rest of India, along with chequered histories of secessionist movements and insurgencies, North-East India has remained as a separate 'other' in the broader Indian psyche. The region has also been boxed under a veneer of uniformity, in terms of geo-political strategies and developmental policies, which are designed to facilitate growth in the less developed region of North-East India, and bring the region at parity with the rest of India (Xaxa, 2016).

Amidst the complex geo-political strategies and homogeneous developmental policies, what remains a bit obscured is the heterogeneity of North-East India, as a region which is inhabited by more than two hundred ethnic and sub-ethnic groups, speaking numerous languages, adhering to various belief systems, and practicing different cultural traditions; thereby creating a tapestry of social, cultural, religious, and political realities (Acharya, 1988). Therefore, in order to gain insight about the complex socio-politico-cultural and religious matrixes of North-East India, the ethnic groups and their respective culture must be explored from the emic perspective. The attempt to study the masked performances of North-East India is a similar endeavor to explore the cultural ecology of the region, as reflected through the expressive medium of masks that serve as repository of cultural ethos and worldview.

Among the eight states of North-East India, the tradition of mask as a communicative medium to articulate beliefs, myths, legends, and experiences of the cultural groups during performances, have been observed mainly in the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, and Sikkim. There is a dearth of literature elaborating about the folk performances within which the mask traditions are embedded; however, tracing from the limited sources (which comprise of research articles and Government websites), the researcher has provided a list in the following table, regarding the ethnic groups and communities, and the folk performances in which masks play significant roles.

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[1] Siliguri Corridor, also known as the chicken's neck, is a narrow sliver of land; thirty-six kilometres at its narrowest; that connects a landmass, grouped as the 'North-East', which, although a part of India has its distinct character owing to the geographical isolation from the rest of India.

State	Ethnic Group or Community	Folk Performance
Arunachal Pradesh	Idu Mishmi	Igu dance
	Khampti	Khampti dance
	Monpa	Aji Lhamo, Yak Cham, Singhe Cham, Kieng Cham
	Sherdukpen	Aji Lhamo, Yak Cham, Singhe Cham, Kieng Cham
Asaam	Rabha	Bharigaan
	Assamese	Dhuliya Bhaona, Khuliya Bhaona
Sikkim	Bhutia	Yak Cham, Singhe Cham

Table: 1.1 Ethnic group or community and folk performance

Apart from the folk performances, there exist other forms of masked performances in the states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, known as Bhaona and Cham, which originated and developed within institutional religions namely, neo-Vaishnavism and Tibetan Buddhism. While the Bhaona masked performance of Assam has been traditionally performed by the clergies of neo-Vaishnavite religious institution known as Sattra, the Cham masked performances of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim have been performed by the clergies of Tibetan Buddhist religious institution called Gompa.

In the present study, Bhaona and Cham masked performances are explored as communicative medium operating as institutionalized articulation of religiosity within the neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist societies. Exploration of the mask traditions which are embedded in the folk performances of the various ethnic groups and communities of North-East India are not within the scope of the present study, as the origin, performative context, performer-audience relationship, and trajectory of evolution of such performances would be entirely different from the institutionalized Bhaona and Cham masked performances which are embedded within religious traditions, and therefore require different sets of research objectives for exploration. The present study also does not include the tradition of masks prevalent in Naga society, as such masks are mostly used as commemorative objects, and are not embedded within any performative tradition of the cultural group(s).

1.3 Introduction of Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam: An Overview

During the 12th to 15th centuries, the region of Pragjyotisa-Kamrupa (presently a part of it is regarded as the North-East Indian state of Assam) was governed by the chieftains of heterogeneous ethnic groups such as, Koch, Ahom, Chutia and Kachari, who had distinctive worldviews pertaining to social, cultural and religious practices (Patnaik, 2013). In the religious milieu, ritual-centric Brahmanical Hinduism, polytheism, idol worship, and ritual-sacrifices of humans and animals gained prominence, along with the practices associated with animism and occultism. Saktism, being one of the existing pre-dominant religious cults of the region exerted a significant influence on the populace (Guha, 1991; Neog, 1965; Sarma, 1966). Hostility among ethnic groups, feudalism inflicted oppression, racial feuds, and caste-based social stratification led to socio-politico-cultural conflicts, thereby disrupting social cohesion (Neog, 1998).

Owing to such social instability in the region, and influenced by the pan-Indian religio-cultural upsurge brought about by Vaishnavism, the social reformer - Sankaradeva (1449 CE–1568 CE) formulated religio-cultural expressions to propagate the egalitarian ethos of Bhakti movement, and synthesize the fragmented society by fostering fraternal assimilation of ethnic groups (Barman, 2013). This period in Assam, referred to as neo-Vaishnavite movement, commenced around the late 15th century and flourished especially during the 16th and 17th centuries (Datta, 2013). The neo-Vaishnavite movement is also considered as the Renaissance of Assam, which had proliferated not only as a religious practice but also as a way of life that 'awakened' literary and social spheres, and led to the formation of a composite Assamese identity (Borkakoti, 2013; Sarma, 2006; Gohain, 1987).

In order to propagate the ethos of neo-Vaishnavism, Sankaradeva established Namghars (community prayer halls) and created varied expressive media, such as, Borgit (devotional song), Bhaona (devotional drama), etc. for the articulation of Krishna Bhakti, which resulted in the congregation of unlettered as well as educated laities, belonging to different stratum of the multi-ethnic caste society. Eventually, the existing sacrificial practices were replaced with articulation of religiosity through Kirtana (chanting the name of Krishna), Sravana (listening to the chanting) and Dasya (devotionally submitting oneself to the feet of Krishna). The prevailing belief system in polytheism

was thereby substituted with the doctrine of Eka Sarana Naam Dharma[2] of Sankaradeva, which is based on the teachings of the Bhagavata Purana that believe the Brahman (absolute reality) is monistic and Krishna is "the qualified form of the formless Brahman" (Neog, 1965; Saikia, 2013). Consequently, in the Mahapurusia cult of Sankaradeva, the existence of female deities as either consort or attributes of the Supreme Being that have been widely prevalent in the religious traditions of Saktism, Tantrism and Radha-Krishna cult of Vaishnavism was supplanted by the male deity – Krishna (Borkakoti, 2016, p.73).

Over time, the neo-Vaishnavite movement became institutionalized through the establishment of Sattras (neo-Vaishnavite monasteries) across Assam, which functions as the custodian of the religio-cultural practices essential for the continuity of the Krishna Bhakti tradition. Although the first Sattra was established by Sankaradeva at Bordowa in 1494 CE, it was not conceived as a full-fledged structural institution (Mahanta, 2007). After Sankaradeva's demise, Sattra developed and proliferated as an institution under the guidance of his disciples such as, Madhavdeva, Damodardeva, Harideva, Gopaladeva, Mathura Das, Purusottoma Thakur and other Vaishnava apostles.

1.3.1 The Sattra Institution of Neo-Vaishnavism

The term Sattra finds its roots in the Bhagavata Purana, denoting an assembly of sages and devotees engaged in the recitation of sacred texts, sometimes even for years. However, in the context of neo-Vaishnavism of Assam, the term Sattra acquired a distinctive meaning, referring to neo-Vaishnavite monasteries where the Vaishnava adherents reside, engage in devotional practices, and serve as custodians of religious relics and artifacts (Sarma, 1999; Neog, 1998). Since its introduction during the 16th century, the Sattra institution as an embodiment of 'living culture' has brought the Guru (Supreme Being), Deo (Sattradhikar), bhakat (devotees) and naam (congregational prayers) together. According to the scholar Keshavananda Deva Goswami (2013), the multifarious contributions of the Sattra institution to the Assamese society can be classified into two categories: primarily, being devoted towards the proliferation of neo-Vaishnavism, the inmates of the Sattras conduct religio-ritualistic practices, initiate

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[2] Eka Sarana Naam Dharma, as propagated by Sankaradeva, refers to complete devotional submission of the devotees to one Supreme Being i.e. Krishna through the continuous chanting of His name (Neog, 1998).

laypersons as disciples, and induct the adherents into neo-Vaishnavite codes and conventions. Secondarily, being dedicated towards upholding the socio-cultural fabric, the inmates also resolve social disputes, strengthen social bonds among multi-ethnic caste groups through congregational prayer services, and facilitate learning of Sankari culture such as, Borgit, Bhaona, mask-making, painting, etc. (p. 237). Therefore, the Sattra institution play significant roles in the religious as well as socio-cultural lives of the neo-Vaishnavite community, and in the words of the erudite scholar Dambarudhar Nath (2011), "Till at least the first half of the last century [20th century], villagers in Assam hardly dared to do anything not approved by the Sattras. There is not much change in the outlook of the Assamese village folk towards the Sattras, even in recent times" (p.11).

1.3.2 Four Samhatis or Sanghatis of Neo-Vaishnavism

After the demise of Sankaradeva in 1568 CE, the Mahapurusiya cult witnessed schism as a result of contestation among preceptors for deciding the rightful successor and also retaining the ideological base of neo-Vaishnavism. The ideological conflict led to the formation of four samhatis or sanghatis (sects) namely, Brahma samhati, Purusa samhati, Kala samhati and Nika samhati. Detailed descriptions of the four samhatis are mentioned in the following paragraphs:

Brahma samhati – Neo-Vaishnavism witnessed the first schism when Damodardeva rejected Madhavdeva's headship in the apostolic seat (Neog, 1998, p.153). Perceiving a complete abolition of the Brahmanical rites in neo-Vaishnavism, Damodaradeva incorporated such ritualism along with continuation of existing devotional practices within the Sattras that followed his teachings (Dewan, 2002). He laid emphasis on Deva (deity), thereby, re-encouraging idol or image worship of the Hindu deity – Vishnu within the Sattras. It is believed that since both the Gurus – Damodaradeva and Harideva belonged to Brahmin caste, the sect was named as Brahma samhati. Most of the Sattras affiliated to Brahma samhati endorse caste distinction, and are headed by Brahmin Sattradhikars with mandatory recitation of the Sanskrit Bhagavata by Brahmin recites (Goswami, 1988, p.38).

