

CHAPTER THREE

Bhaona and Cham Masked Performances: Ritual Practices and Cultural Meaning

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In the context of the research objectives identified for the present study, the ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Majuli district of Assam, Tawang district of Arunachal Pradesh, and East Sikkim district of Sikkim have brought in emic perspectives from the stakeholders associated with Bhaona and Cham masked performances. In order to collect data, non-participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions were conducted based on different focus of inquiry, which the researcher deemed suitable for addressing the research objectives. In the present chapter, based on the data collected from fieldwork, the researcher elaborates the findings pertinent to the performance dynamics of Bhaona and Cham performances in two sections - section 3.1 elaborates the findings on Bhaona performances of Assam, and the following section, i.e. 3.2 elaborates the findings on Cham performances of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim.

The findings are elaborated based on thirteen parameters that were identified as focus of inquiry during the fieldwork, and have eventually become more prominent during the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The thirteen parameters are as follows:

- Purpose
- Performance Occasion
- Associated Rituals
- Teaching-Learning Space
- Performers
- Audiences
- Language
- Narratives
- Masks
- Costumes, Ornaments, and Make-Up
- Musical Instruments and Songs
- Dances
- Tradition in Transition

**3.1 BHAONA PERFORMANCES
OF
ASSAM**

3.1.1 Purpose

During the 12th to 15th centuries in Assam, ethnic conflicts (among Ahom, Cachari, Chutia and Koch communities), feudalism inflicted atrocities, caste-based marginalization, ritual-centric polytheism, and ritual-sacrifices of humans and animals marked the reasons for socio-politico-religious upheaval. In order to limit the practice of dogmatic Brahmanical ritualism, encourage acculturation of ethnic groups, and inculcate egalitarianism in a hierarchical caste society, Sankaradeva propagated the ethos of Eka Sarana Naam Dharma through lived religious expressions, which include the ritual play – Bhaona (Neog, 1998; Patnaik, 2013; Barman, 2013; Borkakoti, 2006). Dramatizing the religio-spiritual merits accrued by transcendental devotion towards Krishna, as enshrined in the Hindu Puranas, Sankaradeva developed interpretative stories for Bhaona performances in order to appeal unlettered laities as well as educated intelligentsia.

Enumerating the ritual purpose of Bhaona performances during in-depth interview, the research participant - Hem Chandra Goswami (mask-maker from Natun Samaguri Sattra) elaborated that the Vaishnavas of Assam revere Bhaona as one of the symbolic modes of “aradhana and sadhana” (religious and spiritual pursuits) that facilitate articulation of Navadha Bhakti²³ towards Krishna by the ritual-performers as well as the devotee-audiences, belonging from multi-ethnic caste society. Regular participation in such votive performances also attunes the performers and audiences to the neo-Vaishnavite religio-cultural codes of conduct; thereby enlightening them about subjugation of five mental afflictions namely, “kaam” (desire), “krodh” (wrath), “lobh” (greed), “moh” (attachment), and “ahankar” (ego), which impede the process of becoming a devotee through complete surrender to Krishna.

Hem Chandra Goswami further stated that as the votive performances entail Darsan²⁴ of Krishna through enactment of His stories by ritually empowered performers, “the salvific power is believed to be ten times more than that accrued through ritual-offering in the sacred congregation of Bor-sabah”. Therefore, the purpose of Bhaona performances is not dominantly theatrical entertainment, but attainment of ritual efficacy

²³Navadha Bhakti (nine forms of articulating devotion) comprises of “Sravana (hearing the name of the deity), Kirtana (chanting the name of the deity), Smarana (constant remembrance of the deity), Pada Sevana (being in service of the deity), Archana (worshipping), Vandana (praying and praising the deity), Dasya (executing religious obligations), Sakya (developing communion through friendship with the deity), and Atma Nivedana (complete surrender to the deity)” (Goswami, 2013).

²⁴Darsan means having an “auspicious sight of the deity” (Flood, 2011).

to foster communion with Krishna, and also propagation of the religio-spiritual teachings of the Eka Sarana Naam Dharma to inculcate religious fellowship among the laypersons.

3.1.2 Performance Occasion

Since its introduction, Bhaona performances have been a part of any Vaishnavite congregation, as Sankaradeva had staged the first devotional performance – *Cihna Yatra* at the request of his disciples to have a glimpse of the Sapta Vaikuntha²⁵. However, with the formation of Sattras in Assam, Bhaona performances have been incorporated into the larger framework of calendrically regulated religio-ritualistic occasions such as -

- abirbhav and tirobhav tithis (birth and death anniversaries) of Vaishnava apostles like Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva, Badaluwa Padma Ata, etc.;
- Krishna Janmashtami – held on the eighth day of the dark fortnight in the Assamese month of Bhado (i.e. September) to celebrate the birth anniversary of Krishna;
- Raas Purnima – held on the full moon night in the Assamese month of Kati or Aghun (i.e. October or November) to celebrate the ‘divine dance’ of Raas Leela which is believed to be performed by Krishna with Gopis (female cowherds) of Vrindavana.

Apart from the aforementioned occasions, the research participants of in-depth interviews mentioned that ritualistic Bhaona performances are also organized in the lay-Namghars by the Vaishnava devotees on harvest festivals, such as Rongali Bihu (held in the Assamese month of Bohag, i.e. April) and Kongali Bihu (held in the Assamese month of Ahin or Kati, i.e. mid-October). In the lay-Namghars of Mising tribe, Bhaona is also performed on Viswakarma puja (held in the month of Bhado) as a reflection of religious syncretism, because the tribe has been traditionally worshiping the Hindu deity - Viswakarma prior to religious acculturation into neo-Vaishnavism.

Owing to the ritual-piety accrued through ritual offering of Bhaona performances, the lay-adherents often offer Bhaona as commissioned performances in the Sattras and lay-Namghars, on occasions ranging from childbirth to death of a family member. Highlighting this during in-depth interview, the research participant – Gunin Mahanta (a

²⁵Sapta Vaikuntha is the celestial abode of Vishnu – the supreme deity in the Vaishnava tradition.

bhakat from Bihimpur Sattra) elaborated, “As among the Dashavatara of Vishnu²⁶, Narasingha²⁷ is considered as the most auspicious incarnation, lay adherents of Vaishnavism mostly offer the *Nrisingha Murari* Bhaona to overcome impediments like childlessness, unemployment, prolonged illness, etc.”

3.1.3 Associated Rituals

As observed by the researcher during non-participant observation, religio-ritualistic Bhaona performances are embedded with a series of rituals that are conducted by the expert-bhakats (also called ritual-performers) from the Sattras as well as the lay-adherents affiliated to the Sattras and lay-Namghars. At least a fortnight before the actual day of Bhaona performance, the ritual-opening of the play (known as Naatmela) is organized either within the Sattra or lay-Namghar, depending upon where Bhaona will be performed. In Naatmela, the entire play that is to be staged is read, followed by naam-kirtan (congregational prayers) performed by the inmates of the Sattra and lay-adherents; thereby, announcing the ritual-commencement of the rehearsal. During the rehearsal period, each ritual-performer must offer green-grams and bananas as ritual-food in a Xorai²⁸ in the Sattra-Manikut or lay-Namghar in order to seek blessings for his performance. The last rehearsal - Bor-Akhora also comprises of naam-kirtan and offering of ritual-food by the ritual-performers to seek blessings for successful staging of Bhaona.

On the day of Bhaona performance, women associated with the Grihasti Sattras and lay-Namghars perform naam-kirtan around 4 am in the morning, followed by Nittya prasanga (daily congregational prayer). Women associated with the lay-Namghars also conduct ritual-processions while performing naam-kirtan. It is followed by khol prasanga (naam-kirtan accompanied by drums) and Nittya prasanga, performed exclusively by male bhakats and male laities in the Sattra-Namghars and lay-Namghars. The research participant of in-depth interview - Prafulla Baruah (associated with Gopalpur lay-Namghar) also mentioned that in some lay-Namghars, senior bhakats from the Sattras are invited for ritual-reading of the Bhagavata Purana, in order “to heighten the sacredness

²⁶In order to restore cosmic order, the deity Vishnu is believed to have descended on earth as ten different incarnations (thus Dashavatara) namely, Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Narasimha, Vamana, Parasurama, Rama, Balarama, Krishna, and Kalki (who is yet to descend).

²⁷Narasingha, the fourth incarnation of Vishnu, has appeared as a part-lion and part-man in order to kill the Asura-Hiranyakashipu and restore cosmic order (George, 2008).

²⁸Xorai, an offering tray made of bell metal, is considered as a reverential traditional symbol of Assam in which food or betel leaves or betel nuts are offered to deities as well as to respected guests.

of the Bhaona performance to be held in the lay-Namghar”. He further elaborated that on the day of performance, while the Sutradhar and actors impersonating the deities like Krishna, Rama and Narasingha observe ritual-fasting, the actors enacting other characters maintain purificatory diet by abstaining from rice, oil, turmeric, etc., so as “to keep the mind and body in a pure state to successfully invoke Krishna, and evoke devotion in the performers as well as audiences”.

Highlighting about the ritualized proceedings of Bhaona performance during in-depth interview, the former Bor-Bayan of Uttar Kamlabari Sattrā – Muhikanta Bor-Bayan mentioned that the introductory Dhemalir nach²⁹, comprising of Ariya nach and Gayan-Bayan, sets Bhaona apart from the religious performances of other Indian states, which start with Ganesh vandana³⁰. Ariya nach is performed for “agnigad sthapana” (installation of fire-arch) near the entrance of performance space by a group of male dancers who carry the agnigad, which is formed by joining wooden beams at the top ends to hold lamps of varied numbers. It is followed by Gayan-Bayan in which a group of male singers and percussionists consecrate the performance space and set the devotional tone through an hour long rhythmic dance, while singing verses of Kirtana Ghosa, accompanied by musical instruments like khol and bor-taal (big cymbals). The Bhaona performance ends with the muktimangal bhatima presented by the Sutradhar to plead forgiveness from Krishna for any disruption in the performance. Emphasizing upon the ritual-piety earned through Bhaona performance, the bhatima also instructs devotee-audiences to surrender oneself to Krishna.

During the ritual-viewing of Bhaona, the devotee-audiences partake in ritualized actions, such as acknowledging the entry of deities in the performance space with “mangal dhvani” (auspicious sound) like blowing of conch shells and ululation. The ritual-closure of the performances is marked by offering of sewa³¹ and gamosa³² by the devotee-audiences while touching the feet of the ritual-performers impersonating the deities, in order to seek ritual-blessings.

²⁹Dhemalir nach is the preliminary dance in the Bhaona performance.

³⁰. Ganesh Vandana, an invocation of the Hindu deity - Ganesha, is conducted at the beginning of Hindu rituals in order to propitiate the deity of wisdom and knowledge.

³¹ In Assam, sewa is a form of articulating reverence through prostration and offering of Gamosa.

³²Gamosa is a woven towel, characteristic of the community that is involved in the weaving process and hence is an identity marker, it is a mark of reverence to offer gamosa to a another person or even a deity.



Fig. 3.1 Devotees seeking blessings from the performer embodying Krishna

3.1.4 Teaching-Learning Space

During the 12th to 15th centuries, the teaching-learning ecosystem prevalent in the Koch and Ahom kingdom was extremely hierarchical in nature. While in the Koch kingdom the access to religious works was primarily controlled by the Brahmin scholars (Rajkhowa, 2001); the monarchs in the Ahom kingdom provided royal patronage mostly to the scholarly intelligentsia, and encouraged ordinary people to read and write in the Ahom language (Neog, 1998, p.95). In order to replace such hierarchical knowledge transmission process with egalitarianism, Sankaradeva established Kirtanghar (or Namghar) in 1494 CE, where laypersons belonging to different castes, communities and educational qualifications could access Vaishnava teachings through discussion and devotional performances. Establishment of Than in 1509 CE in Bordowa further led to congregation of laypersons who were dedicated towards learning about the Eka Sarana Naam Dharma through various religious expressions, including the ritual play – Bhaona (Neog, 1998, p.96).

According to the scholar Satyendra Nath Sarma (1996), after the demise of Sankaradeva in 1568 CE, his chief disciples – Madhavdeva, Damodardeva and Harideva, along with their followers, institutionalized the Sankari culture within the Sattras of four denominations namely, Brahma samhati, Nika samhati, Purusha samhati and Kal samhati. Eventually, Sattras developed into full-fledged Vaishnava institutions whereby the male inmates of the Sattras re-structured the course of the knowledge system pertinent to Sankari culture. The novice male bhakats from the Sattras receive liturgical training on Bhaona and mask-making through Guru-Shishya parampara from the male expert-bhakats, who serve different monastic positions, such as Bor Bayan (the chief

instrumentalist), Bor Gayan (the chief singer), Bor Bhagwati (the chief reciter of Bhagavata Purana), Khanikar (the artisan), etc. Residing in a Sattra under the guardianship of a Sattradhikar and senior bhakats, learning of Vedic and Puranic texts, translating of Sanskrit scriptures into Assamese language, became integral part of learning about the religious expressions pertaining to neo-Vaishnavism. “As the Bhaona performances became a symbolic mode of Krishna aradhana and sadhana, the ritual-knowledge got confined solely to the male inmates of the Sattras, who have renounced material comforts in order to accrue religio-spiritual merits through the path of Krishna Bhakti”, reiterated the research participant - Muhikanta Bor Bayan (former Bor Bayan of Uttar Kamalabari Sattra) during the in-depth interview.

However, in the succeeding centuries, under the instructions of Ahom kings and enthusiastic exponents from the Sattras, Adhyapak (teacher) bhakats from the Sattras traveled to various parts of the province for “faith liaison with the laity, and impart training on various [Vaishnava] arts in the villages” (Neog, 1998, p.96). Such endeavors “proliferated the learning of Bhaona and mask-making by enthusiast non-Sattra laypersons, and led to the establishment of lay-Namghars and Sanghas [cultural clubs] as important centers for teaching and learning of Sankari culture”, mentioned the research participant – Hem Chandra Goswami (mask-maker from Natun Samaguri Sattra) during in-depth interview. He further highlighted that although enthusiast male laities eventually acquired knowledge pertaining to Bhaona and mask-making, they could not attain the prestige in Vaishnava community that is reserved for expert-bhakats of the Sattras.

Emphasizing on the importance of learning Bhaona and mask-making from the expert-bhakats, the research participant of in-depth interview - Saitendra Nath Payeng (Mising lay-Namghar) said, “As Bhaona and mask-making has been a Sattriya culture, the Vaishnava adherents believe that only the expert-bhakats from the Sattras could induct and train the laypersons appropriately”. He further mentioned that inter-generational socialization along the male line also plays significant role in learning about the tradition of mask-making, as it does not comprise of complicated techniques. Another research participant of in-depth interview, Harikanta Regon from Mising lay-Namghar mentioned:

As we are not experts like the bhakats in the Sattras, we will not be able to quote the particular slokas mentioned in the Bhagavata Purana describing

different mythical characters. But, we have been inducted into this culture since childhood. I grew up watching my father and grandfather making masks for Bhaona performances. We are aware of the shapes and colors associated with different masks representing different characters.

The research participant of in-depth interview from the Bihimpur Sattra – Gunin Mahanta, also mentioned that there has been no fixed remuneration for the expert-bhakats for teaching Bhaona performance and mask-making to the laypersons, and the disciples mostly offer tamul paan (betel leaves) to the expert-bhakats as a sign of reverence, along with a meager amount they are capable of offering.

