

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **Bhaona and Cham Masked Performances: Tradition-Transition Continuum**

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Highlighting on the continued relevance of Bhaona and Cham masked performances within the neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist societies, the research participants of the present study elaborated about the performative intent, performance repertoire, knowledge transmission process, performer-audience relationship, importance of masks, etc. Outlining the transitions observed in the religio-ritualistic Bhaona and Cham masked performances, the research participants also elaborated about newer performative contexts in which the votive performances are being staged, the altered functionalities of masks in such contexts as communicative medium, and the implications of such changes within the neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist societies. The lived experiences and perspectives thus shared by the research participants regarding the tradition – transition continuum is analyzed in the present chapter in order to gain nuanced understanding of the socio-cultural matrix(es) in which the Bhaona and Cham performances are traditionally embedded, and evolving in the globalized context.

### **4.1 Social Significance of Bhaona and Cham Masked Performances**

In this section, with the help of four themes such as – 1) institutionalization of masked performances and authority of ritual-experts, 2) embodied masked performances and social structure, 3) religious socialization through masked performances, and 4) social integration through masked performances, the researcher analyzes the social significance of the Bhaona and Cham masked performances within the neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist societies.

#### **4.1.1 Institutionalization of Masked Performances and Authority of Ritual-experts**

In the Weberian sense (1947), the newly formed religious denominations namely, neo-Vaishnavism and Tibetan Buddhism perceived proliferation under the advocacy of “charismatic” apostles – Sankaradeva and Padmasambhava, and proceeded towards relative “routinization” within the “institutional matrix” of the Sattras and Gompas respectively, which serve as repository of religious teachings and religio-cultural history. In order to function within the “institutionalized expectation”, as proposed by the sociologist Talcott Parsons (1951), well-defined statuses emerged in the religious

institutions of Sattras (like Sattradhikar, Dekha Sattradhikar, Bhakat, etc.) and Gompas (like Rinpoche, Khenpo, Bhikkhu, etc.), along with obligatory monastic duties for the inmates of such religious institutions. The functionaries of the Sattras and Gompas assumed authoritative roles in the religious sphere through their associations with different monastic positions, and eventually became the chief custodian members shouldering the shared responsibilities of propagating the doctrinal teachings formulated by the “charismatic” apostles as well as defending the liturgical practices from criticism. The cultural anthropologist Victor Turner (1974) expounds such consolidation of religious history and teachings within the institutions as formation of a “structure in the Levi-Straussian sense” wherein “binary oppositions are set up and stressed between crucial events, individuals, groups, types of conduct, period of time, and so on” (p.249).

Bhaona and Cham masked performances were conceived by Sankaradeva and Padmasambhava as symbolic medium to address multifaceted crisis experienced during the proliferation of neo-Vaishnavism and Tibetan Buddhism respectively. However, with the formation of Sattras and Gompas as religious institutions, the masked performances have been incorporated into the repertoire of institutional religiosity practiced solely by the inmates of the Sattras and Gompas adhering to liturgical calendar, in order to propitiate the pantheon of deities, accrue ritual-piety, and apprise laypersons of the religious ethos and worldviews; therefore in Turnerian (1974) sense, the idiosyncratic actions and religious messages of Sankaradeva and Padmasambhava achieved “crystallization” in the “activities of cyclical and repetitive rituals” (p.249) of masked performances held within the precincts of Sattras and Gompa institutions. The association of the masked performances with the identity of the religious institutions consequently brought in newer references for the Bhaona and Cham performances, such as Sattriya Bhaona and Lama Dance respectively.

Institutionalization of the masked performances within the religious institutions legitimized the pervasive influence of the chief custodian members in structuring the transmission of liturgical knowledge system. Renouncing all material pursuits, the initiated novice bhakats and bhikkhus undertake the structured apprenticeship on masked performances and mask-making from the ritual-experts in the Sattras and Gompas respectively, through master-disciple immersive knowledge transmission pattern, known as the Guru-Shishya Parampara. The inter-generational conformity to the established

repertoire of ritual-knowledge (pertaining to masked performances), therefore relies on the profound emotional, intellectual and spiritual connection developed between the expert Guru and devoted Shishyas while residing within the ‘sacred’ precincts of the religious institutions. It becomes important to reiterate that the Sattra and Gompa institutions facilitate the process of becoming ritual-experts of masked performances through various means, which include delving into the doctrinal scriptures in which the masked performances are embedded, embracing the ritual endowments associated with monasticism, and inculcating deeper understanding of the ritual ecology through years of lived experiences within the religious institutions.