Purusa samhati – Purusottama Thakur, the grandson of Sankaradeva and his followers had rejected Madhavdeva's headship in the apostolic seat of neo-Vaishnavism, and formed Purusa samhati to revere Sankaradeva as the only Guru of the Mahapurusiya cult.

Although the Sattras affiliated to Purusa samhati lay emphasis on Nama (chanting the name of Krishna), Brahminical ritualism and image worship of Vishnu are also being practiced (Bhuyan, 2022).

Nika samhati – Nika samhati was formed by Padma Ata, Kesava Ata and Mathuradasa Budha Ata, after observing a stark declination in upholding the ideals of neo-Vaishnavism by other three samhatis i.e. Brahma samhati, Purusa samhati and Kala samhati (Sarma, 1999, p.133). The adherence of the samhati adopted the name "Nika" to signify the pure and absolute form of neo-Vaishnavite order being followed (Sarma, 1966). The Sattras adhering to Nika samhati framed stringent codes of conduct for the Vaishnavas, including celibacy, worshipping of Bhagavata, etc. (Sarma, 1966, p.96).

Kala samhati – Kala samhati traces its origin to Gopaladeva Ata, one of the twelve apostles appointed by Madhavdeva to propagate neo-Vaishnavism mainly among the laities belonging to different ethnic groups and lower castes of caste Hindu society (Sarma, 1999, p.117-118). The samhati had derived its name from the place – Kalajhar (situated near Bhavanipur in Barpeta) where Gopaladeva Ata had preached the faith for most of the years of his life. The Sattars adhering to Kala samhati exhibit an indifference towards Brahmanical rites, strictly follow monotheism and place absolute faith in the Guru. Even the Brahmin inmates of these Sattras share liberal disposition on religious affairs (Neog, 1998, p.155).

Despite differences in ideology and contexts of establishment, the four samhatis are not independent sects in so far, as the religious tenets are almost identical with the Mahapurusiya cult (Sarma, 1990, p.239). All the samhatis flourished, establishing hundreds of Sattras all over the Brahmaputra valley under the flagship of propagating the ideals of neo-Vaishnavism.

1.3.3 Structure of Sattra Institution

Structure of the Sattra institution, particularly in the context of the Bhaona performances, is outlined below:

Sattra-**Namghar** – Namghar (or Sattra-Namghar), the neo-Vaishnavite prayer-hall, is the centre of all religio-ritualistic as well as socio-cultural activities held within a Sattra. The architectural structure consists of roof which is supported on wooden pillars (known

as Chati) of varied numbers (such as five, seven, or nine) that divide the space of the floor into loose chambers. The Chatis are also decorated with Vaishnava motifs and murals. The space within the loosely divided chambers are systematically allocated, such as place of ritual-offering of food to the deities; place for the Sattra functionaries, devotees and visitors to sit; place for Bhaona performances; etc. A nave extends around the Sattra-Namghar, following a porch like structure where devotees belonging to multi-ethnic and caste groups sit together for congregational prayers. At the northern end of the Sattra-Namghar stands the sanctum sanctorum (called Manikut), wherein the sacred throne called Guru Asana is placed, with the Bhagavata Purana inside it.

Sattra-**Manikut** – Manikut, literally meaning "house of jewels", is a smaller chamber situated adjoining to the eastern end of the Namghar. It is the sanctum sanctorum of the Sattra where Guru Asana is enshrined, along with either sacred Vaishnava scriptures like the Bhagavata Purana or the idols of Vishnu (depending upon the Samhati each Sattra belongs to). As it is the most sacred space within a Sattra, lay-devotees especially women of menstruating age are not allowed beyond prescribed limits (Neog, 1998; Sarma, 1999).

Hati – Hatis, situated adjunct to Manikut and Namghar, are cloister of residential huts built for the inmates of the Sattras. According to the Vaishnava literatures from Assam, hatis were added into the Sattras mostly around 1509 CE, when celibate bhakats started residing within the Sattras. Mostly there are four rows of almost equal sized residential huts called cari-hati, except the one at the east that is usually larger being the quarter of the Sattradhikar. Each bhakat is allotted a hut (called boha), consisting of one or more rooms. The Sattradhikar lives either in east hati or north hati, except in Auniati Sattra wherein he lives at the centre of the Sattra, near the Namghar (Neog, 1998, p.72).

Lay-Namghar – Namghar is also established as a place of religio-ritualistic practices in almost every village or in each locality where neo-Vaishnavism is practiced, thereby known as lay-Namghar. The institution not only functions as prayer-halls for religious activities but also provides a platform for participating in various community activities, such as resolving social disputes, discussing developmental issues affecting the community, etc. The lay-Namghar also assumes the role of a village parliament, albeit without legal or judicial sanction it provides a platform for grassroots democracy.

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1.3.4 Functionaries Associated with Sattra Institution

A brief description of the various functionaries associated with the Sattra institution of neo-Vaishnavism is mentioned below. The functionaries also play significant roles during the monastic masked performances.

Sattradhikar – During the initial phase of neo-Vaishnavism, the religious order was headed by the founder – Sankaradeva, and whoever administered ordination to lay devotees performed so according to the ritual-authority delegated by Sankaradeva. After the demise of Sankaradeva, Vaishnava apostles like Madhavdeva, Damodardeva and Harideva appointed competent male disciples to further propagate the faith, and they, in turn, established Sattras of their own, and assumed the position of the head of the newly formed Sattras (Neog, 1965, p. 332-333). They are referred as adhikara or Sattradhikara (Lekharu, 1965). Since then, every Sattra has a Sattradhikar who serves as the religio-spiritual head of the Sattra. In earlier days, Sattradhikar was chosen by the predecessor from the inmates of the Sattras, on the basis of religious accomplishments. However, with time, mostly hereditary succession has taken over the selection process. Being a man of erudition, Sattradhikar is revered by the inmates of the Sattra as well as lay-adherents, and addressed as "Prabhu Ishwar" (Supreme God). He presides over the religio-ritualistic services like nittya prasanga (daily rituals), naimittika prasanga (annual rituals), sarana (initiation ceremony of devotees), bhojana (confirmatory ceremony of devotees), etc.

Deka Sattradhikar – Deka Sattradhikar, the deputy to the Sattradhikar is selected by the Sattradhikar from the inmates of the Sattra, either based on seniority of age or at an early age. He supervises the religious as well as administrative functioning of the Sattra in the absence of the Sattradhikar, and assumes the position of the head of the Sattra through investiture ceremony, after the demise of the Sattradhikar.

Bhakat – While the term bhakat encompasses all devotees of neo-Vaishnavism, it primarily denotes those who either hold ecclesiastical office within the Sattra or reside in the Sattra as celibate monks (Sarma, 1999, p. 142). Severing all familial bonds, the male children from interested shishya (disciple) families are brought into the Kewaliya Sattras[3]

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[3] Sattras wherein the inmates adhere to celibacy are called Kewaliya or Udasin Sattras (Nath, 2011, p.40)

by senior bhakats as assistants (known as aldhara), at an early age of three to four years. However, in Grihasti Sattras[4], young male children are inducted into the Sattra institution as a hereditary process. While residing in a Sattra under the guardianship of the Sattradhikar and senior bhakats, the young pupils receive liturgical training on Sankari culture, comprising of music, dance and drama through the Guru-Shishya parampara (master-disciple teaching-learning tradition). They also acquire knowledge on the Vedic and Puranic scriptures (Sarma, 1996, p.58). After achieving perceived progress in religious sphere, they are ordained into the monastic order by the Sattradhikar through sarana, which confers upon them the responsibility of propagating neo-Vaishnavism through regular conduction of religio-ritualistic prayer services.

In order to ensure efficient management of the Sattra, few eligible bhakats are appointed by the Sattradhikar to serve as different functionaries like Bor Bayan (the chief instrumentalist), Bor Gayan (the chief singer), Bor Bhagwati (the chief recite of the Bhagavata), Bor Pathak (the chief recite of the vernacular scriptures), etc.

Apart from the functionaries associated with Sattras, there exists another category of followers known as the shishya. The lay-adherents of neo-Vaishnavism, including both men and women, affiliate with a Sattra from any Samhati, in order to become shishya (disciple) through the initiation process of sarana. According to religious custom, every man in a neo-Vaishnavite family must become a shishya before the commencement of conjugal life (Sarma, 1999, p. 142). Being members of the neo-Vaishnavite religious community, the shishyas participate in the Sattra-based religio-ritualistic occasions in varying capacities, while adhering to religious norms formulated by the Sattra institution.

1.3.5 Position of Women in Neo-Vaishnavism

The ideals of post-Vedic Hinduism influenced the Sattra based institutionalized form of neo-Vaishnavism in terms of 'problematizing' women. Although Sankaradeva in his translation of the Bhagavata Purana had mentioned about acceptability of women as devotees in Bhakti tradition, he had also associated women with material pleasure that serve as barrier to spiritual pursuits in several passages of the Kirtana Ghosa (Sarma,

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[4] Sattras in which the inmates are allowed to marry are known as Grihasti Sattras (Nath, 2011, p.40).