3.1.5 Performers

Ritual-performers of Bhaona performances organized within the Sattras and lay-Namghars comprise of Sutradhar, Gayans, Bayans, and actors impersonating various characters of Ankiya Natas such as deities, demons, ogress, sages, kings, etc. As “women were not allowed on the stage at any period of the history of Assam Vaishnavism” (Neog, 1984, p.20), the performances have been exclusively presented by male inmates of the Sattras, and enthusiastic male laities associated with Sattras and lay-Namghars.

During the in-depth interview, the research participant – Hem Chandra Goswami elaborated that every Sattra has a Managing Committee composed of Sattradhikar and senior bhakats, who select the ritual-performers for Bhaona among the male inmates, based on physical resemblance with the characters to be enacted and also artistic prowess, so that the performance can effectively evoke Bhakti Rasa in devotee-audiences. Sutradhar is selected based on his understanding of Sankari culture developed through years of immersive learning, and also his dexterity in reciting Sanskrit verses, performing Sutradharar nach with pertinent mudras, and singing of nandi and muktimangal bhatima. Gayans and Bayans are selected among the senior bhakats based on their refined competence in singing verses of Kirtana Ghosa, while playing musical instruments like khol and bor-taal, and performing the hour long Dhemalir nach.

Citing from the Charit Puthi, the scholar Maheswar Neog (1998) mentions that, “the head of a Sattra or someone in his family, a Brahman, or someone else in exceptional cases is eligible” for impersonating the deities like – Krishna, Rama and

Narasingha, as those performer-bhakats are revered as the living embodiments of the deities during ritualistic Bhaona performances (p.269). Reiterating such perspective during in-depth interview, the research participant - Khagen Goswami (a bhakat from Natun Samaguri Sattra) emphasized that the roles of Krishna, Rama and Narasingha must be enacted by a Gosai (Brahmin) bhakat, or a bhakat of Kayastha caste, if a suitable Brahmin bhakat is unavailable. Another research participant, Gunin Mahanta highlighted that Bihimpur Sattra mandates the possession of sacred thread through upanayana ceremony for performing as deities (especially Krishna and Narasingha), as according to Hinduism, such initiation ceremony ensures that the bhakat has undergone the rites of passage. Smaller Sattras with lesser number of bhakats also call upon male laities to join as actors in Bhaona performances organized within the Sattras, as “all the male members are liable to be recruited as actors” (Neog, 1984, p.23). However, non-Sattra laities are not allowed to enact the roles of deities like Krishna, Rama and Narasingha. Citing an example, the research participant of in-depth interview - Kamal Mahanta (Deka Sattradhikar of Alengi Narasingha Sattra) elaborated that the laypersons from Mising, Deori and Koiborto communities have enacted in the *Rukmini Harana* Bhaona organized within the Sattra, but the role of Krishna was enacted by a Gosai bhakat from the Sattra. However, Garmur Sattra does not mandate a Brahmin or Kayastha from the caste Hindu society to enact the roles of deities, owing to the social reforms brought about by Pitambardeva Goswami³³. Replicating the norms of the Sattra institutions, the lay-Namghars of non-tribal communities also adhere to caste norms while selecting the ritual-performers for impersonating the deities; however, in the lay-Namghars of Mising tribe, caste has never been a criterion as the tribe does not have sub-castes.

Participation of women as actors, singers and percussionists has been strictly prohibited in the Bhaona performances held in the Sattras and lay-Namghars. The research participant of in-depth interview - Hem Chandra Goswami elaborated that when Bhaona is presented inside the Namghar, “it is a religious expression through which a Vaishnava pays obeisance to Krishna”. Accordingly, every devotee-audience is instructed to ritually view the ritual-play with a pious mind. Therefore, “if any devotee-audience comes to know that a woman performer is menstruating, it might impede in evoking devotion because menstruation is considered as a pollution period in Assamese

³³Pitambardeva Goswami (1885-1962) was a Sattradhikar of Garmur Sattra, and was most importantly a social reformer who had voiced against caste system, child marriage, etc.

society”. Citing example from the Guru Charit Katha, the research participant Kamal Mahanta further narrated about the obstacles faced by Madhavdeva while teaching Bhaona to male performers, who were impersonating female characters, as the informants of the Ahom king had mistakenly thought that women were preparing for a public performance. Upon hearing it, the Ahom king had summoned the performers and ordered them to undress in the royal court in order to prove their biological sex. Therefore, along with religious norms, socio-cultural codes of conduct have also restricted women from participating in the Bhaona performances.

3.1.6 Audiences

As observed by the researcher during non-participant observation, the audiences of religio-ritualistic Bhaona performances comprise of the inmates of Sattras as well as laypersons belonging to various castes and communities, including Brahmin, Kayastha, Kaibarta, Koch, Deori, Sonowal Kachari, Ahom, etc., who are initiated into the Eka Sarana Naam Dharma. Such devotee-audiences, in adherence to the established religious norms formulated by the Sattras institutions, actively participate in rituals associated with the votive Bhaona performances, such as observing purificatory diet, conducting naam-prasanga, and offering gamosa to the ritual-performers.

During the focus group discussions with the research participants in Majuli, the audiences mentioned that being adherents of neo-Vaishnavism, the ritual-viewing of Bhaona performances are driven by social, cultural, religious, and intellectual needs. A concise description of how such varied needs are fulfilled through Bhaona performances, as elaborated by the research participants, are mentioned below:

- exhibition of religious affiliation to the Sattras and lay-Namghars, in order to continue as a member of the neo-Vaishnavite religious community;
- enhancement of social interaction with fellow Vaishnavas with an intent to deepen social bonds and reinforce social inclusion within the neo-Vaishnavite community;
- induction of the succeeding generation into the Bhaona tradition to facilitate the transmission of cultural legacy that ensures continuity of the religious tradition;
- articulation of Bhakti towards Krishna to accrue ritual-piety, which is believed to aid the neo-Vaishnavite devotees in overcoming impediments;

- cognizant of the neo-Vaishnavite codes of conduct as portrayed in the exemplary narratives and codified norms, so as to comprehend the ethos of neo-Vaishnavism;
- experience of the mythical past through the narrated stories, and indoctrination of religious insights on resilience and humility to navigate through the challenges;
- celebration of the cultural identity through commemorating the chequered history of neo-Vaishnavism, and paying obeisance to the Vaishnava apostles of Assam, who had endured multifaceted hardship during the proliferation of the religious tradition;
- engagement through aesthetic stimulation in the dramatic presentation of Bhaona, primarily because of the masks that represent various divine and demonic characters.

3.1.7 Language

Sankaradeva had composed the dialogues and songs of his six Ankiya Natas in Brajabuli language to facilitate easy comprehension of the narratives, mainly by the unlettered laypersons, who were not conversant in the Sanskrit language. Brajabuli³⁴, created by Sankaradeva, is a form of an artificial literary language, which consists of elements of different languages, such as old Assamese, Maithili, Avadhi and Brajabhasa (Sarma, 2006, p.119). According to the erudite scholar Maheswar Neog (1998), the vocabulary and idiomatic expressions of Brajabuli “were nothing unfamiliar” to the audiences, and as it was not the language of the masses, it had a “purifying effect upon their hearts as if they were listening to the very tongue of Krishna or Rama” (p.246). Sankaradeva had limited the usage of Sanskrit in the Ankiya Natas to the nandi, muktimangal bhatima and slokas strewn all over the Natas (Bhattacharyya, 1964, p.11).

However, limited use of Brajabuli as only prose dialogues, and adoption of Assamese language for composition of recitative verses and songs became evident in the Ankiya Natas written by Madhavdeva (Sarma, 1996, p.70). Similarly, during the 17th century, litterateurs such as Bhusana Dvija (composed *Ajamil Upakhyan*), Ramacarana Thakura (composed *Kamsa Badh*), Daityari Thakura (composed *Syamanta Harana*), etc. had extensively used Assamese instead of Brajabuli. The inclination towards the use of Assamese had also been recorded in the Sattras when Niranjandeva Goswami – the then Sattradhikar (tenure 1656 CE to 1658 CE) of Auniati Sattras translated the Sanskrit

³⁴ In order to differentiate the Brajabuli language created by Sankaradeva from the Brajabuli popularized by Vidyapati – a Maithili poet of the 14th century, it has also been known as Assamese Brajabuli (Goswami, 1999).

spiritual drama – *Prabodha Chandrodaya* into Assamese, titled *Mahamoh Naat*, following the framework of Ankiya Natas written by Sankaradeva (Sarma, 1996, p.83).

Distinguishing the Bhaonas composed by Sankaradeva and Madhavdeva, and the playwrights of succeeding generations on the basis of language, Neog (1984) had termed the later Bhaonas as Matribhasa Bhaona (p.53). The erudite scholar Kesavananda Deva Goswami (2001) had identified the use of colloquial Assamese language in non-lyrical style as the defining characteristics of Matribhasa Bhaona (p.111). The scholar Satyendranath Sarma (1996) had also elucidated that as Brajabuli was not the language of common masses, the communicative competence, in terms of knowledge and practice consistently declined among the playwrights. Moreover, as the religious scriptures like Kirtana and Dasan were composed in Assamese language, the shift towards use of Assamese in Bhaona resonated more among audiences (p.77).

Despite the growing popularity of Bhaona in Assamese language, there have always been immense efforts undertaken by Sattras institutions to continue the tradition of Bhaona in Brajabuli language. The research participant of in-depth interview – Babul Bhuyan (Deka Sattradhikar of Garmur Sattras) mentioned that as Sankaradeva had composed Ankiya Natas in Brajabuli language, “Brajabuli Bhaona has been the symbol of Assamese Sattriya culture for centuries”. Therefore, it becomes “the sole responsibility” of the Sattras to perform Bhaona in Brajabuli language as learning Brajabuli has been a part of the education the inmates of Sattras receive over the years.

3.1.8 Narratives

Dramatizing the religio-spiritual merits of transcendental devotion to Krishna, as enshrined in the Hindu texts, such as Bhagavata Purana, Vishnu Purana, Agni Purana, Harivamsa and Ramayana, Sankaradeva composed six interpretative stories namely, *Kaliya Damana* (1518 CE), *Patni Prasada* (1531 CE), *Keli Gopal* (1540 CE), *Rukmini Harana*³⁵, *Parijata Harana*³⁶, and *Ram Bijoy* (1568 CE). In the six Ankiya Natas, Sankaradeva incorporated scenarios to elicit the nine Rasas in devotee-audiences namely, Sringara, Hasya, Karuna, Raudra, Veera, Bhayanaka, Bibhatsa, Adhbhuta and Santa;

³⁵The year in which Sankaradeva had written *Rukmini Harana* is undocumented.

³⁶The year in which Sankaradeva had written *Parijata Harana* is undocumented.

however, he consistently prioritized Bhakti Rasa in order to instill profound devotion for the Supreme Being among devotee-audiences of Bhaona (Goswami, 2007, p.70).

As comprehended by the researcher through observing the Bhaona performances and reviewing the texts of Ankiya Natas, Sankaradeva had weaved the message of “dustok domon, santok palon” (subjugating the evil and preserving the virtuous) while emphasizing the need to subjugate the five mental afflictions – “kaam” (desire), “krodh” (wrath), “lobh” (greed), “moh” (attachment) and “ahankar” (ego) that impede the process of becoming a devoted follower of Krishna. For example, in the play *Keli Gopal*, the demon Sankhacuda embodies the fervent “kaam” that urged him to abduct the Gopis of Vrindavana with the intention of engaging in coercive sexual encounters. In the play *Ram Bijoy*, Parasurama³⁷ symbolizes the “krodh”, which drives him to wage war against Rama upon learning that Rama had broken the revered Ajabgava bow of the deity Shiva while marrying Sita. In the play *Rukmini Harana*, Sisupala³⁸ epitomizes the insatiable “lobh” as while despising him, Rukmini mentions, “*ae papi Sisupala: tuhu hamaka bibaha karite avala: ha ha jaice simhakabharyaka: srgala abhilasa kaya thika!*” (Medhi, 2017, p.243) [Translation by the researcher: Oh, sinner Sisupala, your audacious attempt to marry me resembles a jackal’s desire to marry a lion’s wife]. In the play *Parijata Harana*, Satyabhama’s intense “moh” of being Krishna’s most beloved wife leaves her paralyzed when she hears Krishna has gifted the Parijata flower to the co-wife Rukmini. She implored Krishna to bring the entire Parijata tree from the garden of Indra³⁹. Likewise, the allure of the Parijata tree triggers similar “moh” in Indra’s wife, Sachi, compelling her to persuade Indra to wage war against Krishna. In the play *Patni Prasada*, “ahankar” is exemplified by the Brahmins, who controlled their wives’ expressions of devotion by forbidding them from worshipping Krishna, as well as dismissed the existence of Krishna while stating, “*hamu bedata sastrata parama pargata: yajnabrata dane parama pavitra: o hamu bhudevata: hamaka sarbbaloke pujaya nandasuta krsna: hamaka age konahaya //*” (Medhi, 2017, p129) [Translation by the researcher: We are the great experts in the Vedas and scriptures and through ritual-

³⁷ According to Hindu mythology, Parasurama is believed to be the sixth incarnation among the Dashavatara of Vishnu.

³⁸ Sisupala, the king of the Chedi kingdom, is an antagonist in the Mahabharata. The Hindu epic Mahabharata describes Sisupala as the king of the Chedi kingdom, who was slain by Krishna. In *Rukmini Harana* Ankiya Nata, Sisupala is portrayed as a suitor who forcefully wanted to marry Rukmini.

³⁹ In Hinduism, Indra is the “king of deities”, who is “associated with the “sky, lightning, thunder, storms, rains, rivers, and war” (Madan, 1990).

sacrifices and fasting, we have become absolutely sacred. We are revered as the Bhudevata whom everybody worships. Who is insignificant Krishna, the son of Nanda, compared to our revered status!?. In the plays of Ankiya Natas, Sankhacuda's "kaam", Parasurama's "krodh", Sisupala's "lobh", Sachi's "moh", and Brahmins' "ahankar" entailed varied punishments decreed by Krishna, thereby conveying about the potential repercussions such mental afflictions could bring, in order to preserve the moral order in a neo-Vaishnavite society.

3.1.9 Masks

a. Importance of masks in Bhaona performances

Masks serve as a medium to portray the traits of divine and demonic mythical characters with great precision, which facilitate instantaneous recognition of the represented characters. Therefore, masked performances became an effective storytelling instrument for propagating the mythology-based religious teachings (Zaman, 2009). Consequently, as mentioned in the Guru Charit Katha, Sankaradeva had incorporated the usage of masks for enacting characters such as, Brahma, Garuda, and Shiva in his first devotional drama – *Cihna Yatra* (Goswami, 2013, p.196).

During the in-depth interview, the research participant - Hem Chandra Goswami mentioned that during Bhaona performances, the masks essentialize the 'eccentric' appearances of the mythical characters that facial make-up often fails to exhibit. Citing examples, he elaborated that a mask must be encrusted on the face of the ritual-performer to portray the beak of Garuda or four-heads of Brahma or ten-heads of Ravana. He further described that in order to starkly juxtapose the compassionate demeanor of Krishna and Rama with the devilish, inhumanly attributes of Sankhacuda, Taraka and Maricha, the ritual-performers need to resort to grotesque masks. Similarly, the embedded grotesqueness in the mask of Putana helps in juxtaposing the crude, repulsive and unfeminine attributes of the ogress with the idealized motherhood of Yasoda (the mother of Krishna) or the idealized divine beauty of Rukmini and Sita – the consort of Krishna and Rama respectively.