The expertise thus developed bestows authority upon the clergy to codify the neo-Vaishnavite or Tibetan Buddhist religious insights into sets of institutionalized practices, which in the words of O’Dea and Yinger (1961) could be referred to as “institutionalized concretization”. Such codified institutionalized practices are performed by the ritual-experts within the Sattras and Gompas while serving as distinctive functionaries, and are also reflected through the monastic masked performances. For example, while the Sattradhikar, the head of a Sattra is ritually obligated to write new plays for Bhaona performances as part of his initiation rites, the Rinpoche in the Gompa, being ritually the most empowered, gets visionary dreams about incorporating new dances into the existing repertoire of Cham performances. In the Sattra, the Bor Bayan and Bor Gayan - the chief percussionist and singer take the lead role in setting the devotional tone through Dhemalir nach during Bhaona performances. Similarly, the chief dance master – Champon performs the *Phag* Cham to consecrate the Chamling before the ritual-commencement of Cham performances. The Bor Bhagwati – the chief reciter reads the Bhagavata in the Sattra before the ritual-commencement of Bhaona, while in the Gompa, Umze - the chief chanting master is in charge of ritual chanting of the mantras during Cham performances.

Ritual involvement in the masked performances, therefore, became an expression of religious authority bestowed exclusively upon the inmates of the Sattras and Gompas by the institutional religions namely, neo-Vaishnavism and Tibetan Buddhism respectively. The chief custodian members in the Sattras and Gompas, as “sphere of authority”, thereby entrench their monastic positions and retain the ritual efficacy of the Bhaona and Cham performances by restricting and circumventing the right to learn,

practice and teach such votive performances. The relative simplicity in Bhaona performances and the egalitarian ethos embedded in neo-Vaishnavism has enabled the enthusiast laities to learn and perform Bhaona in the lay-Namghars, while strictly adhering to the religious norms specified by the ritual-experts from the Sattras. However, the Gompa institutions in Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim have proscribed the learning and performance of Cham by the laypersons, owing to the complex ritualistic procedures of deity visualization and deity embodiment that requires attainment of religio-spiritual empowerment through years of practice and meditation. The lay-adherents of Bhaona performances in Assam, and Cham performances in Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim are permitted to actively participate in certain ancillary rituals associated with the votive performances; however, they do not have the ritual authority to dictate the course of the institutionalized masked performances, unlike the ritual-experts from the Sattras and Gompas. It is also imperative to highlight that distinct from Bhaona and Cham masked performances, the practices of mask-making reflect lesser authority of the ritual-experts from the Sattras and Gompa respectively, as the lay-adherents are permitted to learn the art of crafting Bhaona or Cham masks. However, as the lay-artisans lack in the institutionally recognized mode of acquiring religious knowledge, the adherents revere the mask-makers from the Sattras or Gompas as the institutionally recognized “ritual-experts of the tradition”, who could not only efficiently quote from the doctrinal texts that describe about the masks, but also possess the ritual-authority to consecrate the masks before the commencement of the votive performances. Such cultural phenomena resonate with the proposition of Mary Douglas (1973) who expounds that societies whereby ritual-specialists have “pronounced social hierarchy”, the members are governed with a “social ethos of piety towards authority” (p.87).

#### **4.1.2 Embodied Masked Performances and Social Structure**

The French structuralist Emile Durkheim (1995) mentioned that human bodies, being socially constructed and culturally patterned, externalize the symbolic meanings inherent in the social context within which their bodies are positioned. As the embodied practices performed by the social body reflects the societal norms, values and beliefs, the body becomes crucial in determining the ways through which people engage with the world around them. Consequently, the social body is being used as a tool for manifesting inclusion or sense of belonging, and exclusion or othering (Holdrege, 1998; Hughes and Lock, 1987; Howson, 2004). Similarly, in the ritual context, human bodies act as

instrument for externalizing theology as “the bodies participate in worship first of all through a wide range of actions”, whereby, “specific relations of domination and subordination are generated and orchestrated by the participants themselves simply by participating” (Ware, 1997; Bell, 2009).