1966, p.65). Moreover, Vairagya[5] has been considered as a significant path in Vaishnava philosophy; therefore, practicing celibacy emerged as the most revered institutionalized means to become a devout neo-Vaishnavite. Consequently, Sattras defied the egalitarian ideals of neo-Vaishnavism and segregated the religious space between the man and the woman, mainly during the later phase of the neo-Vaishnavite movement (Bora, 2018, p.339). Although non-celibate Grihasti tradition exists across Assam, celibate Kewaliya tradition holds significant reverence in Assamese society. Within the neo-Vaishnavite Sattras, male devotion is exclusively institutionalized through ordination as bhakats or Sattradhikars. Any woman can become a shishya and partake in ancillary rituals; however, the paucity of her engagement is prescribed by the Sattra institutions. Although women got directly associated with the Grihasti Sattras through marriage, they could never attain the social status of male bhakats (Bora, 2018, p.344). It is also imperative to highlight that in certain Sattras such as, Uttar Kamalabari Sattra in Majuli, Barpeta Sattra in Barpeta, etc. women are debarred from entering the Sattra-Namghar.

The Sattra institutions not only formalized the religious expressions but also re-structured the process of knowledge transmission, thereby influencing varied religio-cultural manifestations associated with neo-Vaishnavism. Within the Sattras, only the male bhakats receive liturgical training on Sankari culture through the Guru-Shishya parampara. Therefore, as such expressive medium serve the symbolic purpose of articulation of Krishna Bhakti to proliferate neo-Vaishnavism, "the active participation of only male disciples and absence or restricted presence of female devotees make Sattras highly gendered space" (Chattapadhyay and Chakraborty, 2021, p.54).

Moreover, the hagiographical accounts in the Charit Puthis[6] compiled under the tutelage of different Sattras did not recognize the contribution of the female Vaishnavas such as, Bhubaneswari Devi and Kanaklata Ai in the propagation of neo-Vaishnavite ideals. Women Vaishnava saints are always mentioned in relation with male Vaishnava apostles like Sri Harideva and Chaturbhuj Thakur, and the complete absence of their "legacy" in neo-Vaishnavism of Assam could be "premised on the fact that no woman saint actually established a guruparampara or monastic tradition" (Bora, 2018, p.338).

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[5] Vairagya, a Sanskrit term, is notably used in Hindu tradition to express a spiritual practice involving detachment and renunciation from the dualities of pleasure and pain in the material world.
[6] Charit Puthis are biographical literature about Sankaradeva and other Vaishnavite apostles from Assam.

1.3.6 Bhaona – the Masked Performance of Assam

During the 12th to 15th centuries, the Pragjyotisa-Kamrupa region already had indigenous dramatic expressions, such as Ojapali, Putula nach, Deodhani nach, and Dhulia Bhaona. Drawing creative inspirations from these indigenous performative traditions, and other dramatic presentations prevalent in different parts of India, such as Ramleela of Uttar Pradesh, Yakshagana of Karnataka, Bhagavata Mela of Tamil Nadu, Krishnanattam of Kerala, Prahlada Nataka of Odisha, Kirtaniya of Mithila, etc., which were steeped in religious themes, Sankaradeva astutely recognized the impact of performative traditions (especially theatre) to proliferate the egalitarian ethos of Eka Sarana Naam Dharma in the stratified society of Pragjyotisa-Kamrupa which was caught in a labyrinth of cults and conflicts (Medhi, 1997; Mahanta, 2013). In 1468 CE, Sankaradeva developed a distinctive form of storytelling through dance and songs, known as *Cihna Yatra* (meaning: pageant in painted scenes), in order to vividly depict the celestial abode of the supreme deity Vishnu, thereby marking a significant contribution to the neo-Vaishnava tradition (Sarma, 1999, p.16).

During the late 15th century, Sankaradeva further developed the pageant shows into theatrical forms, incorporating various elements of dramatic unity, such as music, song, dance, dialogue, costume, masks, make-up, etc. to propagate the ethos of neo-Vaishnavism and evoke devotion towards Krishna in the laypersons. In order to foster intellectual engagement in diverse audiences, ranging from unlettered laities to scholarly folks, Sankaradeva had incorporated different elements into the theatrical forms such as, "katha" (prose), "gita" (song), "sloka" (Sanskrit verses), and "bhatima" (panegyric hymns). Such dramatic compositions are known as Ankiya Natas, as they are single act play without any formal division between scenes. The staging of the Ankiya Natas is known as Bhaona (Medhi, 1997; Neog, 1998). Sankaradeva had written six Ankiya Natas namely, *Kaliya Damana*, *Patni Prasada*, *Keli Gopal*, *Rukmini Harana*, *Parijata Harana* and *Ram Bijoy*, depicting interpretative stories from the Puranas such as, Bhagavata Purana, Vishnu Purana, Agni Purana, Harivamsa, and the epic – Ramayana (Neog, 1965). Bhaona performances were conceived by Sankaradeva as a ritualistic practice that could be performed in any Vaishnavite congregation, and he had encouraged every enthusiast laity for participating in Bhaona as a performer, irrespective of caste and creed. However, with the formation of Sattras, Bhaona performances got

incorporated into the Sattra based ritualistic occasions through which the inmates of the Sattras articulate devotion towards Krishna (Mahanta, 2004).

The framework of Ankiya Natas written by Sankaradeva comprises of the following sections:

a. Purba Ranga (Preliminaries): Before the ritual-commencement of the 'actual' drama, pre-drama practices such as the Dhemalir nach (introductory dance) is performed by a group of male singers and percussionists who are known as Gayans and Bayans;

b. Nandi (Benediction): Sanskrit verses recited in the praise of deities such as Krishna and Rama or for kings are called Nandi. Another form of benediction exists in the Ankiya Natas in which the anchor of the play, known as Sutradhar, describes about the plot of the Bhaona that is to be staged.

c. Prarochana: Recitation of Sanskrit verse by the Sutradhar is known as Prarochana, which is followed by bhatima.

d. Prastabhana: The enactment of the drama is known as Prastabhana.

According to the erudite scholar Maheswar Neog (1984), along with recognizing the significance of theatrical forms in conveying the ethos of the Eka Sarana Naam Dharma in a stratified society, Sankaradeva had also realized the importance of masks in enthralling the educated intelligentsia (who are well-versed in the Hindu Puranas), and delineating mythical characters with precision for the unlettered audiences (who do not have access to the Puranas). Owing to such relevance of masks as a communicative medium for effective storytelling, and unifying diversified audiences within a shared religious plane, Sankaradeva incorporated masks for enacting characters such as Brahma (deity), Garuda (mount of Krishna), Taraka (demon), Maricha (demon), Subahu (demon), Sankhacuda (demon), Kali Naga (serpent), etc. (Goswami, 2013). Masks, therefore, became an integral part of Bhaona performances, and embedded a distinct identity to the performative tradition of neo-Vaishnavism. Recognizing the importance of masks in Bhaona performances, the scholar – Deepsikha Chatterjee (2020) has referred to Bhaona as a "masked performance", and the scholar Arifur Zaman (2017) further reiterated the theatrical functionality of masks in depicting characters which make-up would generally fail to portray.

1.4 Tibetan Buddhism and Sectarian Development in Tibet: An Overview

The religious history of Tibet documents the contribution of the Tibetan empire in the advent and proliferation of Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet (Samuel, 2012, p.10). During the 7th century CE, Tibet was reigned by the 32nd King – Songtsan Gampo (618-649 CE), whose wives' religiosity inspired him to embrace Buddhism, and he ordered his minister – Thonmi Sambhota to invite Buddhist scholars from India in order to translate the Sanskrit Buddhist texts into Tibetan language (Beckwith, 2003). Under the rule of the 36th King of Tibet, Trisong Detsen (755-797 CE), Buddhism became the official religion of Tibet (Berzin, 2000). Eventually, Buddhism faced opposition from the practitioners of the pre-existing Bon faith, and in order to counter such opposition, the "semi-legendary Tantric Guru" – Padmasambhava was invited to Tibet in 747 CE, who established the first monastery in Tibet, named Samye Gompa[7], around 749 CE. Padmasambhava also vanquished the local spirits, vowed them to defend Buddhism, and incorporated them into Buddhist pantheon, thereby "making them entitled to appropriate propitiation" by successive Tibetan Buddhist ritual-experts. Padmasambhava thus "established a Tantric form of Mahayana Buddhism, then popular in India" (Samuel, 2010, pp.11-14). According to Pearlman (2002), with the formation of Samya Gompa, seven Tibetans belonging to noble families were ordained, after being tested by the Buddhist practitioner – Santaraksita, about their perseverance in adjusting to the rigorous demands of monastic life. It was followed by the ordination of hundred and eight adherents, who were bestowed the responsibility of translating Buddhist texts, and the tradition of being ordained eventually proliferated (p.30).

The tradition of inviting Indian Buddhist scholars also continued during the reign of King Ralpachan, the grandson of Trisong Detsen, who even endowed state lands to construct Gompas, and authorized the inmates of the Gompas to collect taxes from lay-adherents. His successor, Lang Darma (tenure 836-842 CE), being a Bon follower, sought to suppress Buddhism by destroying Gompas, burning religious scriptures, and forcing monks to adopt Bon faith. Such mayhem resulted to his assassination by Lama Lhalung Palgye Dorje. Although Lang Darma's demise marked the Era of Fragmentation

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[7] The term Gompa (sometimes also spelled as Gompa) refers to the Tibetan Buddhist monasteries where the Buddhist practitioners reside, partake in ritualistic practices, and serve as the custodians of religious tradition. Detailed description is provided in Section 1.4.4.

in Tibet, resulting in the collapse of the Tibetan empire, Buddhism continued to flourish even without royal patronage, as in the words of Geoffrey Samuel (2010):

> "Tantric (Vajrayana) Buddhism came to provide the principal set of techniques by which Tibetans dealt with the dangerous powers of the spirit world… Buddhism, in the form of Vajrayana ritual, provided a critical set of techniques for dealing with everyday life. Tibetans came to see these techniques as vital for their survival and prosperity in this life". (p.10)

However, during the late 11th century, a reformative movement among the Tibetan Buddhist practitioners fragmented the religious tradition and led to the rise of four schools or sects namely, Nyigma, Kagyu, Sakya and Gelug (Samuel, 2010, p.11).