Fig. 3.2: Juxtaposition of Putana (left) and Yasoda (right) in *Keli Gopal*; Source: Researcher

Therefore, in order to heighten the dramatic significance of Bhaona performances, usage of masks eventually increased in the Ankiya Natas of Sankaradeva for depicting characters, such as Taraka, Maricha, Subahu (in the play *Ram Bijoy*), Sankhacuda (in the play *Keli Gopal*), Kali Naga (in the play *Kaliya Damana*), etc.

Along with serving the theatrical purpose of iconic representations of the mythical characters, certain masks are also venerated as the living embodiments of the deities that serve as conduits for the visiting divine power during votive Bhaona performances. The research participant of in-depth interview, Tulashi Mahanta (a mask-maker from Prachin Samaguri Sattrā) described that the ritual-donning of mask representing the deity Narasingha, while staging Bhaonas such as *Nrasingha Murari* and *Nrasingha Yatra*, invokes the divine power of Narasingha, and channelizes it into the body of the ritual-performer through the mask. Thereby, facilitating ‘divinization’ of the ritual-performer, however temporarily, who then becomes ritually empowered to serve the purificatory role of annihilating the impediments experienced by the devotee-audiences of Bhaona performances.

b. Rituals associated with mask-making process

During the in-depth interview, Hem Chandra Goswami elaborated that before crafting the masks for Bhaona performances, the Khanikar⁴⁰ reflects upon the physical characteristics and essence of the mythical characters to be crafted through a type of meditation called *Roop Dhyān*. During the mask-making process, rituals are observed by

⁴⁰In the Sattras, mask-makers, make-up artists, and sculptors are called Khanikar.

the Khanikars depending upon the types of the mythical characters to be crafted, i.e. divine or demonic. There are no rituals associated with the crafting of masks representing the demonic characters, such as Marichi, Taraka, Putana, Sankhachuda, etc. However, the Khanikars must offer saki (earthen oil-lamp) and incense sticks in the Sattrra-Manikuts or lay-Namghars for successful completion of the making process of the masks representing the divine characters, such as Narasingha.

c. Iconography and Symbolism of Bhaona masks

The iconography of the Bhaona masks, which comprises of the colors and contours, are based on the descriptions mentioned in the pan-Hindu texts, such as Bhagavata Purana, Ramayana and Mahabharata, as well as the Vaishnava literatures of Assam, such as Kirtana Ghosa, Sachitra Kirtanputhi and Chitra Bhagavata.

Iconographic descriptions of some of the important Bhaona masks are mentioned below:-

The Hindu Puranas depict Brahma as a reddish-complexioned male deity who possess four heads (therefore called “Chaturaonon”), each facing a cardinal direction, and symbolizing His omnipresence as well as the four Vedas created by Him namely, Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda and Atharvaveda.



Fig.3.3: Mask of Brahma Source:Researcher

Garuda, the mythical bird and also the divine mount of Krishna, is portrayed with a beak (known as “chorai thot” in Assamese). Distinguishing the contours of eyes between

Garuda and Bali⁴¹, the Assamese literature *Prahlad Charitra* mentions that as Garuda is a devotee of Krishna, the eyes are full of devotion, unlike the arrogant eyes of Bali.



Fig.3.4: Mask of Garuda
Source: Researcher



Fig.3.5: Mask of Narasingha
Source: Researcher

The mask representing the deity Narasingha is crafted adhering to the description mentioned by Sankaradeva in the *Narasingha Dhyana*, which is also influenced by the poem *Prahlada Charitra*, written by one of the earliest Assamese writers - Hema Saraswati. The description states –

“Tapta subarnara samaj wale sakshu dui
Parbota samana kai ache swarga sui
Sarirara Ram Chandra sama sukla barna
Tuli ache urdhaka tabadha dui karna
Baila mukha atigiri gahbara porai
Prasanda botasa jen nishwasa bojai
Prakashe kasha sire rabira kirana...
Jihba mei ache dui dashana prakati...”

[Translation by Krishna Goswami (2013, p.197): “The eyes shine like hot gold, the figure is so tall that it touches the heaven, hairs of the body are white as the moon, breathing is like heavy storm, the head shines like the sun, the outstretched tongue is sharp.”]

⁴¹In Ramayana, Bali is depicted as the king of Kishkindha, who had coercively captured his brother – Sugriv’s wife – Ruma. Later, Rama had defeated Bali in order to liberate Ruma from captivity.



Fig.3.6: Mask of Ravana
Source: Researcher

Ravana, the king of Lanka, is depicted as a blue-complexioned chief antagonist in the Hindu epic Ramayana, who possess ten heads (therefore called “Dashanon”) that signify his intellect as a scholar. In contrast to the protagonist Rama, who is considered as the epitome of virtue, the antagonist Ravana is portrayed as a metaphor for evil, ignorance, and dark alleys of human minds.

In Hindu mythology, Kaliya Naga is depicted as a multi-headed venomous serpent with dark-blue complexion. However, the Vaishnava myths depict Kaliya Naga as a five-headed, white and brown complexioned serpent. The serpent depicted in the Ankiya Nata - *Kali Damana* is associated with a story from the 16th chapter of the 10th Canto of the Bhagavata Purana in which Krishna subdues the giant serpent for poisoning the Yamuna River.



Fig.3.7: Mask of Kaliya Naga
Source: Researcher

Putana, the ogress who had poisoned her own milk in order to kill infant Krishna, is depicted through grotesque features, such as wrinkled dark-brown skin, extremely arched eyebrows, bulbous nose, enlarged lips, disheveled hairs, and eyes gleaming with malevolent glint.



Fig. 3.8: Mask of Putana
Source: Researcher



Fig.3.9: Mask of Sankhacuda
Source: Researcher

Sankhacuda, the demon who had abducted the Gopis (female cowherds) of Vrindavana, in order to have coercive sexual encounter, is depicted through grotesque features such as extremely arched eyebrows, globular eyes, bulbous nose, ripping teeth-filled mouth, extremely large ears, etc.

d. Types of masks

The research participant of in-depth interview – Hem Chandra Goswami, who is also a renowned mask-maker from Assam, explained that depending upon the size of masks, the Bhaona mask tradition of Assam (known as “mukha” in Assamese language), could be categorized into three types namely, Cho or Bor mukha, Lotukai or Lotukari mukha and Mukh mukha.

Cho or Bor mukha is around eight to ten feet tall, and covers the entire body of the performer while donning during performance. Different parts of the body such as head, chest, and torso are made separately, and ensemble when worn by a performer during the Bhaona performance. The masks of Narakasura, Narasingha, Kaliya Naga, etc. fall under the category of Cho or Bor mukha.

Lotukai or Lotukari mukha is smaller in size than the Cho or Bor mukha. These masks also have detachable parts such as Cho or Bor mukha. The masks of Ravana, Putana, Taraka, Sankhacuda, etc. fall under the category of Lotukai or Lotukari mukha. For example, the Ravana mask has four separate parts, comprising of ten heads, twenty hands (ten right hands and ten left hands), and the body till the waist.

Mukh mukha, literally meaning face mask, is the smallest in size in comparison to the Cho mukha and Lotukai mukha. The mukh mukhas cover the whole face of the performer along with the head. The masks of Garuda, Brahma, etc. fall under the category of Mukh mukha.



Fig.3.10: Cho mukha of Narakasura
Source: Researcher



Fig.3.11: Lotukai mukha of Ravana
Source: Researcher

e. Rituals associated with donning of masks during Bhaona performances

According to the research participants of in-depth interviews such as Hem Chandra Goswami, Gunin Mahanta, Kamal Mahanta, etc., in the religio-ritualistic Bhaona performances rituals are exclusively observed before donning the mask that represents the deity – Narasingha. The bhakat, who is eligible to perform as Narasingha, consecrates the mask through offering of saki and burning of incense sticks, while maintaining a purificatory diet (such as abstaining from rice, oil, turmeric, etc.). The adherents of neo-Vaishnavism believe that conduction of such rituals along with a day-long meditation prepares the body and mind of the performer-bhakat for invocation and embodiment of the deity during the votive Bhaona performance.

f. Storage of Bhaona masks

The adherents of neo-Vaishnavism believe that the mask representing the deity Narasingha possesses cultic life of its own, even without Bhaona performances. Therefore, the storage process of Narasingha mask abounds with elaborative religious norms and distinctive rituals. After Bhaona performance, the Narasingha mask is kept in a clean place, and a saki and incense sticks are offered to the mask during the dusk. A worn out Narasingha mask is immersed in the water of the revered Brahmaputra River while playing musical instruments, such as khol and bor-taal, and performing naam-kirtana. The masks representing other mythical characters are stored in a wooden box, and kept in a room where the Sattradhikar sits. The masks of rival characters such as Rama and Ravana are kept separately as according to Vaishnava folklore, masks of antagonistic characters quarrel if kept in a single box.



Fig. 3.12: Masks of Narasingha
Source: Researcher

3.1.10 Costumes, Ornaments and Make-Up

Codified by tradition, the character-specific costumes, ornaments and make-up form an integral part of the preparation of the ritual-performers, presentation of the Bhaona performance, and reception of the performance by devotee-audiences.

Detailed description of costumes, ornaments and make-up of different characters in the Bhaona performances, as observed by the researcher and mentioned by the research participants, are provided in the following paragraphs.

a. Costumes and Headgears

Khekerupatiya Pag - the headgear of the Gayans and Bayans covers mostly the head and little part of the forehead, and is adorned with Tulsi rosary. The pure white-colored costumes of the Gayans and Bayans, made from natural silk, consist of Chapkon (an upper garment reaching upto knees), Cheleng (a scarf worn over Chapkon) and dhoti (a loose piece of clothing wrapped around the lower half of the body).



Fig.3.13: Costumes of Gayan-Bayan;
Source: Researcher

Sutradhar Pag or Koshapatiya Pag – the turban like headgear of the Sutradhar appears elliptical from bird’s eye-view and protrudes either at the front or at the back, resembling the headgears of the Mughal emperors (Neog, 1998, p.271). It is prepared by tying the white colored cloth in a vessel called “Kosha”, which according to legend was used to wash the feet of the deities. The pure white-colored unisexual costumes consist of Jalikota chola (a loose jacketed vest without collar), Ghuri (a type of petticoat or skirt reaching ankles), and Karadhani (a waist-band interspersed by flowery designs).



Fig.3.14: Costume of Sutradhar
Source: Researcher

Krishna and Rama wear a small sized crown known as Kiriti. Such crowns are made up of Sanchi Pat (agarwood), bamboo sticks, cane fibre, etc., and embellished with a peacock's feather, and Kingkhap – a type of design on Muga silk, which was popular especially in the Ahom dynasty. The costume consists of Bhuni (dhoti) which is of yellow-colored for Krishna, and blue-colored for Rama, and a yellow and blue colored embroidered cloth called Bukuwali and Pithiyali, worn on chest and back respectively.



Fig.3.15: Costumes of Krishna and His mother Yasoda
Source: Researcher

The royal characters wear large crowns known as Mukut, which are prepared following similar methods like the Kiriti of Krishna and Rama. The costumes consist of either full-sleeved or half-sleeved colored Chapkon, colored dhoti, and velvet and lace embellished Nimai, which is a decorated piece of cloth hanging from the waist lines.



Fig.3.16: Costumes of royal characters
Source: Researcher

The male performers who are impersonating female characters are decked in flowery designed Mekhela⁴² and Riha⁴³ (for royal characters), and Ghuri, Sador and Kurmani (for common women). The married female characters also cover their heads with a veil called Orani. Hair is tied to a knot called Khopa. While wigs are prepared from properly dyed jute fibre, artificial breasts are mostly made up of wood and stuffed cotton balls or gamosa.



b. Ornaments

The Sutradhar wears ornaments such as, Kanphuli (earrings) in traditional Lokaparo design (formerly worn by dignitaries in the Ahom dynasty), Doog Doogi and Motamoni (necklace), Mota Gam Kharu (bracelets), Nupur (anklet), etc. The royal characters and deities wear Chandrahar around their waists. The female characters wear Unti (earrings), Baju (armlet), Musthi Kharu (bracelet), Golpata (necklace), Jethi (tapering worn on forehead), etc. The earrings, bracelets and necklace are made in the traditional Assamese designs, such as Jonbiri, Dholbiri, etc. While the sages like Vishwamitra, Parasurama and Narada wear Rudraksha⁴⁴ around their necks, the deities like Krishna and Rama wear Banamala – a garland made of wild flowers.

⁴²Mekhela, the bottom weave, is traditional Assamese attire worn by the women of Assam, along with an upper weave called sador.

⁴³“Riha, a part of the three-piece Assamese traditional garment worn by women, forms an important part of the bridal trousseau in Assam” (Sharma, 2006).

⁴⁴Rudraksha, the dried seeds of the “genus *Elaeocarpus*”, are considered as auspicious, and thus associated with the chanting of mantras.

c. Make-up

Describing about the make-up during in-depth interview, the research participant of in-depth interview from Natun Samaguri Sattrā – Hem Chandra Goswami mentioned that organic ingredients like vermilion (hengul), yellow arsenic (haital), indigo, seeds of elephant apple, tamarind seeds, charcoal of dry gourd, brown ochre (gereu), etc. have been traditionally used to prepare the make-up for Bhaona performances. He further highlighted that different characters in Bhaona performances are decked in different shades of make-up in congruence with the nature of the character being portrayed. While the reddish make-up on the sages like Vishwamitra and Parasurama denote the “tapas”⁴⁵ in them, the same reddish tint in the royal characters symbolize their aggressive and pompous demeanors. The female characters such as the consorts of the deities and Gopis of Vrindavana wear make-up of whitish tint to denote their naivety and purity of body and mind. The deity - Krishna wears make-up of “shyama” (blue-black) tint adhering to Hindu religious texts. Another research participant of in-depth interview - Gunin Mahanta from Bihimpur Sattrā mentioned that the make-up artists maintain religious norms even while decking up the ritual-performers before Bhaona performances, as the actors impersonating the deities such as Krishna and Rama, must apply the make-up before the actors who are enacting non-deity characters, and “they will even put on a tilak⁴⁶ if their roles are to be staged in the latter half of the Bhaona performance”.

3.1.11 Musical Instruments and Songs

The six Ankiya Natas written by Sankaradeva are lyrical in nature, therefore, the religio-ritualistic Bhaona performances held in the Sattras and lay-Namghars have provisions of live musical presentations. Mainly three types of musical instruments accompany the Bhaona performances namely, khol (membranophonic drum), taal (idiophonic cymbal) and bahi (aerophonic flute). As mentioned by the research participant of in-depth interview - Gunin Mahanta from Bihimpur Sattrā, such musical instruments are also called “debobadyo” in Assamese, as the singers and percussionists sit on a temporarily built wooden platform raised about ten feet from the ground, away

⁴⁵In Hinduism, Tapas comprises of variety of austere meditative practices, such as asceticism, inner cleansing, self-discipline, etc. Owing to Sanskrit origin, Tapas denotes warmth or heat or fire, such meditative practices could generate in the body of the practitioner.

⁴⁶Tilak is a distinctive ornamental spot of colored powder worn on the forehead, as a religious symbol.

from the purview of the devotee-audiences of Bhaona, thereby creating an illusion that the sounds are coming from the Devaloka⁴⁷.