Depending upon the social contexts in which the neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist theologies are being interpreted, the chief custodian members from the Sattras and Gompas have ascribed religious meanings to the adherents’ bodies, and stratified religious participation in the Bhaona and Cham masked performances respectively, based on multiplicity of structural ties that are hierarchically arranged in neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist societies. An adherent’s body derives meaning in the ecclesiastical floor of Sattras and Gompa in relation to another body; the system of purity and pollution governs the ‘divinization’ or ‘defilement’ of the adherents’ bodies, depending upon various structural cleavages such as caste, gender, and relation to monasticism (i.e. clergy or layperson). As the lives of the laypersons are believed to dominantly revolve around domestic obligations, body-centric pleasures, and material aspirations that are regarded as impediments to religio-spiritual pursuits, their bodies are attributed ‘polluted’ status juxtaposed with the ‘pure’ status ascribed to the bodies of the ordained clergies, whose lives are solely devoted towards ritual-propitiation of deities and proliferation of neo-Vaishnavite or Tibetan Buddhist religious tradition. Although certain clergies belonging to Grihasti Sattras in Assam, and Nyingma school in Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim are permitted to enter conjugal life, it does not diminish their bodies to ‘polluted’ status which is generally attributed to laypersons, because despite shouldering familial responsibilities, the lives of the clergies are predominantly devoted towards religious obligations. Moreover, in some cases within the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism (like in Khinmey Gompa), certain clergies who have achieved higher ritual-empowerment, enter conjugal life only to conduct Tantric practices while embodying the Dakas and Dakinis of Tibetan Buddhist religious tradition.

In the religious tradition of Tibetan Buddhism practiced in Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, the polluted bodies and minds of the laypersons are ritually excluded from performing the votive Cham, which is solely performed by the ritually empowered ‘pure’ inmates of the Gompas. Although, the ‘impure’ menstruating bodies of female laities are allowed to embrace monasticism and become an Ani, they do not enjoy the privilege a

bhikkhu ritual-performer enjoys in terms of performing Cham. In certain Gompas like Khachoed Pema Woeling Ani Gompa of East Sikkim, the Anis are allowed to perform the *Dakini* dances during Cham; however, in most of the Gompas like Tawang Gompa, Khinmey Gompa, Rumtek Gompa, Enchey Gompa, Brumchung Ani Gompa, etc. the Anis are completely prohibited from performing the ritualistic masked dances. Moreover, even in Khachoed Pema Woeling Ani Gompa, the Anis are proscribed by the religious norms to perform the roles of revered Dharma protectors such as Mahakala, Palden Lhamo, Padmasambhava, etc. Even among the male inmates of the Gompa, there exist distinctions on the basis of accomplished monastic degrees and subsequent empowerments that purify and prepare the bodies and minds of the bhikkhus to become ritually empowered to perform exclusive ritual functions through Cham performances. For example, only the enlightened body and mind of the Rinpoche or Dorje Lopon is empowered to lead the *Zhanag* Cham and burn the Torma during Cham performances. Similarly, only the empowered body and mind of the chief dance master – Champon could ritually don the mask representing the Phag and consecrate the Chamling, and only the Rinpoche or Dorje Lopon could embody the Dharma protectors such as, Padmasambhava or Mahakala or Palden Lhamo through ritual donning of the mask that represents the Dharma protector.