1.4.1 Four Schools or Sects of Tibetan Buddhism

A conscise overview of the different schools of the Tibetan Buddhist religious tradition is provided below:

Nyingma school – Nyingma school, the oldest of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism, was founded in the 8th century CE during the reign of King Trisong Detsen in Tibet. Nyingma school traces back the root of its religious teachings to the first Buddha – Samantabhadra, as well as various early Buddhist practitioners associated with the proliferation of Buddhism in Tibet, such as Padmasambhava, Santaraksita, Yeshe Tsogyal, Vimalamitra and Vairotsana (Powers, 2007, pp.867-842). However, Nyingma school attributes its origin mainly to Padmasambhava, who is revered as an emanation of Amitabha and Avalokitesvara (Germano, 2002).

The religious teachings of Nyingma school emphasis on the Buddhist paths to liberation, and also considers Dzongchen (the "Great Perfection") practices as the "most direct, profound and subtle path of Buddhism" (Powers, 2007, p.370). The Dzongchen practices encompass "cutting through everyday mind and its obscuration to reach the primordial nature of mind" (known as "rigpa"), and is also associated with "sunyata" (meaning "emptiness"). Nyingma school also has a significant tradition of "discovering and revealing hidden treasure texts", known as Terma, which allows the Tertons

(treasure discoverers) to bring to light the hidden Buddhist scriptures at crucial junctures of propagation of Tibetan Buddhism (Powers, 2007, pp.383-347).

Kagyu school - During the 11ᵗʰ century, Marpa Lotsawa - a Tibetan translator of Buddhist scriptures, travelled to India and Nepal in order to further his knowledge in Buddhist teachings. He received religious teachings on the "close lineage" and "distant lineage" of Mahamudra from the Indian Buddhist Mahasiddhas, such as Atisa and Naropa. Upon returning to Tibet, Marpa imparted the Buddhist teachings to the poet-saint Milarepa, and conjointly established the Kagyu school in the latter half of the 11ᵗʰ century. Eventually, the Kagyu school gave rise to four sub-lineages namely, Karma Kagyu, Drikung Kagyu, Drukpa, and Takhing Kagyu (Powers, 2007, p.402).

The principal meditative practices of Kagyu school encompass Mahamudra that progresses through four stages, such as developing a focused mind, transcending conceptual elaborations, realizing the singular source of all phenomena, and leading to a path beyond continual meditation (Roberts, 2011). Along with the Mahamudra practices, the Kagyu school also adheres to the Shentong teachings which emphasize on the doctrine of two truths that distinguish between relative reality and absolute reality. While the relative reality is considered as empty, absolute reality is considered empty only of "other" relative phenomena, and in itself is not empty. The practitioners also believe that the absolute reality is the "ground" that is "uncreated and indestructible, non-composite and beyond the chain of dependent organization" (Stearns, 1999).

Sakya school – Sakya school, one of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism, was founded by Drokmi Lojapa (992-1072 CE) – a renowned Buddhist scholar who had studied under the tutelage of Buddhist Mahasiddhas, such as Naropa and Ratnakarasanti (Stearns, 2001). The Sakya school derived the name from the "grey-colored landscape of Ponpori Hills", located in southwestern Tibet near Shigatse, where the first Sakya Gompa was established by Khon Konchog Gyalpo in 1073 CE, and since then serves as the seat of the Sakya school, headed by Sakya Trizin (Powers, 2007, pp.420-438).

Sachen Kunga Nyingpo (1092-1158 CE), the first of the five supreme masters of Sakya school, acquired knowledge about Tantric practices from Tibetan translators (also known as "Lotsawas"), who had visited India, such as Drokmi Lotsawa, Bari Lotsawa

and Mal Lotsawa (Warner, 2009; Gardner, 2010). While Drokmi Lotsawa introduced the "Lamdre Path" to the Sakya school, Bari Lotsawa introduced various significant Tantric practices, and Mal Lotsawa introduced the Vajrayogini lineage. The principal transmissions that form an integral part of the spiritual curriculum of the Sakya school include the Vajrakilaya and Mahakala Tantras, as well as the teachings of Gunya Nyingpo on the "separation from four attachments". Eventually, the Sakya school gave rise to two sub-lineages namely, Ngor and Tshar (Gardner, 2010).

Gelug school – Gelug school, the newest among the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism, was founded by the Tibetan philosopher and Tantric practitioner – Je Tsongkhapa (1357-1419 CE) in the 14th century, and is rooted in the Kadampa tradition of the Indian Buddhist Mahasiddha Atisha (Schaik, 2011, p.8). The official head of the Gelug school is known as Gaden Tripa, however, one of the most influential positions in Gelug school is known as Dalai Lama. The Gelug school emerged as the most dominant Tibetan Buddhist school in Tibet and Mongolia during the latter half of the 16th century, mainly after forming alliance with the Mongol empire (Alexander, 2020).

According to the scholar John Powers (2007), a religious teaching of Tsongkhapa contains a "comprehensive view of Buddhist philosophy and practice that integrates Sutra, Tantra, analytical reasoning, and yogic meditation" (p.400). Tsongkhapa had also integrated the Kadam teachings of "lojong" (mind training) and "lamrim (Principles of Path) with the religious teachings of the Sakya and Gelug schools of Tibetan Buddhism, along with strict adherence to the Vinaya tradition of monastic disciplines (Schaik, 2011, p.10). In the "Principles of Path", Tsongkhapa had mentioned about the three principle stages in the "Path of Awakening", which comprise of intending to renunciate the cyclic existence, aspiring for Buddhahood to benefit all sentient beings, and comprehending the nature of sunyata. The scholar further noted that the "Path of Awakening" comprises of "hierarchically arranged stages, and trainees are expected to complete each level before moving on to the next one" (p.482). The lowest level caters to the Buddhist practitioners who delight in Samsara and seek rebirth in the higher realm, the middle level serves the practitioners who are pursuing personal liberation from rebirth through renunciation, and the highest level caters to the practitioners who seek to attain Buddhahood for the liberation of all sentient beings (Powers, 2007, pp.482-483).

1.4.2 Introduction of Tibetan Buddhism in Arunachal Pradesh: An Overview

Prior to the advent of Tibetan Buddhism, the inhabitants of Monyul (present day Tawang and West Kameng districts of Arunachal Pradesh) were adherents of the Bon faith, and Tibetan Buddhism was introduced to the Monpa and Sherdukpen ethnic groups of Monyul during the 8th century CE, with the arrival of Padmasambhava in the region (Mizuno and Tenpa, 2015). The adherents of Tibetan Buddhism also believe that Padmasambhava's arrival in the region is documented in different places of Tawang (such as Taktsang, Jiktsang, Kimnash, Terma Bumgan, etc.) as well as West Kameng (such as Jambring, Khang Gisih, Flujima, Chupit, etc.), as those places have been hallowed by Padmasambhava's presence (Sarkar, 2006, pp.1-3).

According to the religious history of Monyul, fulfilling Padmasambhava's prophecy in the 12th century, Lama Sherbun and the third son of Pema Lingpa (both belonging to Nyingma school) arrived at Tsosum (another name for Tawang at that time) from Bhutan, and established three Nyingma Gompas namely, Urgyeling Gompa, Sangeling Gompa and Tsorgeling Gompa (Tenpa, 2013). Followed by their arrival, another Tibetan Lama – Thechpa Rinpoche, hailing from the Mindrolling Gompa of Tibet, established the Tersar sub-lineage of Nyingma school in Tawang through the construction of the Thechpa Gompa. Subsequently, Khinmey Gompa was constructed after the Thechpa Gompa got dilapidated, and since then incarnations of Thechpa Rinpoche have been serving as abbots of the Khinmey Gompa (Sarkar, 2006, p.15).

The history of Gelug school in the region could be traced to Thangston Gyalpo (1385-1462 CE), a Tibetan associate of the 1st Dalai Lama, who had prophesized the birth of seven 'gifted' sons in the house of a Monpa layperson - Berkhar Targe. Fulfilling Gyalpo's prophecy, Targe's second and seventh sons went to the Tashilhunpo Gompa in Tibet for acquiring religious training, and were ordained as Tanpei Dronme and Lopsang Khechun respectively by the 2nd Dalai Lama. Upon returning from Tibet, adhering to the Dalai Lama's directive, Dronme, his brother and fellow-associates established several Gompas in Monyul, such as Brakar Gompa, Argyadung Gompa, Lhangateng Gompa, Sanglamphe Gompa, Tadung Gompa, Thongleng Gompa, and Surchung Gompa. They also established Gelug Gompas in eastern Bhutan, such as Tashi Tselling Gompa, Dungsham Gompa and Galden Tselling Gompa (Sarkar, 2006, pp. 5-6).