According to the scholar Satyendranath Sarma (2002), the numbers of songs in each Ankiya Natas are – ten in *Patni Prasada*, sixteen in *Kaliya Damana*, twenty-three in *Parijata Harana*, twenty-four in *Ram Bijoy*, thirty-five in *Rukmini Harana*, and thirty-six in *Keli Gopal* (p.49). The scholar further mentioned that the Bhaona performances also comprise of three types of bhatimas at three distinct junctures of the ritual-play, such as eulogizing Krishna or Rama at the beginning of the performance, praising the deities and their consorts in the middle of the performance, and seeking deliverance for the devotee-audiences at the end of the play (Sarma, 2006, p.121).

3.1.12 Dances

Bhaona performances are embedded with highly stylized, character-specific, ritualistic nrityas, composed by Sankaradeva in connection with the devotional play. The nrityas adheres to the Indian treatises like Bharata's *Natya Shastra*, Nandikeshvara's *Abhinaya Darpana* and Subhanjkara's *Sri Hastamuktavali*. Following distinctive grammar of "angika-abhinaya"⁴⁸ related to hastamudras (movements of hands), sirahkarma (movements of head), drishti (movements of eyes), grivakarma (movements of neck), karna (postures), bulan (gait), etc., the nrityas intend to convey the Bhavas of the ritual-performers, and evoke desired Rasa(s) in devotee-audiences (Goswami, 2015).

Recalling his years of experience as a Bor-Bayan of Uttar Kamalabari Sattrā, and also citing Maheswar Neog's works on Sattriya nritya (1965), the research participant Muhikanta Bor-Bayan described about the following nrityas performed during Bhaona performances:

- Dhemalir nach, the preliminary dance preceding the Bhaona performance, comprises of Ariya nach and Gayan-Bayan. While in the Ariya nach the male dancers carry the Ariya onto the stage, the Gayan-Bayan consecrates the performance space and set the devotional tone of Bhaona;

⁴⁷In various religious traditions of India, such as Hinduism, Vaishnavism, etc., Devaloka denotes a plane of existence where the deities reside and therefore could be equated to Heaven.

⁴⁸Angika-abhinaya is an expression through gestures, postures, movements of each part of the body and gait.

- Sutra-bhangi or Sutradharar nach is performed by the Sutradhar at different junctures, such as entering the performance space, singing the nandi in praise of the deities, announcing the summary of the staged Bhaona, singing the bhatima in praise of the protagonist of the play, etc. This nritya intends to transport the devotee-audiences to a sacred spatio-temporal setting where the deities will unfold Their divine stories;
- Bhawariyar nach or Bhawariya-pravesar nach, characterized by simple foot-work, is performed by dramatis personae (except the ritual-performers impersonating Krishna and Rama) while entering the performance space, and also at latter stages of Bhaona;
- Krishna-bhangi or Gosai-pravesar nach, characterized by a pleasant agility and the hand gesture symbolizing playing of flute, is presented by the ritual-performers impersonating the deities - Krishna and Rama, while entering the performance space;
- Gopi-bhangi or Gopi-pravesar nach, characterized by subtle circling movements, is performed by the dramatis personae impersonating as the Gopis of Vrindavana, and also other female characters of the Bhaona performances;
- Rasar nach is performed by the dramatis personae impersonating as Krishna and Gopis of Vrindavana, while enacting the Raas Leela;
- Yuddhar nach, characterized by numerous swift swirling and recurrent brisk and wide strides, represents fights between the protagonist and antagonist(s) of the Bhaona performance with weapons such as gada, chakra, torowal, dhal, dhenu, etc.
- Bhawariya-prasthanar nach is performed by the dramatis personae (except the ritual-performers impersonating as Krishna and Rama) while exiting the performance space;
- Kharmanar nritya is performed by the dramatis personae with the muktimangal bhatima to announce the ritual-closure of the Bhaona performance.

3.1.13 Bhaona Tradition in Transition

a. Sangeet Natak Akademi, National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage, and new performative context of Bhaona performances

The Sangeet Natak Akademi (SNA), a national academy for performing arts, was established in the year 1952 through a resolution undertaken by the then Ministry of Education, Government of India. The objectives of the Akademi as specified in the Memorandum of Association include, promotion of research in the fields of Indian

music, dance and drama; revival and preservation of folk traditions; provision of sponsorship to encourage festivals, seminars and conferences; proliferation of cultural exchange among artists from different regions of India as well as other countries; and collaboration with similar Akademies, institutions and associations for the furtherance of the objectives. In order to fulfill the set objectives of SNA, comprehensive documentation of the Satriya culture of Assam, including Bhaona, gained momentum primarily in the 1990s, under the guidance of erudite scholars such as Prof. Maheswar Neog and Dr. Pradip Jyoti Mahanta. Concurrently, seminars and workshops were organized to encourage the preservation of Bhaona and associated mask-making tradition through learning and performance by layperson. Consequently, the “rigidity to keep the [Satriya] art forms codified within the Sattra campus and that too amongst celibate monks gradually lost its orthodoxy” (Mahanta, 2004).

Furthermore, inscription of Ankiya Nata and Satriya Theatre (Bhaona) as the Performing Arts of Assam, in the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India broadened the performative context of Bhaona performances. The Sattra and lay-Namghar centric, liturgical calendar regulated votive Bhaona performances traditionally conducted to propitiate the ‘Supreme’ deity of neo-Vaishnavism, therefore, evolved into proscenium stage-based, secular, cultural programmes organized to promote the intangible cultural heritage of Assam. Since then, specific cultural competitions and festivals have been designed by Sattras as well as national cultural organizations to inspire the Assamese society to uphold the tradition by consistently engaging in performances. Two major examples of such festivals and competitions include, Asom Bhaona Samaroh - organized and sponsored since 2006 by the Auniati Sattra of Majuli, and Ankiya Bhaona Samaroh - organized and sponsored since 2009 by the Satriya Kendra⁴⁹ in Guwahati. Bhaona performances have also been presented in various State and Central Government commissioned cultural programs held in Assam as well as different states of India, such as International Srimanta Sankaradeva Festival (Guwahati, since 2016), Namami Brahmaputra (Guwahati, Assam, 2017), Republic Day Parade (New Delhi, 2018), North East Festival (New Delhi, 2018), North East Eco Tourism and Cultural Festival (Dibrugarh, Assam, 2019), Kumbh Mela (Ayodha, Uttar Pradesh, 2019), etc. Other than programs commissioned by the State and

⁴⁹Satriya Kendra is a constituent unit of Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi.

Central Government of India, Bhaona performances have also received foreign grants; for example, Bhaona performances held in the Guimet Museum of France and the British Museum of London during the Brindabani Jatra of 2018 have been sponsored by the international Euro-American grants.

b. Re-institutionalization of Bhaona performances and associated mask-making in academic institutions

Re-institutionalization of Bhaona and associated mask-making in centres and departments of Performing Arts in academic institutions, such as National School of Drama (New Delhi), Dr. Bhupen Hazarika Centre of Performing Arts, Dibrugarh University (Assam), and Majuli University of Culture (Assam) further re-structured the courses of knowledge transmission process pertaining to Sankari culture. The formalized pedagogical framework in such institutions facilitates an interface between theory and practice, and helps in developing a well-documented compendium of knowledge through seminars, lectures-cum-demonstrations and workshops conducted by the exponents from reputed Sattras like Auniati Sattra, Uttar Kamalabari Sattra, Natun Samaguri Sattra, etc.

Liaison between academic institutions and national cultural organizations such as Sangeet Natak Akademi, North Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre, Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre, etc. also facilitate teaching-learning of Bhaona and mask-making through short-term certified programs. For example, in collaboration with Sattriya Kendra of Guwahati, a fifteen day traditional mask-making workshop was held at Srimanta Sankaradeva Kalakshetra in Barpeta (2016); Demonstration of Traditional Mask-Making Art at National Institute of Fashion Technology in Shillong, Meghalaya (2017); Seminar on Traditional Mask-Making organized by Sangeet Natak Akademi in Shreshtha Bharat Sanskriti Samagam (2021); Sattra Traditional Craft of Mask-Making of Assam as a subject in Assam Skill Development Mission for Skill Development; Crafts Demonstration Program organized by the Ministry of Textiles, Government of India at Natun Samaguri Sattra in Majuli (2018); etc. Along with the academic institutions and national cultural organizations, several socio-cultural organizations from Assam have also created spaces for proliferating teaching and learning of Bhaona and associated mask-making; for example, Sanskar Jagoran Yatra organized by Pragya Foundation; workshops on Brajabuli language and traditional Bhaona costume-making organized by Society for Srimanta Sankaradeva; etc.

However, differentiating the acquired knowledge pertaining to Bhaona and mask-making on the basis of teaching-learning space, the research participant of in-depth interview – Muhikanta Bor Bayan underlined that receiving an one year to six months of certified training from Universities, and developing a skill is “different” from years of immersive learning of religious expressions, which is handed down to generations within the Sattras. Speaking on the same line, another research participant - Hem Chandra Goswami mentioned that there is apparently no harm in learning mask-making and Bhaona as a performing art form, and achieving a certificate which will help in earning livelihood, but “nobody should confuse performing arts with devotional expression”. He further emphasized that Adhyapaks from Sattras must be included in the academic teaching-learning process in order to ensure that “the learners not only receive proper training” but also “embrace the Vaishnava ethos so as to prevent devaluation of the foundational philosophy of Sankari culture”.

c. Introduction of Vaishnava women as performers in Bhaona performances

Elucidating about the introduction of Vaishnava women as performers in the Bhaona presentations, the research participant of in-depth interview – Babul Bhuyan (Deka Sattradhikar of Garmur Sattra) mentioned that under the instruction of Pitambardeva Goswami, Sanghas started developing outside the premise of Sattras where interested lay-women were imparted training on Bhaona performances by the male bhakats from Sattras. However, even the social reformer had not allowed lay-women to perform in Bhaona held inside the Sattras and lay-Namghars. He further highlighted that in Majuli, by the late 1950s, women started performing female roles in Raas Leela organized on the occasion of Raas Purnima in the Kristi Sangha of Garmur Sattra.

During in-depth interview, the research participant – Pubali Bhuyan (a female Bhaona performer from Garmur Saru Sattra) mentioned that with the passage of time, Mahila Samitis developed in Majuli, and members of such women-centric groups have been consistently approaching the exponents from the Sattras to teach Bhaona and associated mask-making to the lay-women of Majuli. In this regard, the exponent – Muhikanta Bor Bayan of Uttar Kamalabari Sattra, and cultural institutions such as Kristi Sangha of Garmur Sattra, and Sukumar Kalapeeth of Natun Samaguri Sattra have notable contributions in supporting the enthusiastic Vaishnava women in learning Bhaona and mask-making. It is imperative to note that since the year 2019, a significant

tradition of all-women Bhaona performance has been taking place on the proscenium stage in the Phuloni village of Majuli, during the annual Raas Purnima.

Re-institutionalization of Bhaona as academic courses in Universities, along with various endeavors undertaken by the State and the national cultural institutions to facilitate teaching and learning of Bhaona have also inspired women across Assam to learn the Satriya culture, which so far has only been pursued by the Vaishnava men. Presentation of the Ankiya Bhaona – *Parijata Harana* in 2011 by the first batch of postgraduate students of Dr. Bhupen Hazarika Centre for Performing Arts in Dibrugarh University, is an example of first academic co-acting in Bhaona performance. In the year 2014, around fifty renowned Assamese female actors had participated in the Ankiya Bhaona – *Ram Bijoy* organized in New Delhi by the Assam Tourism Development Corporation, Government of Assam in association with a Guwahati-based socio-cultural organization – Raginee. In an interview with the newspaper ‘The Times of India’ (dated: 26 October, 2014), the actor-cum-director of the play - Madhurima Choudhary said, “I wanted to turn the tables. These are times of women's revolution, this women-driven performance aids in empowering us”. All-women Bhaona was also staged at Darrang district of Assam in the year 2021, on the play *Rukma Bir-er Darpa Churna*- an Assamese translation of the Ankiya Bhaona *Rukmini Harana* by a Sivasagar-based cultural group – Shyam Kanu Natya Gosthi, in association with Samannay Mahila Samaj from Darrang. In an interview with the newspaper ‘The Times of India’ (dated: 15 April, 2021), the Cultural Secretary of the Shyam Kanu Natya Gosthi mentioned that such an initiative aims to popularize the unique creations of the Vaishnava apostles among the lay-women in Assamese society, and also provide a platform to explore the unexplored cultural talents of the womenfolk.

d. Bhaona performances in local and global languages

Along with the Assamese language, there have been extended efforts to promote Bhaona performances in Mising and Bodo languages by the Asom Sattra Mahasabha - an apex body of the Sattras of Assam, constituted in the year 1915. In an interview with the newspaper ‘The Telegraph’ (dated: 27 February, 2012), the President of the Asom Sattra Mahasabha – Lila Kanta Mahanta stated that the annual Setubandha program aims to encourage Bhaona performances in Mising and Bodo languages, in order to bring the two dominant indigenous groups of Assam (i.e. Mising and Bodo) under the fold of the

neo-Vaishnavite Sankari culture. He further mentioned that the Mising Bhaona group - Jengraimukh Shilpi Samajh from Majuli district, and the Bodo Bhaona group – Tamalpur Samannita Ankiya Natya Samajh from Tamalpur district has been presenting Bhaona across Assam, since last two decades, on plays such as *Sita Haran Bali Badh* and *Hiranyakashipu Badh* respectively.

The languages of Bhaona performances evolved further to foster performer-audience-narrative connect as the practitioners from Assam have started performing Bhaona nationally and globally, as well as foreign theatre artists have also become interested in learning the performing art. For example, a cultural enthusiast, Arup Saikia, has translated the Brajabuli Bhaona *Keli Gopal*, and Assamese Bhaona *Ravan Badh* into English language. He along with the members of Prajanma Unmesh, a socio-cultural organization, has so far presented the translated Bhaonas in Delhi (in the year 2018), Mumbai (in the year 2018), and Abu Dhabi (in the year 2019). In an interview with the newspaper - 'The Hindu' (dated: May 26, 2014) Arup Saikia said, "Intellectual assets cannot be kept within the narrow confines of a particular language. One has to change with time and showcase the cultural wealth to the new generation across the globe." His endeavors have also been supported by the Department of Culture, Government of Assam to promote Bhaona in a language that global audiences are familiar with. Similarly, a group of fifteen theatre artists from France performed the Brajabuli Bhaona *Parijata Harana* in French language, under the tutelage of Adhyapak Dr. Bhabananda Borbayan of Uttar Kamalabari Sattrā, in the International Srimanta Sankaradeva Festival (2016) held in Srimanta Sankaradeva Kalakshetra of Guwahati. The following year, the Brajabuli Bhaona *Ram Bijoy* was performed in Spanish language in the same festival by a group of artists from France, Slovenia, Denmark, Belgium and Mexico.