In the religious plane of neo-Vaishnavism in Assam, the ‘polluted’ bodies of the male laities are not considered as ‘pure’ as the clergies of the Sattras; however, their bodies are also not considered as ‘impure’ as the menstruating bodies of the female laities. Thus, along with the inmates of the Sattras, the male laities are also permitted to become the ritual-performers of the votive Bhaona performances, unlike the restrictions imposed on the female laities that proscribe them from participating in such performances. The involvement of female laities during Bhaona performances is limited to ancillary rituals like naam prasanga, provided they are not menstruating during the ritual-participation. Although the Sattra institutions allow male bhakats and male laities to become ritual-performers in ritualistic Bhaona performances, there exist distinctions depending upon caste and communities, as in most of the Sattras and lay-Namghars, non-Brahmin male clergies and male laities are not allowed to embody the most revered deities, such as Krishna, Rama and Narasingha.

In Turnerian (1977) view, therefore, the neo-Vaishnavite society of Assam, and Tibetan Buddhist societies of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, could be referred to as “structured”, “differentiated” and “hierarchical system” that contain “the notion of an arrangement of positions or statuses...involve the institutionalization and perdurance of groups or relationships”, “with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of ‘more’ or less” (pp.96-126). The reinforcement of social structures through the institutionalized masked performances could also be analyzed through the concept of “prestige hierarchy” as proposed by the anthropologists Joseph Henrich and Francisco Gil-White (2001), and the concept of “shame” as proposed by the anthropologist David Fessler (2004). The inmates of the Sattras and Gompas, as ritual-performers of the masked performances, attain “prestige” for acquiring ritual-knowledge required for participating in the votive performances, and thereby become the epitome of devout Vaishnavas or Buddhists, whom the lay-adherents are expected to defer to and obey. Any transgression by the lay-adherents in the form of failure to participate in the ancillary rituals or trying to become a ritual-performer of the masked performance without seeking permission from the ritual-experts, result in “shame” through social exclusion.

#### **4.1.3 Religious Socialization through Masked Performances**

Religious socialization can be defined as a life-long interactive process within which various agents of socialization influence the formation of individuals’ religiosity through induction to religious preferences, and internalization of religious ethos and worldview through continued exposure (Sherkat, 2003; Clausen et al., 1968; Yamane, 2016; Brown and Gary, 1991). According to scholars such as Geertz (1995), Ashworth (1993) and Rappaport (2000), religious rituals serve as an influential medium of religious socialization, which through performance facilitate transmission of encapsulated religious norms, values and beliefs system from one generation to the next, bridging the gap between the past, present and future.

In the states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, the institutionalized masked performances embedded in the liturgical calendar regulated religio-ritualistic occasions, provide the neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist communities a ritual pause from quotidian life especially for articulating religious norms, values and beliefs through communal religiosity. The cultural phenomenon resonates with Durkheim’s (1995) proposition that the days of religio-cultural importance are ‘sacred’ time which



punctuates everyday life of any community. Borrowing from James Carey's (1989) ritual view of communication, it could be argued that such 'sacred' ritualized occasions of institutionalized Bhaona and Cham masked performances "draw" the inmates of the religious institutions and lay-adherents "together in fellowship", and rejuvenate social interaction among the three agents of socialization namely, religious institution, adherent family members, and peer groups, in order to represent and maintain symbolic reality.

During the days of religio-ritualistic occasions, the religious institutions become the centre of religious socialization, thereby conferring the top rung of vertical socialization to the ritual-experts from the Sattras and Gompas. The ritual-experts as tradition bearers, therefore, endeavor to facilitate religious understanding by inducting laities to religious teachings through the ritual-enactment of masked performances. With the help of exemplary narratives of Bhaona and Cham masked performances, the ritual-experts also advocate for inculcation of behavioral messages that obligate lay-adherents to fulfill religious commitments, so as to accrue ritual-piety and become devout Vaishnavas or Buddhists. Situating the masked performances within the patterned institutionalized relationships, the ritual-experts also indoctrinate laities to the differential reverence towards the ritual-performers, depending upon the roles being served in such votive performances. Moreover, as the gendered spaces of the Sattras and Gompas circumvent the gendered masked performances, the ritual-experts are enabled to apprise lay-adherents of the existing gender norms, which structure neo-Vaishnavite society in Assam, and Tibetan Buddhist societies in Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim.