The Gelug school thus introduced by Tanpei Dronme, flourished in Monyul and Bhutan through successive incarnations of Dronme, such as Lopsang Khechun (a Tibetan), Lopsang Tanpei Wezer (a Monpa), and Lopsang Tanpei Gechan (a Tibetan), until the Drukpas of Bhutan attacked the Gelug establishments around 1640s (Sarkar, 2006, p.8). In 1644, Mongolian troops led by Gusri Khan invaded Bhutan, prompting Bhutan to sign a peace agreement with Tibet in 1646 in order to restore the pre-religious conflict status quo (Shakabpa, 1967; Sarkar, 2006). Meanwhile, after receiving directive from the 5th Dalai Lama, the 4th incarnation of Tanpei Dronme – Lodre Gyatso initiated the construction of a new Gompa in Tawang, which could serve as the centre of Gelug school. Despite challenges from the adherents of Thechpa Gompa (Nyingma school) and Gangardung Gompa (Kagyu school), Gyatso (also called Mera Lama) established the Tawang Gompa (also known as Tawang Galden Namgye Lhatse) around 1680 CE, with the assistance of Monpa locales whom Dalai Lama had directed to assist (Aris, 1980; Sarkar, 2006). Tawang Gompa gradually established the supremacy of the Gelug school over other schools of Tibetan Buddhism in Tawang, and successive incarnations of Tanpei Dronme, such as Kechang Doyen Tanjing (a Tibetan), Kejang Jurme (a Tibetan), Thudan Kechang (a Tibetan), and Tanzin Thrinle Namgye (a Monpa) continued the propagation of the Gelug school in the Monyul region (Sarkar, 2006, pp.11-12).

1.4.3 Introduction of Tibetan Buddhism in Sikkim: An Overview

Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, is believed to have blessed the hidden land of Bayul Dremazong (present day Sikkim) even before the advent of Buddhism in Tibet, and designated the land as the heart of all the holy places in Buddhism, while naming its hills, mountains and valleys (Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, 2020). The reverence of Sikkim as one of the most sacred places visited and blessed by the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas such as Chenrezig (Avalokitesvara), Tara, Dro-nGer-Chen, Chogyal Song-Chen Gompo and Padmasambhava, has also been mentioned by the Tibetan Lamas of the 14th and 15th centuries, including Ratnalingpa, Rigzin Godem-Chen, Sangay Lingpa, and Pema Lingpa (Dokhampa, 2013).

Fulfilling Avalokitesvara's prophecy, it is believed that Padmasambhava visited Sikkim in the 8th century CE, in search of hidden lands, situated in the four cardinal directions of Tibet, in order to conceal Termas for successive Tibetan Buddhist practitioners. Eventually, he selected Bayul Dremozong, situated at the southern border

of Tibet, as one of the "Four Great Hidden Lands" (Dokhampa, 2013). According to the Bras-ijongs-gNas-Yig [8], Padmasambhava had also consecrated four Takphu (caves), situated in the western region of Sikkim near Tashiding, as the abode of the protective deities of the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon (Risley, 1894). In the book "*Lamaism in Sikkim*" (1973), Waddell documented the "miraculous" meeting of Lama Lhatsun Chenpo with two other revered Lamas – Kathog Rikzim Kuntu Chenpo and Ngadak Sempa Rikzim in Sikkim, and forming of a council to search for Phuntsog, who according to Padmasambhava's prophecy would further the proliferation of Tibetan Buddhism in Sikkim. In 1641 CE, Phuntsog Namgyal, with a familial connection to the Minyak dynasty of Tibet, was crowned as the 1st Chogyal of Sikkim (pp.8-9). It has also been recorded that on the auspicious occasion, Dalai Lama had gifted a Phurba (ritual dagger) and a sand image of Padmasambhava to Phuntsog, thereby solidifying the Chogyal's connection to the Tibetan Government (Shakabpa, 1967).

Following Phuntsog Namgyal's ascent to the throne, he provided royal patronage to Lama Lhatsun Chenpo to establish the first Gompa of Sikkim, named Dubde Gompa, in 1647 CE. Subsequently, Tashiding Gompa, Pemayangtse Gompa, and Sange Choeling Gompa were constructed on the sites consecrated by Padmasambhava (Waddell, 1973, p.18). In 1814, the capital of Sikkim shifted from Rabdentse to Tumlong, where in the next five decades six Gompas were constructed with a capacity of housing more than two hundred inmates in each Gompa. According to scholars, the eastern region of Sikkim, particularly around Tumlong, witnessed the construction of more number of Gompas, with sporadic growth of Gompas in the northern region (Upper Teesta valley), which aligns with the trade routes towards Tibet through the Kangra La (Ling, 1991). The period between 1840 to 1860 CE also witnessed a notable growth in the proliferation of Tibetan Buddhism in Sikkim with the construction of fourteen Gompas belonging to Nyingma and Kagyu schools of Tibetan Buddhism. According to Dhamala (1991), the Kagyu Gompas were mainly constructed during the reign of 4th Chogyal of Sikkim, Gyurmed Namgyal, in fulfillment of a religious commitment made to the Gyalwa Karmapa of the Tsurphu Gompa in Tibet.

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[8] According to Risley (1894), Bras-ijongs-gNas-Yig is a Tibetan Buddhist text in which detailed descriptions about geographical positions and significance of various sacred sites of the hidden lands are mentioned.

1.4.4 The Gompa Institution of Tibetan Buddhism

The term Gompa (sometimes also spelled as Gompa) refers to the Tibetan Buddhist monasteries where the Buddhist practitioners reside, partake in ritualistic practices, and serve as the custodians of religious tradition. Gompas are generally situated in remote places, far from the habitation areas of laypersons, as staying undisturbed of material temptations is considered as conducive for religio-spiritual pursuits. Therefore, Gompas are generally perched on cliffs or hillsides, which provide commanding views of the valleys where the adherent laities reside. Such positioning of Gompas also allows the laypersons to view the revered site from far off places.

1.4.5 Structure of Gompa Institution

Structure of the Gompa institution, particularly in the context of Cham performances, is outlined below:

Lhakhang – Lhakhang is the single or double storied, rectangular shaped sanctum sanctorum within a Gompa that houses the altar of Buddha or Padmasambhava, depending upon the specific school of Tibetan Buddhism to which the Gompa is affiliated. There are also rows of wooden seats for inmates, which are placed longitudinally in north to south direction, and are hierarchically arranged according to the ranks of the inmates. Thus, some seats are placed at higher position than others in order to accommodate the Lamas of higher ranks, such as Rinpoche, Khenpo, Dorje Lopon, Umze, etc. The Lhakhang also houses wooden shelves which hold ritualistic objects, such as miniature stupas, butter lamps, sacred books, water vase, cymbals, conch, hand-drums, etc. The walls and ceiling of Lhakhang are decorated with various Tibetan Buddhist motifs and pantheon of Dharma protectors (Sarkar, 2006).

Dukhang, the double or triple storied building, is one of the most notable structures within a Gompa, and houses Lhakhang and Labrang - abbot's quarter (Sarkar, 2006).

Chamling – Within a Gompa, Chamling is the circular courtyard positioned predominantly on the southern side of the Dukhang, and serves as the space for religio-ritualistic practices, including Cham performances[9].

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[9] The description of Chamling was provided to the researcher by the respondent – Lama Thupten from Tawang Gompa.

1.4.6 Functionaries Associated with Gompa Institution

A brief description of the various functionaries associated with the Gompa institution of Tibetan Buddhism is mentioned below. The functionaries also play significant roles during the monastic masked performances.

Rinpoche – Rinpoche (meaning "the precious one") signifies a reincarnated Lama who could have escaped from the cycle of rebirth because of attainment of mastery in religio-spiritual practices in the previous life, yet propelled by compassion, took another birth to benefit all sentient beings (Chun-Fang, 2000). Presently, the title of Rinpoche is also used to denote any esteemed Lama[10] or Tulku[11] who serves as the abbot (administrative and spiritual head) of the Gompa, after undertaking religious training since childhood, and assuming the responsibilities of the previous incarnation. Occasionally, exceptional religious practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism are also conferred the title of Rinpoche later in life, as an acknowledgment of their religio-spiritual accomplishments (Buswell, 1993).

Khenpo – In the Nyingma, Kagyu and Sakya schools of Tibetan Buddhism, the title of Khenpo signifies a spiritual degree which is awarded to monks who have studied at least five subjects in Buddhism, such as Prajnaparamita, Madhyamaka, Pramana, Abhidharma and Vinaya for a period of thirteen years, and also defended their mastery in such subjects (Mukpo and Gimian, 2006). In the Nyingma school, along with thirteen years of intensive study, monks are also required to impart Buddhist teachings in a Shedra (centre for teaching) for a period of three years in order to achieve the title. In the Gelug school, however, the title of Khenpo refers to "religious preceptor" who either ordains novice monastics in the Gompa, or serves as the abbot of the Gompa (Buswell et. al., 2014)

Bhikkhu (monk) – Severing all familial bonds, five to twelve year old male children of adherent lay-families are brought into Gompas, and inducted into monkhood, where under the tutelage of senior Lama (called Gergan), they partake in the proliferation of religious tradition through conduction of ritualistic services and meditation. In Tibetan Buddhism, the vows for bhikkhus comprise of four stages namely, Genyen (pledging of

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[10] In Tibetan Buddhism, the title Lama is traditionally conferred to venerated spiritual masters or abbots of Gompas. Nowadays, the title is also conferred to monks or nuns (especially in Nyingma, Kagyu and Sakya schools), who have attained religio-spiritual accomplishments through advancement in Tantric practices (Amanda, 2000)

[11] The title Tulku is conferred to reincarnated individuals who consciously take rebirth in order to continue the propagation of specific teachings of various lineages of Tibetan Buddhist (Pelzang, 2004).

five vows by enthusiast layperson), rab-jung (entering monastic life which includes wearing the robe), Getshul (acquiring religious teachings and conducting monastic rituals as a novice bhikkhu), and Gelong (pledging the vows of fully ordained bhikkhu at the age of twenty-one) (Gyatso, 1995).