Along with performance of Bhaona in different local and global languages, there have been sustained efforts to continue the tradition of Bhaona in Brajabuli language, especially by the Sattrā institutions of Assam. For example, the Matribhasa Bhaona - *Ravan Badh* was translated into Brajabuli language and performed in Srimanta Sankaradeva Kalakshetra of Guwahati by the bhakats of Alengi Narasingha Sattrā. In recent times, similar initiatives are being undertaken by different socio-cultural organizations, such as hosting of seminars on characteristics and importance of Brajabuli language in the Ankiya Bhaona Samaroh festival, organized every year since 2009 by

Sattriya Kendra, Guwahati; workshops on the Brajabuli language were conducted in 2022 by Society for Srimanta Sankaradeva and Parampara Pravah, in collaboration with the Srimanta Samkaradeva Kalakshetra Society and the International Council for Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), North East Region, etc.

e. Introduction of cultural outsiders as audiences of Bhaona performances

The inclusion of Bhaona in national and international cultural programs as well as tourist-centric performances has introduced the tradition to national and foreign audiences, who are uninitiated into the neo-Vaishnavite religious tradition, and are therefore, regarded as “cultural outsiders” by the local populace. Differentiating such audiences from the devotee-audiences of traditional Bhaona performance, the research participant of in-depth interview - Hem Chandra Goswami mentioned that as the performative tradition of devotional storytelling from the Hindu Puranas and epics exist in other states of India, the national audiences could comprehend the “nature and content” of the Bhaona performance. However, as such audiences do not share the devotional fervor present in the Vaishnavas of Assam, Bhaona appeals to them more as a “theatrical entertainment” and not as a ritual play meant for articulation of Bhakti towards the ‘Supreme Being’. He also underlined that the cultural differences further complicate the decoding process in the foreign audiences, making it challenging for them to “appreciate the nuanced shades inherent in each character of Bhaona”, and thereby limiting their understanding to a “basic summary” of the performance.

f. Masks as souvenirs and Mukha Bhaona

Artistic innovations such as jaw and eyelid movements brought into age-old Bhaona tradition of Assam by the renowned mask-maker - Hem Chandra Goswami have contributed to the aesthetic quotient as well as the story-telling capacities of masks. Moreover, as the numbers of masks being traditionally used in Bhaona performances were less, he introduced Mukha Bhaona in the year 2000, in which each character including Krishna, Rama, Sita, Narada, etc., adorns a Mukh mukha while staging the performances. During in-depth interview, the research participant - Hem Chandra Goswami also explained that such initiatives revitalized the Bhaona mask tradition by increasing the visibility of the performative artifact in front of national and global audiences. He further mentioned that in order to preserve the ‘sanctity’ of the Ankiya

Natas written by Sankaradeva, experimentation through Mukha Bhaona is only limited to newer narratives like *Dasavatar*, *Sita Harana Bali Badh*, etc.

Expressing his views on commercialization of masks, Hem Chandra Goswami emphasized that along with “Hari kotha” (chanting the name of Krishna), artists also need “Chaul kotha” (revenue) to sustain the continuity of the performative tradition. Therefore, in order to facilitate commercialization of Bhaona masks, he started crafting of smaller-sized masks designed for decorative purposes, which cater to the demand of national and international tourists, who want to purchase masks from the Majuli Island of Assam as souvenirs. He also suggested that during festivals in which Assamese gamusa is presented to honor the chief guests, the organizing committee should contemplate about gifting masks, as such artifacts are also a part of the cultural heritage of Assam.

Although commercialization of masks has situated the lived tradition in the global market, the Khanikars from Assam are circumventing ways to preserve the indigeneity of the age-old tradition. The artisans are crafting the decorative masks adhering to the traditional Lakhimi Sutra of mask-making, and are also exclusively focusing on crafting of masks that depict characters from Bhaona performances such as, Garuda, Krishna, Narada, Sita, etc. Citing example, the research participant - Hem Chandra Goswami highlighted that in order to express the neo-Vaishnavite philosophy through decorative masks, he especially emphasizes on the crafting of masks representing the mythical bird – Garuda. According to him, the Garuda masks are not only aesthetically intriguing but also remind of an ardent devotee of Krishna. Therefore, whoever is initiated into Hindu mythology, could easily comprehend the reverence that Assamese society has towards Krishna Bhakti.

g. Evolving performative context and shortening of Bhaona repertoire

Bhaona performances held as performing art form in cultural and tourist programs, limit the scope of associated rituals such as, congregational naam-prasanga in the Sattra-Namghar or lay-Namghar, offering of sewa by devotee-audiences, etc. However, in order to uphold the foundational philosophy of Bhakti embedded in Bhaona, the performers sometimes conduct naam-prasanga in the Sattra-Manikut on the day of performance. Citing another example, the Deka Sattradhikar of Dakhinpat Sattra – Janardan Goswami (a research participant of in-depth interview), mentioned that

sometimes before the commencement of the performance in proscenium stage, the performers place a miniature wooden replica of Manikut on the stage, with the Bhagavata Purana inside the replica, so as “to convey to the uninitiated audiences about the sacred essence inherent in the Bhaona performances of Assam”.

The repertoire of Bhaona performances, comprising of songs and dances has also shrunk in the evolving performative context. Citing an example, the research participant of in-depth interview – Muhikanta Bor Bayan elaborated that in the votive Bhaona performances held within the Sattras and lay-Namghars, the songs and dances progress in pre-defined time, such as around one hour for Dhemalir nach, thirty minutes for Sutradharar nach and twenty minutes for Kharmanar Nritya. He stressed the significance of adhering to the time-frames as the dances and songs serve certain ritual functions, such as consecrating the performance space, evoking Bhakti Rasa in devotee-audiences, seeking forgiveness from Krishna for any disruption in the performance, etc. However, with a change in the performative context where the entire Bhaona performance is condensed into ten to thirty minutes, the devotional songs and dances are reduced to symbolic representations, highlighting only the distinctiveness of Bhaona as a performative tradition of Assam.

The involvement of new playwrights in the evolving performative context has also brought about perceived changes in the narratives of the Bhaona performances. Highlighting about such changes, the research participant of in-depth interview - Hem Chandra Goswami mentioned that the new playwrights, mostly comprising of the laypersons, lack the “cultural capital” the Sattradhikars acquire over time or the Vaishnava apostles used to possess in older times. Consequently, the new playwrights often struggle to write interpretative stories in the format of Ankiya Bhaona, and are opting for relatively shorter and easier “harana” (abduction) and “badh” (killing) episodes from the Bhagavata Purana, Ramayana and Mahabharata, such as *Putana Badh*, *Sita Harana*, *Bali Badh*, *Bakasura Badh*, *Syamanta Harana*, *Ravana Badh*, etc. He lamented that such stories could effectively convey the summarized “dustok domon santok palon” message of neo-Vaishnavism to the “cultural outsiders”; however, such stories also tend to rely on extreme grandeur and exaggerated violent acts, which have never been a part of the Bhakti Rasa centric votive Bhaona performances.

h. Introduction of new media to promote Bhaona performances

During the in-depth interview, the research participant - Gunin Mahanta mentioned that in order to showcase the richness of neo-Vaishnavite religious tradition, the inmates of various Sattras (like Auniati Sattra, Uttar Kamalabari Sattra, Garmur Sattra, Bihimpur Sattra, etc.), and adherents associated with lay-Namghars have created YouTube channels, WhatsApp groups, and Facebook pages of the Sattras and lay-Namghars for sharing religio-ritualistic activities with regional, national as well as global audiences. He further elaborated that such social media platforms has also been fostering a collaborative environment for the enthusiasts who are proactively networking with Bhaona performers and mask-makers, being dedicated towards the proliferation of the performative tradition that was once confined within the sacred precincts of Sattras.

**3.2 CHAM PERFORMANCES
OF
ARUNACHAL PRADESH AND SIKKIM**

3.2.1 Purpose

Elucidating the ritual goal of Cham performances, the Mongolian scholar Agvanchaidub stated that Padmasambhava had conducted the first Cham rituals during the 8th century to subdue the local deities and malevolent spirits, who were creating obstacles in the construction of the Samya Gompa, and proliferation of Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet (Rinchen, 1967). Since then, the adherents of Tibetan Buddhism revere Cham as a meditative dance practice through which the ordinary body, speech, and mind of a performer-Lama transforms into the impersonated Dharma protector, and consequently, empowers the ‘divinized’ Lama to conduct four ritual actions namely, pacification of fierce Dharma protectors, magnetization of peaceful Dharma protectors, destruction of malevolent spirits, and enrichment of all sentient beings (Pearlman, 2002).

Apart from the ritual significance of Cham in the religio-spiritual lives of the inmates of Gompas, Cham also has varied purposes in the lives of the adherent laities. Enumerating such ritual goals, the research participant of in-depth interview - Lama Thupten (a Lama in Tawang Gompa) mentioned that regular viewing of Cham familiarizes the laities with the Dharma protectors of Tibetan Buddhist pantheon, and also attunes them to the Buddhist religio-cultural codes of conduct and religious history, thereby ensuring the continuity of Buddhist dharma. Citing example he elaborated that as the adherents believe that after death the consciousness of the deceased comes across Shay-Tho (wrathful and peaceful) Dharma protectors during the Bardo period⁵⁰, therefore, ritual-enactment of the *Bardo* Cham “apprise laities of the after-life journey of the consciousness, and instructs how the consciousness can ensure re-birth in the higher realms through paying appropriate homage to the Dharma protectors”. Similarly, the *Zhanag* Cham apprise laities of the Tibetan king Lang Darma who had destroyed Gompas and executed Buddhists before being vanquished by Lhalung Pelgyi Dorje. Moreover, as highlighted by the research participant - Lama Karma Wangchuk (a Lama from Rumtek Gompa), the inherent salvific power in the votive Cham performances is believed to subdue the “barche” (mental afflictions) experienced by laypersons, such as desire, wrath, greed, attachment and pride through “thong droe” (just by watching Cham performances), which eventually advances their spiritual journey towards enlightenment.

⁵⁰ In Tibetan Buddhism, Bardo is considered as the intermediate period of forty-nine days between death and re-birth which provides opportunity for liberation to the religious Buddhists, or accords rebirth in lower realms to the irreligious ones.

3.2.2 Performance Occasion

Since inception, depending upon the discretion of Tibetan Buddhist practitioners, Cham performances have been an essential ritual process of propitiation of the Dharma protectors of Tibetan Buddhism, and subjugation of the ‘evil’ emanations that impede proliferation of Buddhism. However, with the formation of Gompas, Cham performances were incorporated into the Tibetan Tsurphu calendar regulated monastic occasions that are specific to each school of Tibetan Buddhism (Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 2007).

A concise description of the religio-ritualistic occasions on which the researcher observed that Cham performances are conducted within the Gompas located in Tawang district of Arunachal Pradesh and East Sikkim district of Sikkim are mentioned below:

- In Tawang Gompa of Arunachal Pradesh (Gelug school), Cham is annually performed for three consecutive days – 28th to 30th day of the 11th month of Tibetan lunar calendar (i.e. mid-January to February), as a part of the week-long Torgya ritual held within the Gompa for invoking the Dharma protector – Yamantaka.
- In Khinmey Gompa of Arunachal Pradesh (Nyingma school), Tse Chu Guru Tsange Cham is performed every year for two consecutive days – 10th to 11th day of the 5th month of Tibetan lunar calendar (i.e. late May to mid-June), as a part of the week-long rituals held to commemorate the birth anniversary of Padmasambhava.
- In Enchey Gompa of Sikkim (Nyingma school), Cham is performed for two days – 28th to 29th day of the 10th month of Tibetan lunar calendar (i.e. mid-December), as a part of the Kagyed rituals held prior to the Sikkimese New Year – Losoong.
- In Rumtek Gompa of Sikkim (Kagyu school), Mahakala Gutor Cham is held for three days - 28th to 30th day of the 12th month of Tibetan lunar calendar (i.e. mid-January to mid-February), as a part of monastic rituals held prior to the Tibetan New Year, known as Losar.
- In the Gompas of Sikkim, Cham is also performed on Pang Lhabso festival, which is held on the 15th day of the 7th month of Tibetan lunar calendar to invoke Dzonga (or Mount Kangchendzonga – the guardian deity of Sikkim), Gonpo (or Mahakala), and Dragpo Deshi (the guardian of four cardinal directions). It also commemorates the ‘Treaty of Blood Brotherhood’ signed in the 15th century by the two ethnic groups - Lepcha and Bhutia at Kabi Lungchok, which is presently located in North Sikkim.

3.2.3 Associated Rituals

As observed by the researcher during non-participant observation, religio-ritualistic Cham performances are embedded with a series of rituals which are conducted by the expert-Lamas from the Gompas as well as the lay-adherents who are affiliated to the Gompas. At least four weeks prior to the actual day of Cham performance, the expert-Lamas (could also be called ritual-performers) start the process of “sadhana” (meditation) in order to seek ritual-blessings from the Dharma protectors, which in turn ritually empowers them to benefit all sentient beings through the Cham performance. The scholar of Tibetan Studies – Ellen Pearlman (2002) mentions that meditation plays an important ritual function in the Cham performance because “if the dancers do not meditate for the good of others, the dance becomes just [a] common play and not a transformative practice” (p.58).

Apart from the meditation, ritual-crafting of Torma is also considered as an integral part of the rituals associated with Cham. Torma – the ritual cake made up of barley flour and yak butter, is crafted mostly by the junior Choyoks under the supervision of the Chopon of the Gompa, after undergoing a week-long meditation. The adherents of Tibetan Buddhism believe that the ritual-crafting of Torma clarifies the mind from delusions, such as desire, wrath, greed, attachment and pride. As the Torma symbolizes the Dharma protector being invoked through the Cham performance, it is dyed according to the essence of the Dharma protector; for example, the Torma of fierce Mahakala and Yamantaka are red, black or blue-black in color. After completion of the making process, Dorje Lupon consecrates the Torma through ritual-chanting of mantras.



Fig.3.18: Torma of Mahakala in Rumtek Gompa;
Source: Researcher

Highlighting about the ritualized proceedings of Cham performances, the research participant of in-depth interview - Lama Thupten from Tawang Gompa mentioned that the introductory *Phag Cham* is performed by the Champon (the chief dance master) to neutralize the Chamling – the dance courtyard in the Gompa, while donning a mask that represents the Boar-headed deity - Yidam Dorji Phagmo (or Vajravarahi). Further ritual-purification of the Chamling is conducted either through *Zam Cham* or *Phag Lang Cham*. *Zam Cham* is performed by four bhikkhus while donning red and dark-blue colored masks which represent the wrathful Dharma protectors of Tibetan Buddhist pantheon. *Phag Lang Cham*, on the other hand, is performed by two bhikkhus while donning masks which represent Boar and Ox.



Fig.3.19: *Phag Cham*; Source: Researcher

Within the chronologized repertoire of Cham performances, the ritual-burning of Torma holds a significant ritual function, which is conducted after the completion of *Shana Cham*. The adherents believe that burning of the Torma evokes bonding of emptiness and wisdom within the onlookers by symbolizing the severing of attachment from desire that binds one to the Samsara. Wrapped in straw, the Torma is thus burnt outside the Gompa by Dorje Lupon, who is costumed as a dancer of *Zhanag Cham*.

During the ritual-viewing of Cham performances, the devotee-audiences also partake in associated ritual such as offering of Khata (ceremonial silk scarf) to the ritual-performers, who are impersonating the Dharma protectors. The offering of white colored Khata (which is considered as auspicious as the snow of the ‘sacred’ mountains in Tibet)

is a symbolic mode of seeking ritual-blessings from the Boddhisattvas⁵¹ as well as articulating religious sincerity towards Tibetan Buddhism. The scarves are thereby offered by lay-audiences while folding hands near their foreheads, with a humble bow, and any delegated senior Lama ties the Khatas around the necks of the performer-Lamas.

The ritual-closure of Cham performances comprise of unfolding of the consecrated Thangka⁵² and granting of Wang⁵³ by the Rinpoche. The ‘sacred’ Thangka which is believed to house the spirit of the Dharma protector is unfurled in front of the lay-audiences, so that they could seek blessings through touching it by forehead, and eventually progress in the path of enlightenment. The life-long empowerment conferred on the lay-adherents in the form of Wang also blesses them to overcome impediments, which impede sound health and material prosperity.