The adherent family members, who had already internalized the inherent religio-cultural meanings through intergenerational involvement in the religious life, serve as an agent of vertical socialization for the succeeding generation. It has been perceived that one of the motivations of the family members to visit the Sattras or Gompas on the days of masked performances is to pass on the legacy of cultural participation to the next generation. Therefore, since a very early age, the younger generation is encouraged to adapt to the religio-cultural ecology through imitation of the codified practices performed by the preceding generations, such as ritualistic visits to the Sattras or Gompas for ritual-viewing of the masked performances, partaking in obligatory congregational prayers, offering sewa or khata to the ritual-performers as a sign of reverence, etc. Moreover, the male members in the artisan families, who espouse the

sustenance of the religio-cultural tradition, also serve as an agent of vertical socialization while inducting the male children into the practice of mask-making, and continuing the tradition of patrilineal acquisition of religious knowledge over the years.

Regular attendance to Bhaona or Cham performances also help lay-adherents establish contacts and continue interaction with the peer groups, who are equally committed towards fostering religious literacy. Such peer groups, as agent of horizontal socialization, conjointly seek theological justifications enshrined in the scripture-oriented masked performances, and also clarify each other's doubts by sharing religious experiences, as approaching the ritual-experts from the Sattras or Gompas might not be always possible. Moreover, in the state of Assam, horizontal socialization with culturally competent peer groups has considerable influence in encouraging the laities to form cultural associations dedicated towards learning of Bhaona performances, under the supervision of the ritual-experts from the Sattras. The cultural phenomenon has not only been testified in the interviews conducted during the fieldworks, but also evidenced by the proliferation of Bhaona performances in the lay-Namghars.

The interactive process involving the induction of the succeeding generation and continued participation of the preceding generation in the religio-ritualistic occasions of masked performances therefore, enable the neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist communities to sustain interaction with the ritual paraphernalia<sup>64</sup> located within the 'sacred' spaces of the religious institutions, collectively revise the religio-cultural histories, and liaison with ritual-experts and fellow lay-adherents dedicated towards espousing the religio-cultural truths. The religious knowledge accumulated by the participants through years of religious socialization, which Innaconne (1998) has termed as "religious capital", thus not only inculcates deference towards the Sattras or Gompa religious institution and the ritual-experts, but also enkindles a collective sense of belonging to the neo-Vaishnavite or Tibetan Buddhist religious community.

#### **4.1.4 Social Integration through Masked Performances**

In the Durkheimian sense (1995), the institutional religions namely, neo-Vaishnavism and Tibetan Buddhism mediate "collective effervescence" in multi-ethnic

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<sup>64</sup>Along with masks, agnigadh in Bhaona performances, and Torma and Thangka in Cham performances could be considered as ritual paraphernalia of the votive masked performances.

neo-Vaishnavite society in Assam, and Tibetan Buddhist societies in Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim by fostering collective religious understanding, and generating consensus on religious norms, values and belief system among the lay-adherents. Borrowing from Carey (1989), the religio-ritualistic Bhaona and Cham masked performances could be argued as occasions which contribute to the construction of shared symbolic order, and as Nottingham (1971) mentions that sharing of common symbols is “a particularly effective way of cementing the unity of a group of worshippers. It is precisely because the referents of symbols elude over precise intellectual definitions that their unifying force is the more potent...” (p.19). The pluralistic neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist societies experience communion through collective participation, as conforming to religious norms, the lay-adherents belonging to different ethnic groups, castes, gender, economic status and age groups ritualistically visit the Sattras or Gompas – the shared symbol of their neo-Vaishnavite or Tibetan Buddhist identity. It would be a trifling assumption to claim that the occasions of masked performances are the sole contributors in fostering social integration in neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist societies; however, transcending social boundaries such lived religious expressions ritually obligate the diverse lay-adherents to partake in collective symbolic actions, which reinforce identification with a distinct religious community, whose members are inter-generationally socialized to act in unison in the religious planes. For example, in Majuli district of Assam, the laypersons belonging to different ethnic groups such as Mising, Deori and Sonowal Kachari, who have adopted neo-Vaishnavism, partake in communal naam-prasanga, craft Bhaona masks, enact Bhaona performances, etc. along with the adherents belonging to higher castes such as Brahmin and Kayastha. Sustained religious adherence to neo-Vaishnavism and regular involvement in such relatively inclusive religious endeavors promote social cohesion along the caste, ethnic and religious fault lines existing within an Assamese society. Similarly, in the state of Sikkim, collective participation of the lay-adherents in ancillary rituals, such as crafting of Cham masks, offering of khata to the ritual-performers of Cham, preparing of communal meals on the days of masked performances, etc. strengthens social bonds between two distinctive ethnic groups namely, Lepcha and Bhutia, who are united by their shared identity as a Tibetan Buddhist community.