In order to ensure efficient functioning of the Gompa, few eligible bhikkhus, among the inmates, are appointed by the Rinpoche or Khenpo to serve as different functionaries, such as Dorje Lopon, Gekko, Chopon, Umze, Champon, Chamjyu, etc.

Dorje Lopon (or Vajra Master) is a title conferred to a qualified bhikkhu who is empowered with the spiritual authority to impart Vajrayana teachings and practices, and also preside over Tantric practices during religio-ritualistic occasions (Trungpa, 2003).

Gekko (or Master of Discipline) is a title conferred to a bhikkhu who ensures that the other bhikkhus in the Gompa adhere to monastic vows and regulations.

Chopon (or Ritual and Shrine Master) is a title conferred to a bhikkhu who hold ceremonial knowledge about religio-ritualistic practices, and therefore oversees the preparation process of different monastic rituals. The trainees, known as Choyok, are selected among the young bhikkhus of seven to ten year age, and they learn about conduction of rituals while assisting the Chopon (Rigpa-Shedra, 2017).

Umze is a title conferred to a qualified bhikkhu who serves as the chief chanting master during religio-ritualistic occasions (Rigpa-Shedra, 2017).

Champon is a title conferred to a bhikkhu who serves as the chief dance master in the Gompa, and is responsible for teaching Cham performances to other bhikkhus[12].

Chamjyu is the title conferred to a bhikkhu who serves as an assistant to the Champon.

Other than the Gompas where male monastics reside, there also exists another type of Gompa wherein the Anis (nuns or female monastics) reside. In the religious

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[12] The descriptions about the monastic positions of Champon and Chamjyu were shared by Lama Thupten from Tawang Gompa.

parlance of Tibetan Buddhism, the Gompa for female monastics is known as Ani Gompa[13]. The induction process into monasticism for Anis is similar to that of the Bhikkhus, comprising of four stages; however, the titles Getshulma (female form of Getshul) and Gelongma (female form of Gelong) are presently discontinued in Tibetan Buddhist religious tradition (details of which is provided in the next section).

1.4.7 Position of Women in Tibetan Buddhism

In Indian Buddhism, there exist four successive stages namely, rab-jung, Getshul or Getshulma, and Gelong or Gelongma, which comprise of distinctive vows embraced by Buddhist practitioners at the time of ordination. Although the stages for men and women provide identical routes, in reality, the Gelongma ordination, existing in India and East Asia, was "never effectively established in Tibet"; thereby perpetuating the disparity between the ordination of men and women practitioners (Samuel, 2012, p.208). According to the scholar Geoffrey Samuel (2012), Buddha Sakyamuni had instituted the Gelongma ordination only after repetitive pleading by his disciple Ananda and foster-mother Mahaprajapati. Since then, the women Buddhist practitioners who aspire to become Gelongma, are directed to adhere to added rules of "garudharma" (the eight strict rules), in addition to the disciplines observed by the Gelongs, and it is believed that such rules attributed to the subordinate status to female practitioners (p.209).

Highlighting on the issue of gender within Buddhist monasticism, the American Buddhist scholar Alan Sponberg (1992), mentioned about four types of dynamics namely, "soteriological androgyny", "institutional androcentrism", "ascetic misogyny", and "soteriological androgyny". The practice of "soteriological androgyny" is a reflection of the belief system that the path of Nirvana[14] or Buddhahood could be pursued without any gender constraints; however, the egalitarianism was compromised with the institutionalization of the religious tradition. Eventually, a reflection of "institutional androcentrism" could be observed in the Vinaya codes, which were formulated for the Buddhist monastics. Consequently, women practitioners were allowed "to pursue a monastic career, but within the accepted social standards of male authority and female

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[13] Owing to the dearth of literature on Ani Gompa, the researcher could not describe about the various functionaries associated with the Ani Gompas. However, during the ethnographic fieldwork it was observed that the male monastics help in conducting rituals within the Ani Gompas.
[14] Nirvana is the most important goal in Buddhist philosophy that "marks the soteriological release from worldly suffering and re-births in Samsara" (Buswell and Lopez, 2013).

subordination" (Samuel, 2012, p.209). Reflection of "ascetic misogyny" could also be found in the texts about Indian Buddhism, mostly written by male monastics, in which women are described as "seductress and temptresses who can lead the male monastics to break his vows and draw him back into the secular world". However, there also exist the practice of "soteriological androgyny" in which the subtle body practices are "premised on the existence of both male and female polarities" within human beings, and it is believed that "both the polarities are necessary, both genders contain both, and neither alone is sufficient for the attainment of Buddhahood" (Samuel, 2012, pp.209-210).

Association of women with Gompa institutions for serving various roles such as lay-patrons, monastics, hereditary Lama, etc. have also been documented by Geoffrey Samuel in the book titled "*Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*" (2012), however, the scholar also mentioned about the chequered hierarchical status when it comes to gender and religion, as it is believed that "woman's 'natural' role in life is that of wife and mother", and not monastic celibacy (p.212). He mentioned that although women served as lay-patrons in providing necessary provisions to the Tibetan bhikkhus, they were not allowed to access the Buddhist teachings, other than as audience. Similarly, there exist a body of folklore on "sexual desires of nuns", which undermines the 'sanctity' of the position of female practitioners, and also limit the scope of support from lay-adherents. On the other hand, examples of women being identified as hereditary Lama, as a result of taking birth in a hereditary Lama family, also exist in the religious history of Tibetan Buddhism. Citing such an example, Samuel (2012) mentioned about Jetsun Tsering Trichen, who was recognized as the 16th Karmapa for being the reincarnation of the 15th Karmapa's consort (p.216). In recent times, Tibetan Buddhist practitioners have made several declarations to address the subordinate position of female Buddhist practitioners, whereby they advocate for the establishment of more number of Ani Gompas, in order to encourage female monasticism. During the 2007 "International Congress on Buddhist Women's Role in the Buddhist Sangha", held in Germany, the Dalai Lama also reaffirmed his endorsement for the re-introduction of Gelongma ordination in Tibetan Buddhism, which now awaits the consensus of practitioners belonging to different schools of Tibetan Buddhism (Samuel, 2012, p.213).

1.4.8 Cham – the Masked Performance of Tibetan Buddhism

Cham, the ritualistic masked performance, traces its origin to Padmasambhava, who had conducted the Cham rituals through Vajrakilaya dance (the dance of the three-sided ritual-dagger) during the 8th century CE, in order to pacify the malice of the "lha" (spirits of local mountain deities), and subdue the "srin" (malevolent spirits), who were obstructing in the construction of the Samya Gompa, and proliferation of Tibetan Buddhism (Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1976; Rinchen, 1967; Fedotev and Fedotor, 1986). Since then, with the proliferation of Gompas, Cham became an important monastic ritual through which the inmates of the Gompas conduct rituals while representing the Dharma protectors and retinues (assistants) of the Dharma protectors of Tibetan Buddhist pantheon. The first Cham performance conducted within the Gompa was *Zhanag* Cham in which the story of how Lama Lhalung Palgye Dorje had sought Lang Darma with bow and arrow, and re-established Tibetan Buddhism, was depicted (Pearlman, 2002, p.34).

The adherents of Tibetan Buddhism believe that the ritual purpose of Cham is multilayered; it is spiritual practice for the bhikkhus and Lamas, which help them to progress in the religio-spiritual pursuits. On another level, Cham is an ensemble of ritual-actions through dance, meditation, chanting of mantras, etc. which facilitate the performers to procure blessings for all sentient beings by subjugating evil forces, and reinforcing faith in Tibetan Buddhism (Pearlman, 2002, p.73). Therefore, as a meditational masked performance, Cham is based on transformation of the ordinary body, speech, and mind of the performers through dance movements, which are performed within the mandala circle drawn on the Chamling. The ritual function of the mandala circle works at three levels – the first level signifies the abode of the realm of the deities (which is considered as one of the "six realms of existence[15]"). While the second level represents its physical location on earth, the third level of the mandala circle functions "within the physical body of a Cham dancer or Tantric practitioner as a secret centre known as chakra" (Pearlman, 2002, p.62). Therefore, the adherents regard Cham as a 'spatialization' of recited rituals. According to Pearlman (2002), the space-time frame of Cham performance is usually divided into three phases:

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[15] According to Mahayana Buddhism, there are six reals of existence in which re-birth can take place depending upon the karma. The six realms of existence are: the realms of "god, demi-gods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell denizens" (Jinpa, 1995).

a) Preparatory phase of meditation (also known as Cham Khang): It starts a week before the actual day of the performance in which the inmates of the Gompas conduct meditational practices on the Torma (a ritual-cake made up of barley flour and yak butter) as well as on the mandala[16] of the Dharma protector being invoked.

b) Public performance in the Chamling: Depending upon the Gompa, Cham performances are conducted for two to three days in the Chamling of the Gompa, which climax with the burning of Torma.

c) Dissolution phase: Ritual-paraphernalia (such as sand mandala) created inside the Lhakhang for the conduction of Cham performances, are dissolved into emptiness.

Although there exists a book by the 5th Dalai Lama (known as Cham Yig), in which he had mentioned about the dance steps, costumes, iconography of the masks, etc., the ritual-knowledge pertaining to Cham, such as visualizing oneself as Dharma protectors and retinues of Dharma protectors, is orally transmitted to the novice bhikkhus of the Gompa, under the tutelage of Champon. The adherents of Tibetan Buddhism believe that the complex ritualistic procedure of deity visualization is made possible with the help of masks, as in Tibetan Buddhist religious tradition, masks are not inanimate objects but embodiment of the represented Dharma protectors. Moreover, the symbolism embedded in the iconography of the masks also help in conveying the nature of the Dharma protectors, and the ranks of the Dharma protectors in Tibetan Buddhism, such as the masks of the chief Dharma protectors like Mahakala, Palden Lhamo and Yamantaka have a crown with five skulls, whereas the masks of lower ranked protector deities have lesser number of skulls on the masks (Pearlman, 2002, p.74).