3.2.4 Teaching-Learning Space

According to Dzongchen teachings of Tibetan Buddhism, Cham originated from Samantabhadra (Tib. Kuntu Zangpo) – the primordial Buddha and the five Dhyani Buddhas namely, Vairochana (Tib. Nam nang), Akshobhya (Tib. Mitrugpa), Ratnasambhava (Tib. Rinchen Jungne Rin Jung), Amitabha (Tib. Wopakme), and Amoghasiddhi (Tib. Donyo Drub pa Don drub). Thereafter, the knowledge pertaining to Cham was transmitted to Vajrasattva (Tib. Dorje Sempa) – the progenitor of all creations, who is also revered as the protector of Tibetan Buddhism. Vajrasattva orally transmitted the knowledge of Cham to Chemchok Heruka – the wrathful aspect of Samantabhadra, who further narrated it to the Boddhisattvas like Manjusri, Avalokitesvara, and Vajrapani. The knowledge was further transmitted to the religious masters, such as Padmasambhava, Vimalamitra, Nyak Jnanakumara, and others (Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 2007, p.113).

Around the 8th century CE, Padmasambhava had established the lineage of tantric practices through Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism, wherein the ritual practices of

⁵¹According to Buddhism, a Boddhisattva is “a person who is on the path towards the attainment of Buddhahood” (Skikking, 2021).

⁵²Thangka, a sacred painting on silk applique, depicts the Tibetan Dharma protectors and is generally rolled up and kept in sacred places within the Gompas.

⁵³After Cham performance, Wang is conducted by the Rinpoche in which he blesses the lay-adherents by throwing ritually-empowered water on them, along with providing them with a ritual-thread.

Cham eventually “became the property of major monasteries passed on through the centuries by hereditary or reincarnate Lamas” (Fedotov and Fedotor, 1986, p.7). The oral tradition of the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism mentions that the Cham practices were introduced within the religious traditions of the Gelug school during the time of the 5th Dalai Lama as “up until then, the ‘Yellow Hat’ lamas are said to have abstained from performing Cham since they regarded these as a typical feature of the opposing Nyingma sect or school” (Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 2007, p.113).

Eventually, as elaborated by the research participants – Lama Thupten from Tawang Gompa and Lama Karma Wangchuk from Rumtek Gompa, the Gompas in Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim that adhere to Nyingma, Kagyu and Gelug schools of Tibetan Buddhism, developed into religious institutions, whereby liturgical trainings on Cham performances, along with playing of instrumental music, vocal chanting, reading of scriptures, sculpting of Torma and creation of sand mandala are being imparted to every novice bhikkhu, under the apprenticeship of qualified Gelong (fully-ordained) masters. The Rinpoches in every Gompa select the Gelong masters for tenure of three to ten years to serve as different functionaries associated with the monastic duties like Dorje Lupon, Champon, Chamjyu, Umze, Uchung, etc. In order to comprehend the ways of the Bodhisattvas, the Rinpoches also impart religio-spiritual teachings to the novice bhikkhus through oral transmission of Prajnaparamita (perfection of wisdom), and Vinaya texts (monastic disciplines). Such liturgical training facilitates the religio-spiritual developments in the novice bhikkhus, which are required for achieving varied kinds of empowerments necessary for being eligible to perform Cham. The immersive teaching-learning process also comprises of regular monastic exams, Buddhist philosophical debates as well as spiritual retreats organized under the tutelage of Retreat masters associated with Gompas.

Although Cham Yig, the doctrinal text of Tibetan Buddhism, contains detailed description about musical notations, dance movements, and mudras pertaining to Cham, the ‘secret’ knowledge is orally transmitted from the Gelong masters to the novice bhikkhus, and appropriate execution depends primarily on the practical knowledge acquired by observing and mindfully imitating the Gelong masters. As the practice of monastic Cham comprises of complex ritualistic procedures of deity visualization and deity embodiment in order to perform ritual actions, the knowledge has been solely

confined to the inmates of Gompas, who are involved with monasticism. Therefore, the involvement of laypersons as ritual-performers has been strictly prohibited in the Gompas of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim.

However, besides the inmates of the Gompas, the knowledge of mask-making has also been inter-generationally transmitted among the adherent male laities belonging to different ethnic groups, such as Monpa (in Arunachal Pradesh), Lepcha and Bhutia (in Sikkim). Explaining about the lay teaching-learning process during in-depth interview, Pema Tashi (a lay mask-maker from Tawang) mentioned that along with observing the method of mask-making followed by their fathers and grandfathers, the male laities also learn about the colors and contours of the masks through the Thangka paintings and the old masks available in the Gompas. The research participant of in-depth interview - Lama Thupten further highlighted that the male laities are allowed to learn about the mask-making related to Cham because “the adherents believe that the ‘sacredness’ is ritually infused within the masks through the process of consecration, which is conducted by the Rinpoches, after the successful completion of the making process”.

3.2.5 Performers

The ritual-performers of Cham performances held within the Gompas of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim comprise of the inmates of the Gompas who represent various Dharma protectors and retinues of the Dharma protectors of the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon, along with an orchestra team, lead by the chief chanting master – Umze.

During the in-depth interviews, the research participants - Lama Thupten and Lama Karma Wangchuk described that every Gompa in the states of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim has tenure-based system for serving as different monastic functionaries, such as Rinpoche, Dorje Lupon, Champon, Chamjyu, Umze, etc., based on the achieved empowerments, and only such functionaries are allowed to perform distinctive roles during Cham performances. For example, the role of Padmasambhava, Mahakala, Yamantaka, Palden Lhamo, or the lead role in *Zhanag Cham* is performed either by the Rinpoche or Dorje Lupon of the Gompa. Similarly, *Phag Cham* is lead by the chief dance master – Champon, on the first day of Cham performance, and his assistant – Chamjyu, on the second day of performance.

Quoting from Cham Yig, the research participant - Lama Thupten highlighted that as Cham performance is not an ordinary theatrical performance, the body, speech and mind of the ritual-performers “must be capable of visualizing the essence of the Dharma protectors” while performing the ritual-dance, accompanied by mantras and ritual-music produced through the sacred musical instruments. He further elaborated that the speech of the ritual-performers “must roll like thunder while chanting the sacred mantras, and the mind should receive appropriate spiritual training by performing two kinds of meditation, known as *bskyed rim* and *rdzogs rim*”. Therefore, the ritual-performers eligible for performing Cham must have undergone different types of empowerments, such as flask empowerment, secret empowerment and wisdom empowerment, which signify different levels of spiritual accomplishments necessary for embodying the Dharma protectors of Tibetan Buddhist pantheon (Pearlman, 2002, p.72). However, certain Cham performances such as *Durdak Cham* and *Shawa Cham* are presented by young bhikkhus as such Cham performances consist of highly acrobatic movements, and therefore require greater flexibility in the body of the performer.

Participation of Anis (i.e. nuns) as ritual-performers has been generally prohibited in the Cham performances held within the Gompas of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, with certain Ani Gompas as exceptions, where Anis are allowed to perform the roles of Dakinis⁵⁴. Therefore, almost in all the Gompas of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, the monks and Lamas visualize themselves as Dakinis and female Dharma protectors through meditation and perform such roles during Cham. It is also imperative to mention that although in exceptional cases Anis perform *Dakini Cham*, under no circumstances the Anis are permitted to embody the female Dharma protectors of Tibetan Buddhist pantheon, such as Palden Lhamo.

While sharing his perspective on the issue during in-depth interview, Lama Thupten from Tawang Gompa (Gelug school) mentioned that Cham is a “religious expression through which an ordained Buddhist is ritually empowered to carry out ritual-actions for propitiation of Dharma protectors and well-being of all sentient beings”. Therefore, a fully ordained bhikkhu follows two hundred and fifty-three disciplines in daily life, especially in Gelug school. He further stated that according to the Vinaya text

⁵⁴In Tibetan Buddhism, Dakini (or Khandro) refers to “the most revered manifestations of the feminine principle” that embodies “both humanity and divinity in feminine form” (Jinpa, 1995).

of Buddhism, in order to become fully ordained, an Ani must follow five hundred and six disciplines, which is nearly impossible for a menstruating Ani, and generally an Ani follows only thirty-six disciplines. Therefore, it is believed that Anis could not achieve the deity visualization and deity embodiment capabilities that a bhikkhu could ritually achieve in order to perform the votive Cham performances.

Among the exceptional cases wherein the Anis partake in religio-ritualistic Cham performances, is the Khachoed Woeling Ani Gompa of East Sikkim, where Anis perform the *Dakini* Cham such as *Jimbeb* Cham and *Kadrin* Cham, on the religio-ritualistic occasions of Lhabab Duechen⁵⁵. While citing another example during in-depth interview, Lama Norsung (a Lama from Khinmey Gompa belonging to the Nyingma school) mentioned that the Anis of Chillipam Gompa⁵⁶ also perform *Jimbeb* Cham and *Kadrin* Cham, and had there been an Ani Gompa of Khinmey Gompa, there could have been provisions for Anis to participate in the *Dakini* Cham.

3.2.6 Audiences

As observed by the researcher during non-participant observation, the audiences of religio-ritualistic Cham performances include the inmates of Gompas as well as laypersons belonging to diverse ethnic groups, such as Monpa (in Arunachal Pradesh), Lepcha and Bhutia (in Sikkim), who share commonality in terms of their adherence to the Tibetan Buddhist religious tradition. Conforming to the religious norms set by the Gompa institutions, the devotee-audiences partake in various rituals associated with Cham performances, such as cleaning the Chamling, preparing food in community kitchen, offering khata to the ritual-performers, etc.

During the focus group discussions with the research participants in Tawang and East Sikkim districts, the audiences highlighted that being the adherents of Tibetan Buddhism, the ritual-viewing of Cham performances and participation in associated rituals are motivated by various social, cultural, religious, and intellectual needs. A brief

⁵⁵The Buddhist festival Lhabab Duechan commemorates “Buddha’s descent from the Trayastrimsa heaven down to earth”, and according to the Tibetan tradition, it is celebrated on the “22nd day of the 9th lunar month” (Jinpa, 1995).

⁵⁶Chillipam Gompa is located in the West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh, and belongs to the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism.

description of how such varied needs of devotee-audiences are gratified through Cham performances are mentioned below:

- exhibition of religious affiliation to the Gompa through ritualistic visits, in order to continue as a member of the Tibetan Buddhist religious community;
- enhancement of social interaction with fellow Tibetan Buddhists to strengthen social bonds and reinforce social inclusion within the religious community;
- induction of the succeeding generation into the cultural legacy, in order to ensure continuity of the Tibetan Buddhist traditions;
- articulation of religious sincerity towards the Dharma protectors of Tibetan Buddhism, and subjugation of “barche” through “thong droe”;
- cognizant of Tibetan Buddhist codes of conduct as embedded within the narratives of Cham performances and associated rituals, in order to imbibe cultural ethos;
- experience of the past through myths and legends, and indoctrination of religious lessons on resilience and compassion to navigate life as a devout Tibetan Buddhist;
- celebration of Tibetan Buddhist identity through communal remembrance of the chequered history of the different schools of Tibetan Buddhism, and pay obeisance to the Tibetan Buddhist apostles who had proliferated the religious tradition;
- engagement through aesthetic stimulation, in which the masks of the Dharma protectors and the retinues of Dharma protectors play significant roles.

3.2.7 Language

Cham performances in general do not have the usage of language other than chanting of mantras in Tibetan language, and the myths and legends are narrated during the performances through elaborative dance steps, expressive masks, and symbolic ancillary rituals. However, in certain episodes of Cham performances, such as *Bardo Cham* of Enchey Gompa in Sikkim, and *Dopje Apa and Mlengchung Punnai Cham* of Tawang Gompa in Arunachal Pradesh, there are usage of language through dialogues in Sikkimese or Lepcha language and Monpa language respectively.

In Bardo Cham, as described by the research participant of in-depth interview - Lama Pema Wangyal (a Lama from Enchey Gompa), there is limited usage of dialogues while the Gings (messengers of Yama – the deity of Death) describe to Yama about the vicious or virtuous actions undertaken by the deceased, so that the deceased could

receive re-birth in appropriate realm in the next life. In the Cham performance featuring Dopje Apa and his two sons Mlengchung Punnai, as elaborated by the research participant Lama Thupten, there are usage of songs and dialogues in Monpa language to apprise the lay-adherents of the brief socio-cultural and religious history of the Monyul region including, how in the past the inhabitants lived, how the administration functioned, how Buddhism flourished in the region, etc.

3.2.8 Narratives

As comprehended by the researcher through observing the Cham performances, and corroborating from the in-depth interviews of research participants, it could be argued that the narratives of Cham performances weave messages pertaining to Tibetan Buddhist religious tradition, which encompass religious history, religio-cultural values, propitiation of Dharma protectors, and ritual-subjugation of malevolent spirits.

Ritual-enactment of Cham performances such as, *Ngag Cham* and *Zhanag Cham* apprise the devotee-audiences of the challenges and proliferation of Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet. Establishing the root of Tibetan Buddhism in India, the *Ngag Cham* highlights the contribution of the Indian Buddhist Mahasiddha – Atisha in inviting adepts from India to Tibet as Tantric tutors, which resulted in the proliferation of Vajrayana form of Buddhism in Tibet. The *Zhanag Cham* recounts the story of Lhalung Pelkyi Dorji skillfully using bow and arrow to assassinate Lang Darma, who, during his reign in Tibet around 841 CE to 846 CE, had persecuted Buddhist adherents and destroyed Gompas.

The stories narrated through *Ja Cham*, *Bardo Cham*, *Lengan Cham* and *Khindak Palkyi Cham* reflect the values and beliefs embedded in Tibetan Buddhism such as, compassion, harmony, after-life journey of the consciousness, Karma, etc. While *Ja Cham* depicts the consequences of violence against animals, *Bardo Cham* portrays the inevitable punishments awaiting in the after-life journey of the deceased for neglecting the religious duties towards Buddhism. Similarly, *Lengan* and *Khindak Palkyi Cham* describes that since birth, Langi Kepe Deyu (observer of vice) and Langi Kepe Lah (observer of virtue) maintain records of human deeds. Consequently, after death, Lengan who is characterized as the ‘sinner’ for being involved in harming animals, irreligious

practices, and disturbing meditating bhikkhus, receives punishment in the form of rebirth in the Samsara. On the other hand, the virtuous Khindak Palkyi attains Buddhahood⁵⁷.

The narratives conveyed through *Dung Cham* and *Gelong Cham* attunes the devotee-audiences to the Tibetan Buddhist Tantric tradition of considering astrology as a tool to comprehend human body and mind. In *Dung Cham*, twelve ritual-performers, each adorned with mask representing the twelve zodiac signs⁵⁸, depicts how the signs serve as protector deities while safeguarding all sentient beings from experienced or potential miseries. Similarly, *Gelong Cham* elucidates how human lives revolve within the limitations of the twelve zodiac signs which are also symbolic wheels of life.