The religious values and beliefs embedded in the narratives of the Bhaona and Cham performances also espouse socially valued religio-spiritual goals, such as

identifying the five mental afflictions like desire, wrath, greed, attachment and ego, and transmuting those with generosity, compassion and wisdom, which according to the belief system would otherwise either impede the process of transcendental devotion towards Krishna (according to neo-Vaishnavism) or bind every sentient beings to the Samsara (according to Tibetan Buddhism). The adherents of neo-Vaishnavism in Assam and Tibetan Buddhism in Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim therefore believe that structuring their social lives around such shared altruistic values not only ensures collective progress in religious sphere by becoming devout Vaishnavas or Buddhists, but also help reducing affinity towards immorality, violence and self-centeredness, which would eventually bind individuals across different social strata through fraternity. Moreover, the religious beliefs conveyed through the narratives of the masked performances also intend to foster social cohesion by inculcating a sense of belonging to a moral community (either neo-Vaishnavite or Tibetan Buddhist), whose adherents, regardless of economic status, caste, gender or ethnicity, entail similar divine rewards for virtuous actions and divine retribution for transgressing the moral order. For example, in *Lengan* and *Khindak Palkyi Cham*, the characters such as Lengan (the sinner) and Khindak Palkyi (the noble) stand as metaphors for religiously sanctioned virtuous and vicious actions that any Buddhist adherent could undertake, and consequently beget appropriate divine intervention through rewards or punishments. Similarly, in the Bhaona performance, the desire in the demon Sankhacuda, the wrath in the Brahmin Parasurama and the attachment in Indra's wife Saci metaphorically represent different mental afflictions that could be experienced by any Vaishnava adherent, and consequently receive divine retribution from Krishna without any discrimination based on caste or gender.

#### **4.2 Bhaona and Cham Masked Performances and Meaning-Making Processes**

Scholars across diverse disciplines, ranging from psychiatry to sociology, have argued that one of the primary instincts of humans is to derive meaning of their experiences, wherein meaning could be defined as a sense of order, purpose, and pursuit of culturally specified goals (Frankl, 1946; Berger, 1967; Reker, 2000). Similarly, empirical studies on religion provide insights into how religion functions as a potential source of meaning for the adherent communities, with varied meaning-making arising from commitment for religious obligations to involvement in religious rituals (Pargament and Mahoney, 2005; Galek et al., 2015; Schnell and Pali, 2013; Stark and Finke, 2000).

Likewise, in the states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, the Bhaona and Cham masks as well as the masked performances, as sacred symbols and discursive religious practices, entail an immersive process of meaning-making among the neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist religious communities respectively, who in the words of Clifford Geertz (1958) and Edmund Leech (1972) are inter-generationally inducted to the traditional system of meaning with “power and authority” of the Sattra and Gompa institution respectively, thereby facilitating the binding of the neo-Vaishnavite or Tibetan Buddhist worldview and ethos into a “unified system of meaning”.