1.5 Conceptual Framework

Situating the ritual-centric Bhaona and Cham masked performances at the interplay of culture and communication, the present study identified five conceptual frameworks – 1) interplay between communication and culture from the perspective of communication studies; 2) ritual; 3) interplay between myth and ritual; 4) importance of religio-cultural symbols; and 5) masks and identity in performance.

The conceptual frameworks are elaborated below:

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[16] Mandala is a geometric configuration of symbols which is employed for focusing attention of practitioners and adepts during spiritual practices. It establishes a sacred space and also aid in meditation and trance induction.

1.5.1 Interplay between Communication and Culture from the Perspective of Communication Studies

The American anthropologist and social theorist, Clyde Kluckhohn (1951) stated that "culture consists of patterned ways of thinking, feeling, and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values" (p.73). Delineating the philosophical perspectives to comprehend culture, the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) summed up in his book *"The Interpretation of Cultures"*:

> "Believing with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself had spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after, constructing social expressions on their surface enigmatical." (p.5)

Research on culture can be categorized into two approaches namely, essentialist and constructivist. In the essentialist perspective, culture is considered as a "concrete and fixed system of symbols and meanings" (Holiday, 1999). On the other hand, the constructivist perspective emphasizes on "regarding culture as a fluid concept" and focuses on "how it is performed and negotiated by individuals" (Pillar, 2011), thus "culture" is regarded "as a verb" (Street, 1993, p.38), which could be used as a lens to "interpret social behavior in varied cultural contexts".

According to Philipsen (2002), different approaches to study culture has shaped "how it is incorporated into communication studies" as from the perspective of Cultural communication, communication is perceived as a "resource for individuals to produce and regulate culture". Constructionists therefore perceive culture as a "part of the communication process" (Applegate and Sypher, 1988), thereby humans are product of their own discourse. Reality is thus considered to be a social product and communication plays vital role in social construction of reality. In The Ritual

View of Communication by the American communication theorist James W. Carey further elaborates how communication leads to the "construction of symbolic reality", as communication "represents, maintains, adapts and shares the beliefs of a society in a particular time". In "*A Cultural Approach to Communication*" (1989), the theorist distinguishes transmission view and ritual view of communication and elaborated:

> "A ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs. If the archetypal case of communication under a transmission view is the extension of messages across geography for the purpose of control, the archetypal case under a ritual view is the sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship." (p.18)

Society exists because of the "binding forces of shared information" that is being circulated in an "organic system" and therefore to study communication means to examine the ongoing social processes wherein "reality is brought into existence" through "construction, apprehension and utilization of symbolic forms". Thus, to comprehend the meaning of the symbolic order and gauge the underlying fragile socio-cultural process one must addresses the communication process. Reality is the construct of human minds; the "miracle" people perform "daily and hourly – the miracle of producing reality and then living within and under the fact of our own productions – rests upon a particular quality of symbols" which is a representation "of" and "for" reality. While representation of reality presents "the nature of human life, its condition and meaning", representation for reality "induces the dispositions it pretends merely to portray" (Carey, 1989). Thus, ritual view of communication conceives that the process of communication helps in maintaining ritual order by "sharing aesthetic experiences, religious ideas, personal values and sentiments and intellectual notions" in a definite cultural space.

1.5.2 Ritual

According to Catherine Bell (1992), ritual can be regarded as an important focus for "cultural analysis" as rituals serve as "windows" of the "cultural dynamics", with the help of which any society construct and re-construct their "realities" (p.3).

Ritual and Social Solidarity: Highlighting about the capabilities of rituals to promote social solidarity, Emile Durkheim (1965) defined ritual as "the means by which collective beliefs and ideals are simultaneously generated, experienced, and affirmed as real by the community". Therefore, ritual becomes "the means by which individual perception and behavior are socially appropriated or conditioned" (p.465). Durkheim viewed ritual as a process where "collective representations" are dramatized by infusing "mystical ethos" which "in the course of the communal experience" not only "promote acceptance" of the "collective representations" but also instill "deep-seated affective responses". Within any society, ritual exerts control by promoting consensus, and describing about the "psychological and cognitive ramification" consensus could bring into the society (p.513). David Kertzer's (1988) proposition that social solidarity is a "requirement of society", and ritual serves as "an indispensable element in the creation of that solidarity", resonates with Durkheim's proposition. In the book "*The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*" (1977), Victor Turner characterizes two functionalities of rituals, while on one hand rituals are a significant means to affirm communal unity which smoothen the "frictions, constraints, and competitiveness of social life and organization", on the other hand, rituals also embody the anti-structure that "mediate or orchestrate the necessary and opposing demands"; thereby rituals become "paradigmatic activities that mediate or orchestrate the necessary and opposing demands of both communitas and the formalized social order"

Ritual and Performance: Rappaport (1992) perceives rituals as symbolic performance that are designed to have "an impact on an audience and entreat their interpretive appropriateness". Therefore, rituals comprise of sequence of "acts and utterances", and meanings are comprehended "only when those acts are performed, and those utterances are voiced" (p.252). Clifford Geertz (1995) has also explored the entwined relationship between rituals and performance, and how rituals become a means through which "encapsulated" belief system could be performed "for visitors or for themselves" (p.113). Stanley Tambiah (1970) stated that rituals become performative as

"it involves doing things", "it is staged and uses multiple media to afford participants an intense experience", "it involves indexical values in terms of choice of site, degree of redundancy or elaboration", which indirectly legitimizes social hierarchy (p.42).

Therefore, the act of performance in ritual not only brings the "encapsulated" content into existence but also defines the "relationship of the performers to that what they are performing". The performers are not "merely transmitting messages they find encoded in the canon", but the participants are also "becoming a part of the order to which their own bodies" are giving birth through performance (Rappaport, 1992, p.252). Rappaport (1992) further stated:

> "In order to perform a liturgical order, which is by definition a relatively invariant sequence of acts and utterances encoded by someone other than the performers themselves, is perforce to conform to that order. As such, authority or directive is intrinsic to liturgical order. In conforming to the order that comes alive in performance, the performer becomes a part of it for the time being". (pp. 252-253)

Ritual and Power: Rappaport's observation resonates with the perspective of Joachin Wach (1971) when it comes to the interrelation between ritual and power. Wach observed that the "differentiation of labor" for religious activities revolve around gender and age, and in societies which are socially and economically stratified, such "differentiation of labor" extends to "status and authority" (pp.214-18). Reiterating Wach's perspectives, Douglas (1960) added that in highly stratified societies, there exist "ritual-specialists" who have a "pronounced social hierarchy", and the members of such societies are governed with a "social ethos of piety towards authority". On the contrary, in societies with a less defined social hierarchy, rituals are conducted "without officially trained or designated specialists" (pp.86-87).

Ritual and Globalization: Owing to globalization, religiously motivated rituals have become a distinct signifier for heterogenous groups, having varied socio-political aspirations behind strategic performance of their Culture (Bourdieu, 1984; Hemmes et al. 2007, Brosius, 2011). Intangible Culture such as rituals therefore serve as "usable pasts"

(Merkel, 2011) for identity formation in the global imaginary of communities, being the "vessels" which store cultural values, ethos and worldview. Despite often being resistant to change (Bourdieu, 1990; Foucault, 1979; Gramsci, 1997), rituals also facilitate the agency of social agents for developing "alternative modernities", within the institutional constraints in which they are embedded and function (Bourdieu, 1984; Orther, 1984; Sahlins, 1985). In a globalized world, rituals are being creatively constructed and exhibited as cultural property; thereby transforming ritual knowledge into heritage. Furthermore, rituals as part of Intangible Cultural Heritage is traded and owned as capital in the Bourdieuian sense (Brosius and Polit, 2011).

1.5.3 Interplay between Myth and Ritual

In "*The Myth in Primitive Psychology*" (1926), Malinowski described myth as "an active force", "a constant by-product of living faith" of a society that needs miracles, status, and moral rules (p.92). In a similar note, Kluckhohn (1972) mentioned that in any culture, myths are "symbolic descriptions of phenomena of nature", as well as "symbolic representations of the dominant configurations" which help the society in comprehending the "nature of the cosmos, the purpose and meaning of life, the origin and roles of virtue, vice, adversity, etc." (pp.45-54).

Highlighting on the "intricate mutual interdependence" of ritual and myth within a society, Kluckhohn (1972) mentioned that myths and rituals are "symbolical procedures" or "cultural products", which become an integral part of the social hereditary" (p.79). He defined myth as "system of word symbols", and rituals as "a system of object and act symbols" (p.58). Thus, religious rituals often involve "enactment of myths" or might symbolically remind about the mythologies related to belief system, thereby evoking "a series of moods and motivations" in audiences (Judah, 1974). Malinowski further highlighted that myths and rituals conjointly provide "systematic protection" or "simulacrum of safety by making activity repetitive, expective – and make the future predictable by making it conform to the past" (p.66). Myths thereby ensure the inter-generational transmission of culture possible "with little loss of content – thus protecting cultural continuity and stabilizing the society" (p.65).

According to O'Dea (1966), the captivating experience of "awe" might also sometimes lead to the construction of a ritual or myth, which would become dependent

on a third element called "mystical or non-rational experience" (pp.40-41). However, the scholars have also highlighted about the futility in generalizing the interrelatedness of the three elements, i.e. ritual, myth, and mystical experience, as there exist variations between and within cultures. Such variations are also perceived within same religious traditions because every denomination emerges in accordance with the "internal dynamics". Therefore, the interplay between the three elements is a "matter of interpretation by the believer" and the cultural group of which the believer is a member (Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventis, 1993).