The devotee-audiences are also being apprised of the Dharma protectors of Tibetan Buddhist pantheon through Cham performances such as *Palden Lhamo Cham*, *Guru Tsen Gye Cham*, etc. The *Palden Lhamo Cham* held mainly in the Gompas of Gelug school, as Palden Lhamo is one of the three Dharma protectors of Gelug school, attunes the devotee-audiences with the Dharma protector whose twelve guards seek blessings from Her during the Cham, in order to bring peace and harmony in the Samsara. On the other hand, *Guru Tsen Gye Cham* held in the Gompas of Nyingma and Kagyu school attune the devotee-audiences to the varied contributions of Padmasambhava through his eight manifestations. The different manifestations of Padmasambhava comprise of Guru Tsokye Dorje (birth as an eight-year-old child), Guru Shakye Senge (his ordination), Guru Loden Choksey (his mastery in Buddhist teachings), Guru Padmasambhava (him establishing Buddhism in Tibet), Guru Senge Dradok (him subjugating anti-Buddhists), Guru Nima Ozer (him subjugating evil spirits), Guru Pema Gyalpo (his kingship in Tibet), and Guru Dorje Drolo (him concealing Terma and binding malevolent spirits under an oath).

The Cham performances such as *Grai Cham*, *Chok Cham*, *Shawa Cham* and *Durdak Cham* depict the methods of ritual-subjugation of malevolent emanations by the ritual-experts from the Gompas. In *Grai Cham*, Shenji Dowo – the assistant of the

⁵⁷Buddhahood is the state of an “awakened being, who, having found the path of cessation of suffering (which is created by attachment to desires and distorted perception and thinking) is in the state of no more learning” (Keown and Prebish, 2013).

⁵⁸In Tibetan astrology, the twelve zodiac signs comprise of mouse (Jewa), ox (Lang), tiger (Tak), rabbit (Yoe), dragon (Druk), snake (Drue), horse (Ta), sheep (Lu), monkey (Tray), bird (Jaa), dog (Khey), and pig (Pha).

protector deity Dorji Jigje ritually kill the evil spirits who harm sentient beings. In *Chok Cham*, the emperor of Guhaya samajh's chief deity – Gunapati and His twelve assistants uproot the existing evil spirits and safeguard worldly creatures from negative Karma. In *Durdak Cham*, four ritual-performers donning skeleton masks perform acrobatic dances in four cardinal directions with an attempt to destroy the existence of evil spirits. In *Shawa Cham*, the ritual-performer donning the mask of stag-headed messenger of Yama, symbolically dismember a linga⁵⁹ by ritually summoning all evil emanations into it.

3.2.9 Masks

a. Importance of masks in Cham performances

Highlighting about the importance of masks in Cham performances, the research participant of in-depth interview - Lama Karma Wangchuk from Rumtek Gompa elaborated that in Tibetan Buddhism, the Dharma protectors are believed to be aspects of “daknang” (pure vision) whose “physical appearances could only be visualized by the highly learned Rinpoches, who have visionary powers”. Therefore, laypersons who neither have meditative visions nor ritual-expertise, need symbolic masks to identify the represented Dharma protectors, and comprehend the religious messages being conveyed through the performances. He further mentioned that masks essentialize the eccentricities inherent in the physical forms of the pantheon of Dharma protectors and the retinues of Dharma protectors of Tibetan Buddhism. For example, pendulant ears, bull nose, rolled up tongue bitten between teeth, remnants of flesh and blood slobbering around mouth, downward curved flaming eyebrows, skull-diadems on head, etc., could only be manifested through masks, as make-up would fail to reveal such iconographic features.

Apart from serving the theatrical purpose of iconic representation of the Dharma protectors, the masks also have ritual significance for the Lamas participating in Cham performances. The Tibetan Buddhist community reveres the Cham masks as the embodiments of the represented Dharma protectors that have the potential to instill fear in malevolent emanations, and provide tranquility to the adherents seeking enlightenment through prayers and meditation. The research participant - Lama Thupten from Tawang Gompa further emphasized that the consecrated masks serve as conduits through which the meditating ritual-performers invoke the divine power of the represented peaceful and

⁵⁹In Tibetan Buddhist rituals, linga refers to the effigy (made up of barley flour) within which the ritual-performers ritually summon evil emanations and ritually sacrifice it, in order to annihilate negative forces.

fierce Dharma protectors, and channelize the energy of the Dharma protectors into their bodies by ritually donning the masks during Cham performances. Therefore, the masks facilitate in the transformative process of “becoming” the represented Dharma protectors, which in turn ritually empower the performer-Lamas to conduct ritual actions, such as enrichment of all sentient beings through destruction of malevolent emanations.



Fig.3.20: After ritual-summoning of malevolent emanations into the linga (red-colored effigy), the performer-Lamas, embodying Mahakala (left) and Shawa (right), perform ritual-sacrifice of evil in *Mahakala Gutor Cham* at Rumtek Gompa.

Source: Researcher

b. Rituals associated with mask-making process

While crafting the masks for Cham performances, rituals are observed by the mask-makers depending upon the types of the characters to be crafted, i.e. the Dharma protectors or the retinues of Dharma protectors. The mask-makers need not observe any ritual while crafting the masks which represent the retinues of Dharma protectors, such as snowlion, tiger, ox, raven, bull, etc. However, the mask-makers maintain dietary modifications, such as abstaining from meat and alcohol, while crafting the masks of the Dharma protectors, such as Palden Lhamo, Mahakala, Yamantaka, etc.

Reiterating such religious beliefs, the research participant of in-depth interview - Sonam Wangyal (a lay mask-maker from East Sikkim) further elaborated that upon receiving instructions from the Lamas of Enchey Gompa or Rumtek Gompa to craft the masks of Dharma protectors, he tries to “maintain purity in body, speech, and mind, as according to Tibetan Buddhism, any negative action or thought in the mask-maker might infuriate the protector deity whose mask is to be crafted”. Another research participant from Arunachal Pradesh, Lobsang Tashi – a teacher in the mask-making section in

Government Craft Centre of Tawang, highlighted that as soon as he receives an order from Tawang Gompa to craft the mask of Palden Lhamo or Yamantaka, he starts the crafting process after finding a suitable wood, as “it is believed that any unnecessary delay in the making process will infuriate the Dharma protector whose mask is to be crafted, and consequently the mask-maker might also get nightmares”. He also mentioned that during night, it is also imperative to lit butter lamps and incense sticks before the unfinished mask, so that negative spirits do not possess the mask, and cause hindrance in the making process.

c. Iconography and Symbolism of Cham masks

The iconography of Cham masks, which comprises of colors and contours, are based on the description mentioned in various Tibetan Buddhist scriptures, as well as the visionary dreams experienced by ritually empowered Rinpoches.

Iconographic descriptions of some of the important Cham masks, as explained to the researcher by the Lamas of Tawang Gompa, Khinmey Gompa, Enchey Gompa and Rumtek Gompa during in-depth interviews, are mentioned below:

Citipati, the Lords of the Cemetery, are male and female protector deities of the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon who wear white-colored skull mask symbolizing the impermanence of life. The ovoid eyes, placed above concave nose, glean in a menacing manner, and are positioned unnaturally close to each other. The mouths are parted in a large grin, displaying two rows of large teeth, incised in red-painted gums.



Fig 3.21: Ritual-performers donning Citipati masks during *Durdak* Cham; Source: Researcher

Mount Kangchendzonga, the third highest peak in the world, is revered by the Sikkimese and Tibetans as one of the most sacred mountains because it is believed that the guardian deity of Sikkim – Dzonga resides in the mountain. The mask representing the guardian deity Dzonga is dark-red in color with bulging eyes, rolled up tongue, and sharp fangs in gaping mouth, which signify the wrathful nature of Dzonga, being the protector or guardian deity.



Fig.3.22: Ritual-performer donning Dzonga mask during Pang Lhabsol; Source: Internet



Fig.3.23:Ritual-performer donning Mahakala mask; Source: Researcher

Mahakala, the wrathful Dharma protector of the Nyingma and Kagyu schools, is depicted as dark blue or black color in complexion with five-skull crown. In Tibetan Buddhism, the five-skull crown symbolizes the transmutation of the five mental afflictions into wisdom-awareness⁶⁰. The wrathful nature of Mahakala is depicted through bulging eyes, gaping mouth which bares sharp fangs, and rolled up tongue.

⁶⁰ Regarding the five-skull crown in the masks of the wrathful Dharma protectors, Lama Thupten from Tawang Gompa mentioned that during Cham, upon confrontation with negative afflictions, the anger of the Dharma protectors subjugate such afflictions, and the skulls transform those into positive emotions, such as desire becomes wisdom of contentment, wrath transforms to compassion, greed becomes wisdom of reality, attachment becomes wisdom of discernment, and pride is humbled through wisdom of equality.

In Tibetan Buddhist religious tradition, the retinues of the Dharma protectors consist of a varied range of animal protector deities with distinctive iconographic features, such as a white yak as if from its nostrils a snow-storm is blowing, a golden stag with ten-forked antlers, a golden-colored hind with coral-red hair, a white lioness with turquoise locks, a tiger with golden hair, a blue-black bull with curved horns, a turquoise-colored dragon, a spotted leopard, etc.



Fig.3.24: Masks of the retinues of the Dharma protectors; Source: Researcher

Palden Lhamo, the only female Dharma protector of the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism, is dark blue or blue-black in composition. Her yellowish brown hair rising upwards symbolizes the blazing fire of perfect wisdom that incinerates delusions, which are considered as the underlying causes of miseries experienced by sentient beings. Therefore, She wears five-skull crown with an umbrella of peacock-feathers. She has three red globular eyes with angrily wrinkled forehead to depict wrathful nature. Her mouth gapes widely open, baring four sharp teeth with a human corpse lying inside.



Fig.3.25: Ritual-performer donning Palden Lhamo mask;
Source: Researcher

Yamantaka, the wrathful aspect of the Bodhisattva - Manjusri is depicted as a dark-blue colored buffalo or bull-headed Dharma protector in Tibetan Buddhism. Being a Dharma protector, Yamantaka also has five-skull crown and wrathful nature which terrifies the evil emanations.



Fig.3.26: A Yamantaka mask from 10th century in Tawang Gompa;
Source: Researcher

d. Rituals associated with donning of masks during Cham performances

Describing about the various rituals associated with donning of masks during Cham performances, the research participants of in-depth interviews such as Lama Thupten (Tawang Gompa), Lama Karma Wangchuk (Rumtek Gompa), Lama Pema Wangyal (Enchey Gompa) and Lama Norsung (Khinmey Gompa) mentioned that rituals are observed depending upon the characters being represented through the masks, i.e. masks of the revered Dharma protectors or masks of the retinues of Dharma protectors. While the rituals for the masks representing retinues encompass consecration by the Rinpoche, the masks representing the Dharma protectors such as, Mahakala, Yamantaka and Palden Lhamo require extensive ritualistic practices along with ritual-awakening through consecration. At least a week prior to the performance, the performer-Lamas eligible for donning the masks of Mahakala, Yamantaka and Palden Lhamo, undertake meditative practices called deity visualization, along with ritual-chanting of specific mantras for the represented Dharma protectors. The process of deity visualization and mantra chanting allows the performer-Lamas to imbibe the attributes of the depicted Dharma protectors, ensuring that the consecrated masks will serve as conduits for deity embodiment during the Cham performances.

e. Storage of Cham masks

The adherents of Tibetan Buddhism believe that the masks representing various Dharma protectors possess cultic life of their own, even without the Cham performances; therefore, the process of storage also comprises of elaborative religious norms and distinctive rituals. Highlighting on such ritualized procedures, the research participant from Tawang Gompa – Lama Thupten mentioned that after the completion of Cham performances, the masks are stored inside a wooden box, and kept in the most sacred oratory within the Gompa, known as Gonkhang. Following the Tibetan Tsurphu calendar, on the 10th day of the 7th month, the masks are annually taken out so as to put in the sun, and are also painted or polished, if required. Any senior Lama from the Gompa conducts the auspicious Serkym rituals while putting the masks back into the wooden box. If a Cham mask lasts longer than fifty years, it is considered as extremely powerful, and the adherents of Tibetan Buddhism embark on pilgrimages to the Gompa in order to pay homage to the revered mask.

3.2.10 Costumes and Ornaments

According to the scholar Ellen Pearlman (2002), the ritual-costumes of Cham performances combine elements from the medieval Indian monastic pantomime costumes and Tibetan-style of clothing (p.70). The character-specific appliquéd brocade and silk costumes of Cham performances contain religious meanings and ritual significance, thereby forming an integral part of the preparation of the ritual-performers, presentation of Cham performances, and reception of the performances by devotee-audiences. The religious significance of the diverse colors used in the costumes varies from Gompa to Gompa, depending upon the school; however, the shared religious connotations embedded in the basic colors of the brocade remain consistent across all Gompas. For example, red signifies fire and power, white signifies water and peace, yellow signifies earth and growth, green signifies air and limit, blue signifies space and limitless, and black signifies wrath (Pearlman, 2002, p.69). The ritual-performers are also adorned with five bone ornaments, including earrings, necklace, bracelets, anklets and apron that were traditionally carved from human bones (Pearlman, 2002, p.73).

Detailed descriptions of the ritual-costumes and ornaments of different characters in the Cham performances, as mentioned to the researcher by the Lamas of Tawang Gompa, Khinmey Gompa, Rumtek Gompa and Enchey Gompa, are mentioned below:

The costumes of the *Zhanag* Cham dancers consist of a black-colored phod ka (a long-sleeved silk robe reaching the ankles), dorji-gong (a brocade poncho-shaped shoulder cover), Cham Lham (high leather boots), and a black-colored apron decorated with three-eyed wrathful Dharma protectors and five-colored tassels at the bottom. The circular base zhanag (black hat) is considered as one of the most integral costumes of the *Zhanag* dancers. The central portion, known as copula, is adorned with sun disks, crescent moon, skull heads, Vajra, peacock feathers, mirror, etc. The dancers also wield ritual-implements like phurba (ritual-dagger) and yabdar (black scarf) in the right hand, and bandha (skull cups) in the left.



Fig.3.27: Costume of *Zhanag* Cham dancer;
Source: Researcher



Fig.3.28: Costumes of *Durdak* Cham dancers in Tawang Gompa (left) and Rumtek Gompa (right)
Source: Researcher

The costumes of *Durdak* Cham dancers consist of a white or red colored body-fit cotton jacket and trousers adorned with red or white stripes representing shapes of bones, dorji-gong, white-colored lagshup (cotton gloves with long finger nails), white-colored kangshup (cotton shoe with extended toe nails), kumbum (boot coverings), trab (sash) forming a cross over the bodies, skeleton mask with one or three or five skull diadems, and rainbow-colored fans positioned around the ears.

The costumes of the *Dakini* Cham dancers consist of a brocade gown with five colors – white, yellow, red, green and blue, and either a Lhamo mask or a headdress adorned with coral, fire-gilt silver finial and a five transcendent Buddha crown featuring Ratnasambhava, Amitabha, Vairochana, Amogasiddhi, and Akshobhya. The ritual-dancers also wear various ornaments that hold ritual significance, such as the necklace is believed to arouse generosity, the armlets and bracelets encourage ethics, and the earrings instill patience. The Dakinis also wield ritual-implements such as damaru in the right hand to represent compassion, and drilbu in the left hand to signify emptiness.



Fig.3.29: Costume of *Dakini* Cham dancer;
Source: Researcher

The costumes of the ritual-performer embodying the Dharma protector – Mahakala consist of a dark blue-colored phod ka, dorji-gong, Cham Lham, a black-colored apron adorned with three-eyed wrathful Dharma protector and five-colored tassels at the bottom, a tiger-skin loincloth, and the Mahakala mask. The ritual-performer also adorns skull necklace as ornament, which represents conquering of ego and ignorance. The performer wields ritual-implements such as skull cup and curved knife or crescent shaped chopper. It is believed by the adherents of Tibetan Buddhism that the curved knife cuts through the life veins of the malevolent emanations.