1.5.4 Importance of Religio-Cultural Symbols

The entwined relationship between myths and rituals likely emerged from the shared embeddedness within the larger construct of human societies, i.e. a system of symbols. According to the communication theorist James W. Carey (1989), comprehension of sources and nature of social order within a society begins with reflection on the ability of human beings to create symbols, which contribute to the construction of shared symbolic order. Emphasizing on the unifying function of religio-cultural symbols in "*Religion: A Sociological View*" (1971), Nottingham mentions:

> "It is not hard to understand that the sharing of common
> symbols is a particularly effective way of cementing the unity
> of a group of worshippers. It is precisely because the referents
> of symbols elude over precise intellectual definitions that their
> unifying force is the more potent; for intellectual definitions
> make for hairsplitting and divisiveness." (p.19)

Likewise, Clifford Geertz (1958) in his article "*Ethos, worldview and the analysis of sacred symbols*" highlighted on the significance of symbols by asserting that "Meanings can only be stored in symbols: a cross, a crescent or a feather", and such religious symbols which are eventually "dramatized in rituals or related in myths, are felt somehow to sum up what is known about the way of the world" (p.422). Similarly, Edmund Leach's (1972) exploration about the relevance of symbols in a society describes symbols as "storage systems" or "vessels" that encapsulate traditional knowledge, and are capable of "authoritatively" transmitting the worldview and ethos of any cultural group.

Accordingly, interconnectedness among worldview, ethos and symbols could further be explored from the works of Clifford Geertz and Peter Berger. According to Geertz (1958), worldview represents the "intellectual framework" through which individuals perceive the world and define the meaning of life, while ethos embodies the "tone, character, moral, and aesthetic style and moods" towards life as well as the world (p.421). Ethos thereby encapsulates the attitude towards life, whereas worldview involves intellectual reflections on life, and both attitude (ethos) and concepts (worldview) are crucial for constructing the overall meaning of life. Within any cultural group, worldview is reinforced and made to appear objective through ethos. Geertz further stated that symbols play significant role in relating worldview to the ethos by transforming facts into values. The function of sacred symbols within a cultural group is to encapsulate the system of meaning, and inter-generationally transmit that system of meaning with "power and authority", thereby binding the worldview and ethos into a "unified system of meaning" (pp.420-421).

The American sociologist Peter Berger (1967) posited that human society serves as the "guardian of order and meaning", not only for social structures but also for individual consciousness. In this regard, sacred symbols play significant role in establishing and preserving order within social structures, and help (re)shaping human minds. Berger emphasized "it is for this reason that radical separation from the social world, or anomie, constitutes such a powerful threat to the individual", as in such cases, an individual loses "orientation in experience", risking a disassociation from "reality and identity", which might lead to a "sense of becoming worldless" (p.21). Emile Durkheim (1897) has also suggested that any "experience of anomie", characterized by "social rootlessness" and "lack of identity" could possibly lead to suicidal tendencies. The need for a firmly rooted worldview, with definite moral rules and regulations, therefore, is a fundamental requirement for humans to thrive within a society. Peter Berger (1967) also emphasized the necessity for a worldview to exude authority and certainty, because amid alternative paradigms and cosmologies, an individual's worldview might seem fragile and susceptible. Thus, the fragility of a worldview must be "concealed in an aura of sacredness" of symbols, as a lack of compelling worldview would make social values appear refutable, which could eventually jeopardize social stability (p.33).

1.5.5 Mask and Identity in Performance

Across diverse cultural groups, masks have been considered as symbols that convey the assumption of a role by the wearer during performance in ritual as well as theatrical context. Masks help wearers dissociate from personal "id" and transform into "other", thereby allowing objectivity to the wearers to gain a deeper understanding of the characters being portrayed as well as of themselves (Roy, 2016). The argument is further delved into by Keefe and Murray (2007), as the scholars mention:

> "…there is another way of giving the face an extra-daily dimension: the mask. When a performer puts on a mask, it is as if the body has suddenly been decapitated. He gives up all movement and expression of facial musculature. The face's extraordinary richness disappears. There is such a resistance created between the provisional face…and the performer that this conversion of the face into something apparently dead can actually make one think of decapitation. This is in fact one of the performer's greatest challenges: to transform a static, immobile, fixed object into a living and suggestive profile." (p.136)

Elizabeth Tonkin (1979) perceives masks as a medium to express power by both the performer (transforming into "other"), and the audience (taking cognitive control and embracing experiences). While such interpretation delves into the psychological and cognitive processes of both the performers and audiences, Donald Pollock (1995) contends that the analysis lacks comprehensive understanding as researchers must interpret the influence of masks on the performers, rather than how performers make the masks work (pp.581-597). Pollock therefore in the "*Masks and the Semiotics of Identity*" (1995) highlighted about the functionality of masks by stating:

> "mask works by concealing or modifying those signs of identity which conventionally, represent the transformed person or an entirely new identity. Although every culture may recognize numerous media through which identity may be presented, masks achieve their

special effect by modifying those limited number of conventionalized signs of identity" (p.584).

1.6 Rationale of the Study

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 a similar endeavor, with the help of a study titled "*Towards the embodiment of the mask in Balinese Topeng in contemporary practice*", Palermo (2007) attempts to analyze the masked dance-drama of Topeng in order to delve into the relationship between the performative principles and community life in Bali, and explores how Balinese cultural identity is being reinforced through the masking tradition as well as how Topeng has been inter-generationally structuring the meaning-making process in the Balinese society, with alteration in the communicative context owing to globalization. Similarly, the study conducted by Rajendren (2009), titled "*Representing identities through Theyyam ritual and performative practices*", explores the importance of Theyyam as a ritualistic and cultural dance practice of Malabar region (in the Indian state of Kerala) in an attempt to understand the society through the lenses of varied contexts (social, religious, and political), and social strata (such as caste and community). The study on Theyyam explores the functionality of Theyyam in traditional society, as a medium for articulating religious beliefs, ideologies, and philosophies, and also shed light on the new meanings and functionalities of Theyyam as a medium for identity representation in the national and global contexts.

In the context of Bhaona and Cham masked performances of North-East India, the researcher of the present study has identified existing research gap in terms of exploring the significance of such ritualistic practices in articulating neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist ethos and worldviews, structuring the respective societies, affirming neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist cultural identities, and measures for contextualizing the performances in the local-global continuum. The existing body of research on Cham performances of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim is only limited to the

narratives of the ritualistic performances, as mentioned in the works of Sarkar (1961) and Chatterjee (2007). Although the Bhaona performances of Assam have been explored more in comparison to Cham, the existing body of research is limited to the structural descriptions of the masks crafted in Natun Samaguri Sattra, the mask-making techniques (Zaman, 2009; Vaidya, 2015), and the role of Natun Samaguri Sattra as a mask-making cluster in Majuli which proliferates sustainable livelihood of the artisans within the structure of oligopolistic market system (Chakraborty, 2022). Therefore, with reference to Bhaona and Cham masked performances, the performative intent, knowledge transmission process, performance repertoire, performer-audience relationship, gender dynamics, importance of masks within the performative tradition, etc. have remained unexplored, which could have helped in understanding the cultural ecology of the neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist societies.

Along with addressing such research gaps in the traditional contexts, the present study also endeavors to explore the dynamics of Bhaona and Cham masked performances in the national and global contexts, owing to the geo-politics of North-East India. Although geographically less accessible, North-East India occupies a strategic position at the intersection of South, East, and South-East Asia. Therefore, in recent times, there have been several endeavors by the Central Government of India, in collaboration with the respective State Governments, to assimilate the region into the 'mainstream Indian life' as well as facilitate cultural exchange with foreign nations through trade and tourism. However, in order to check the forces of social, economic, and cultural globalization that such State and Central Governmental endeavors eventually bring, the cultural groups in North-East India have time and again undertaken restrictive measures. For example, owing to the sacredness of the Mount Kanchendzonga in the state of Sikkim, the ethnic groups have stopped the Government initiative undertaken for mountain expedition. Similarly, the Sattradhikars of various Sattras in Majuli island of Assam have been restricting the construction of a bridge that will connect the island with the Jorhat town, thinking that an easy access to the 'sacred' island will eventually efface its pristine sanctity of the island. In this context, it is also important to highlight that the international Hornbill Festival is being organized (since

2000) in the Inner Line Permit[17] governed state of Nagaland to showcase the ethnic cultural identities of various cultural groups in Naga society. The present study therefore problematizes the conflicting forces operating within North-East India, and endeavors to explore how the neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist societies are negotiating to retain the ritual-efficacy of the masked performances, and contextualizing the performances as a communicative medium for the present societies that mediate digitally.

The present chapter therefore introduced the masked performances of North-East India, concisely described about the religious institutions within which the Bhaona and Cham masked performances are embedded, highlighted about the importance of masks in the performative traditions, and also elaborated about the monastics associated with the masked performances. The present chapter concludes with the rationale of the study and leads to the next chapter wherein the researcher discusses about the research methodology adopted for the present study to fulfill the set research objectives.

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[17] Inner Line Permit (ILP) is a document that authorizes travel to areas which would otherwise be restricted for all Indian citizens; who are not residents of Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, and Mizoram; within these states. While the provision was initially introduced by India's colonial overlords, through the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation Act, 1873, to protect their own commercial interests (The Indian Express, 2019), post the independence of India, has been affected as a means to protect the rights of indigenous people(s) on their land and resources through the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation Act, 1873, to protect their own commercial interests (The Indian Express, 2019), post the independence of India, has been affected as a means to protect the rights of indigenous people(s) on their land and resources.