Fig.3.30: Costumes of Mahakala,
Source: Researcher



Fig.3.31: Costume of Palden Lhamo;
Source: Researcher

The costumes of the ritual-performer embodying the Dharma protector - Palden Lhamo consist either dark-brown or five-colored brocade phod ka, dorji gong, Cham Lham, a five-colored apron worn over the phod ka, and the Palden Lhamo mask. The performer is adorned with the Tibetan Buddhist traditional five bone ornaments, comprising of earrings, necklace, bracelets, anklets and apron. The white colored bone apron looks like a net with wide interlinked mesh-strings of round beads connected by large square plates. The ritual-performer often wields ritual-implements such as sword in the right hand and skull cup in the left hand.

3.2.11 Musical Instruments and Songs

During Cham performances varied modes of instrumental music and vocal chanting correspond to the four ritual actions performed by the ritual-performers, such as pacifying the fierce protective deities, magnetizing the peaceful deities, destroying the malevolent spirits, and enriching all sentient beings by directing them towards the attainment of Enlightenment. These four ritual actions find expressions within the spectrum of Nava Rasas, and are further classified into three groups representing body, speech, and mind of the ritual-performers. While strong, heroic, and severe correspond to

body; wrathful, energetic, and awe-inspiring falls under speech; compassionate, dignified, and serene come under mind (Pearlman, 2002; Beer, 2004).

During the in-depth interview, the research participant – Lama Thupten elaborated that apart from the above-mentioned ritual function of music in Cham performances, the ‘Cham Yig also mentions that the ritual-music created by the beats of drums and cymbals also guide the masked performers to dance in unison. Some of the beats comprising different numbers of strokes, as mentioned by Lama Thupten, are - *sbir*, *sbram*, *chigbrdeg* (single stroke), *nyisbrdung* (double strokes), *gsumbrdung* (triple strokes), *bzhibrdeg* (quadruple strokes), *lngabrdung* (five strokes), *drngtshan* (six strokes), *dgubrdung* (nine strokes).

Elaborating on the various musical instruments played by the orchestra during Cham performances and the communicative roles of such instruments, the research participants of in-depth interviews – Lama Thupten, Lama Karma Wangchuk and Lama Pema Wangyal mentioned about the followings:

- i) *Dung-kar* – the conch shell announces the call to any ritual activity, for example, when dressed in the costumes of *Zhanag* Cham, the Dorje Lupon of the Gompa consecrate the Torma which is usually placed on a shrine in the Chamling.
- ii) *Dungchen* or *rag-dung* – the ten to twelve foot long brass trumpet played in pairs, is one of the most sacred musical instruments whose vibrations is believed to help in assembling the Dharma protectors within the performance space before the commencement of Cham performance.
- iii) *Kangling* or *Kang-dung* – the trumpet made originally from human and animal thighbone, serves as a symbol of mortality of life. The vibration of *Kangling* is believed to drive away the evil emanations.
- iv) *Gyaling* – the double-reed oboe made from a hardwood bore is also played in pairs and used to announce the arrival of any Dharma protector like Mahakala or Palden Lhamo, or unfold any important event like burning of Torma.
- v) *Cho nga* or *laknga* – the hand drum supported on a wooden pedestal is struck with a curved wooden sickle-shaped striker. Its sound is believed to awaken the protective deities from their sleep of ignorance, and is therefore instrumental in summoning them on the realm of earth.

- vi) Damaru – the small hand drum played by rotation of the right wrist is constructed originally by joining two inverted human skull cups, and covering each with taunt yak skin. The adherents believe it to be a favored ritual implement of the Dakinis like Palden Lhamo.

The adherents of Tibetan Buddhism believe that during Cham while the beating of drums summons the Dharma protectors to assemble within the mandala, the playing of cymbals request them to remain on the realm of earth, and bless all sentient beings.

Mainly there are three types cymbals being played during Cham performances, namely –

- i) Dril-bu – hand-bell
- ii) Rolmo – the larger high-domed cymbals are held horizontally, and are used in the rituals of fierce deities like Mahakala Cham, Yamantaka Cham, etc.
- iii) Silnyen – the smaller pair of flat cymbals with a low central boss are held vertically, and are used in the rituals of peaceful deities.

3.2.12 Dances

During Cham performances, the ritual-dances performed by the ritual-performers serve multilayered functions. During the in-depth interview, the research participant - Lama Thupten from Tawang Gompa mentioned that “at exoteric level, the dances convey the narratives to the devotee-audiences, while at the esoteric level, the dance act as a form of meditation which facilitates deity-embodiment by the ritual-performers”. The ritual-dances adhere to the instructions mentioned in the Cham Yig, and are learnt by the novice bhikkhus under the tutelage of the chief dance master – Champon.

Quoting from the Cham Yig, the research participant of in-depth interview - Lama Karma Wangchuk from Rumtek Gompa emphasized about the extensive foot, hand, and body movements in Cham, along with specified steps such as half-thunderbolt, wide lotus, leaping lotus, move walk, etc. He further highlighted that although the “devotee-audiences could not grasp the religious significance of each meditative steps, they could identify the difference in steps, and understand the signals being communicated”. For example, the acrobatic dance of the *Durdaag* Cham symbolizes the ritual-summoning of evil emanations within the linga, and the fast-paced dance in *Shawa* Cham signals the climax wherein the summoned malevolence is to be annihilated. Similarly, the slow-paced Palden Lhamo dance signifies the slow process of invoking the

Dharma protector and channelizing the energy of the Dharma protector into the body of the ritual-performer so as to conduct ritual actions.

3.2.13 Cham Tradition in Transition

a. National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage and new performative contexts of Cham performances

Inscription of monastic Cham performance of Sikkim as the Performing Arts of Sikkim in the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, broadened the performative context of Cham performances. Despite sharing the same religious tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, the monastic Cham performances held in the Gompas of Arunachal Pradesh have not yet been enlisted in the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage; nonetheless, during the in-depth interviews, the inmates of the Gompas reported instances of new performative contexts of Cham, other than ritual context. The Gompa-centric, liturgical calendar regulated votive Cham performances that are traditionally conducted to carry out ritual-actions by ritually empowered inmates of the Gompas, also evolved into a part of the State Government and Central Government of India sponsored cultural programs and tourist-centric programs organized to promote the intangible cultural heritage of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim. Examples of Cham performances exclusively organized in such new performative contexts include, Cham held at the Buddha Festival of Tawang (from 2004 to 2011); Pang Lhabsol of Sikkim held during the Republic Day Parade in New Delhi (in 2019); Cham held at Tawang Gompa of Arunachal Pradesh for dignitaries like Richard Rahul Verma⁶¹ (in 2016), Kenneth Ian Juster⁶² (in 2019), Kapil Sharma⁶³ (in 2019), etc., who visited Tawang on the occasion of Arunachal Pradesh Tourism Department sponsored Tawang Festival.

b. Re-institutionalization of mask-making in Government institutes

In the states of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, while the knowledge transmission process pertaining to Cham still remains confined within the Gompas, the course of teaching and learning of mask-making has moved beyond Gompas and lay-families, and

⁶¹Richard Rahul Verma, an American Diplomat, had served as the Ambassador of the United States of America to the Republic of India from the year 2015 to 2017.

⁶²Kenneth Ian Juster, an American Diplomat, had served as the Ambassador of the United States of America to the Republic of India from the year 2017 to 2021.

⁶³Kapil Sharma is a popular stand-up comedian from India who hosts television talk shows.

has been re-instituted as two-year vocational course administered by the Governments of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim. During the in-depth interview, the research participant - Lobsang Tashi (a teacher at the mask-making section in the Government Craft Centre of Tawang) highlighted that in order to encourage laypersons to learn traditional crafts, including mask-making, the Government had established the Craft Centre in late 1980s, particularly after Arunachal Pradesh attained statehood. The Government also provides financial support to every student enrolled in the mask-making section through a stipend of rupees two-thousand per month. He further mentioned that the Craft Center is directed to “encourage lay-women to join the mask-making course, which traditionally has been exclusively learnt by the Tibetan Buddhist men”. While the Craft Centre has so far followed the traditional hands-on-training on mask-making, there are also instructions to improve the pedagogical framework by preparing study materials on the techniques of mask-making, essential tools required in the mask-making process, detailed iconographic descriptions of the Dharma protectors of Tibetan Buddhist pantheon whose masks are traditionally crafted, etc.

Another research participant of in-depth interview, Duduk Bhutia (a teacher at the mask-making section of the Government Institute of Cottage Industries - GICI in East Sikkim) highlighted about the negotiation between Governmental involvement and the influence of the chief custodian members from the Gompas in the teaching and learning of mask-making. He mentioned that although it is a vocational course managed by the Government of Sikkim, the course is open exclusively for the men belonging to the Lepcha and Bhutia ethnic groups. He further explained that even within the formalized pedagogy of the institution, the learners are guided to engage in meditation on the Dharma protectors before crafting the masks. Such practices stem from the Tibetan Buddhist belief system that if any mask-maker craft masks without proper meditation, the mask might become disproportionate in shape, which will infuriate the Dharma protector associated with the mask, and the mask-maker might also face divine punishment in the form of bearing deformed offsprings.

c. Introduction of cultural outsiders as audiences of Cham performances

Despite resistance from the inmates of the Gompas in Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, the persistent efforts of the State Government and Central Government of India to include Cham performances in cultural programs as well as tourist-centric programs

organized for dignitaries has introduced the ritualistic performative tradition to national and international audiences, who are uninitiated into the Tibetan Buddhist religious tradition. Differentiating the uninitiated audiences from the devotee-audiences of the religio-ritualistic Cham performances, the research participant Lama Thupten from Tawang Gompa explained during in-depth interview that the uninitiated audiences lack the devotional fervor present in the adherents of Tibetan Buddhism, therefore, Cham “appeals to them dominantly as an entertaining performing art form that showcases the ‘exotic’ Tibetan Buddhist culture”.

Adding to the perspective of Lama Thupten, another research participant - Lama Karma Wangchuk from Rumtek Gompa highlighted that the cultural differences in the uninitiated non-adherents complicate the decoding process of the Cham performances, making it “extremely challenging for them to revere the ritual-performers as embodiments of the Dharma protectors of Tibetan Buddhist pantheon”, and comprehend the underlying worldview narrated through the myths and legends, thereby limiting their understanding to basic concepts, such as impermanence of human existence, warding off evil spirits, etc. or misguiding them to interpret the fierce looking Dharma protectors of Tibetan Buddhist pantheon as “devils dancing on earth”.

d. Cham masks as souvenirs for tourists

In the states of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, along with endeavors undertaken to include Cham performances in commercial programs, the associated mask tradition is also witnessing commercialization, as the masks are being sold to tourists as decorative artifacts. Highlighting on the role of the Directorate of Handicraft and Handloom (DHH) in proliferating the commercialization of Cham masks of Sikkim, the research participant of in-depth interview - Duduk Bhutia mentioned that through DHH, the Government of Sikkim envisioned to encourage the youth of Sikkim to develop skills in traditional arts and crafts, in order to preserve the material culture, and also tap the employment and income generating potential of the cultural heritage of Sikkim. Therefore, in the mask-making section of DHH, smaller-sized masks associated with Cham performances are being crafted by the enrolled students, which are sold as souvenirs in the DHH Emporium. Apart from the DHH Emporium, Cham masks are now-a-days also being sold in different curio shops located in M.G.Marg of Gangtok which sell traditional

handicrafts. The masks being sold in such curio shops are generally sourced from DHH, and lay mask-makers residing in different villages around the East Sikkim district.

Similarly, in the state of Arunachal Pradesh, the research participant Lobsang Tashi mentioned about the role of the Government Craft Centre in commercializing Cham masks as decorative artifacts, and generating revenue. He elaborated that the Tawang Emporium run by the Government of Arunachal Pradesh, located adjacent to the Government Craft Centre, has become an important part of tourist itinerary, where Cham masks are being sold as souvenirs, along with other traditional handicrafts of Arunachal Pradesh. Such endeavors undertaken by the Government of Arunachal Pradesh also encouraged the shop-owners of the curio shops situated in the Old Market and Nehru Market of Tawang to sell masks representing different Dharma protectors as souvenirs for tourists. The shop-owners generally source the decorative masks from different villages around the Tawang district of Arunachal Pradesh.

Although commercialization of masks as decorative artifacts has situated the lived tradition in the global market, the mask-makers of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim are circumventing ways to preserve the distinctiveness of the age-old tradition by adhering to the traditional visual conventions of the Cham masks. During the in-depth interview, the research participant – Lobsang Tashi highlighted that being separated from the performative tradition, the masks could neither depict the myths and legends, nor serve as conduits for divine powers; however, whoever buys the decorative masks representing Mahakala, Palden Lhamo or Kangchendzonga could easily comprehend that the artifacts are embedded in the Tibetan Buddhist religious tradition, and represent various Dharma protectors of the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon. Moreover, the adherents of Tibetan Buddhism believe that even if uninitiated buyer of decorative Cham masks get too attached to the masks, then he or she might take birth as a Buddhist in the next life.

e. Evolving performative contexts and shortening of Cham repertoire

The Cham performances held in cultural and tourist centric programs are considered by the chief custodian members from the Gompas as mere “performing art”, which do not have religious implications. Consequently, the rituals associated with Cham performances such as creation of sand mandala, offering of Khata to ritual-performers, burning of Torma, receiving of Wang from the Rinpoche, etc. are excluded from such

performances. The repertoire of Cham performances, comprising of ritual-chanting of mantras and ritual-dances also shrink in such newer performative contexts. Citing example, the research participant Lama Thupten elaborated that in the votive Cham performances held on the religio-ritualistic occasions, the mantras and dances progress in pre-defined chronology as each episode serve ritual significance of invoking and embodying the Dharma protectors by the ritual-performers to carry out ritual actions. However, in the non ritual context, different episodes are randomly chosen and condensed into a brief twenty or thirty minutes program in order to showcase the “exotic” aspects of Tibetan Buddhist religious tradition.

f. Introduction of new media to promote Cham performances

During the in-depth interview, the research participant - Lama Sonam Rinchen from Rumtek Gompa, who is also in-charge of documenting monastic rituals, mentioned that in order to showcase the richness of the Tibetan Buddhist religious tradition to the regional, national as well as international audiences, the bhikkhus across Gompas have created accounts in social media platforms, such as YouTube, WhatsApp and Facebook. With the help of such digital platforms, videos and photographs of religio-ritualistic activities including Cham performances are being shared, which “foster understanding about the religious tradition among the cultural outsiders, as well as facilitate connection with the transnational Tibetan Buddhist religious community, who are dedicated towards preserving the Tibetan culture”.

The major findings of the present study constitute the ritual purpose of Bhaona and Cham masked performances, the institutionalized knowledge transmission process pertaining to Bhaona and Cham, the ritual-expertise of the inmates of the Sattras and Gompas, the social norms circumventing the right to participate in the votive masked performances, the socio-cultural-religious needs of the devotee-audiences fulfilled through the votive masked performances, the roles of masks in articulating exemplary narratives and facilitating deity embodiment, as well as the alterations in the performative intent, teaching-learning process, and performers-audiences relationships, as a result of the evolution in the performative contexts of the Bhaona and Cham masked performances. In the following chapter, the researcher analyzes the major findings of the Bhaona and Cham masked performances based on the thematic analysis of the responses obtained from the research participants during the ethnographic explorations.