**Dynamics in Performative Context:** According to the folklorist Arnold van Gennep (1960), human transitions are marked by different ceremonies performed at calendrical turn, which are regarded as distinct from the quotidian secular life, and are framed as sacralized space and time by the group. Similarly, in the neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist societies, the adherents attribute shared meanings to specific calendrical days, which represent ‘sacred’ ‘symbolic time’ for the religious community, and therefore, necessitate the ritual-enactment of Bhaona or Cham masked performances; for example, anniversaries of apostles such as Sankaradeva or Padmasambhava, or Raas Purnima in which Krishna had participated in the ‘divine dance’ of Raas Leela with the Gopis of Vrindavan, or the new year Losar in which the Dharma protector Mahakala could be ritually propitiated for the well-being of all sentient beings. The religio-ritualistic Bhaona or Cham masked performances held on such symbolic days are designated as having votive significance, and therefore, in Richard Schechner’s (2003) words, are governed by the “event time” in which “the activity itself has a set sequence and all the steps of that sequence must be completed no matter how long (or short) the elapsed clock time” (p.8). For example, in order to restore moral order, when the ritual-performer of *Durdak* Cham could ritually sacrifice the linga, or when the ritual-performer embodying Krishna in Bhaona could vanquish the performer enacting the demon Sankhacuda, are dictated by the linearly structured sequence of ritual activities mentioned in the existing doctrinal texts (such as Sankaradeva’s Ankiya Natas or Cham Yig composed by the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama) and practiced for centuries, and could not be shuffled to suit the aesthetic sensibilities of the contemporary participants. Moreover, the ritual context also infuses connotative meaning to the places i.e. Namghar and Chamling, situated at the heart of the religious institutions – Sattras and Gompas respectively. The ritualistic practices such as consecration of Namghar through Dhemalir nach by Gayan

Bayan, or consecration of Chamling through *Phag Cham* by Champon, transform such places into ritual spaces where the adherents believe that the divine could be ritually summoned and manipulated by the ritual-performers in prescribed formats through the efficacy of the masked performances, in order to subjugate evil emanations and provide deliverance from impediments. In order to further the ritual goals of the votive Bhaona and Cham masked performances, such ritual spaces also facilitate interface between two separate enlivened identities namely, the identity of the ritual-performers and the (archetypal) identity of the masks. Therefore, in Goffmanian view as contextualized by Schechner (2003), there is “an expressive rejuvenation and reaffirmation of the moral values of the community” in such spaces where “reality is being performed” (p.14).

**Masks-Performers-Audiences Dynamics:** During the religio-ritualistic Bhaona and Cham performances, the meanings of the masks are construed through the structural interrelation among various masks as well as the multi-layered transformation believed to be experienced by the ritual-performers while donning the masks. On one hand, the masks facilitate disjunction of self through disguise, wherein the identity of the ritual-performer as a bhakat from Sattrā or bhikkhu from Gompa is concealed, thereby enabling him to convey the religious messages without the constraints of his social identity. On the other hand, it is believed that the masks facilitate disjunction of self through disclosing the assumed identity as mythical and legendary characters, either through impersonation or embodiment. The masks representing demonic characters (in neo-Vaishnavism) and retinues of Dharma protectors (in Tibetan Buddhism) are believed to facilitate impersonation, whereas the profound ritual-efficacy in the masks representing deities such as Narasingha (in neo-Vaishnavism), and Dharma protectors like Palden Lhamo, Mahakala, Yamantaka, etc. (in Tibetan Buddhism) facilitate embodiment of the deities because of which the ritual-performers acquire divine agency to carry out desired ritual actions, in contrast to mere iconic representation of the characters for theatrical purpose. Therefore, the religious meaning imbued in the consecration of the masks and meditative deity visualization prior to the masked performances becomes an important ritual process, which signals the manifestation of divine power from an otherwise inaccessible realm onto the tangible realm, including the body of the eligible ritual-performers of Bhaona or Cham performances. Thus, Turner’s (1967) perspective on the meaning of ritual symbol in the Ndembu rituals of Zambia could be contextualized in neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist societies in order to

argue that consecrated Bhaona and Cham masks, as ritual symbols, “possess ritual-  
efficacy” being “charged with power from unknown sources” so as “to be capable of  
acting on persons and groups coming in contact with them in such a way as to change  
them for the better or in a desired direction” (p.54)

**Performers-Audiences Dynamics:** Situated within the religious context of neo-  
Vaishnavism or Tibetan Buddhism, the performer bhakats or bhikkhus construe a  
tapestry of meanings through Bhaona or Cham performances respectively. The religious  
endowment embraced during ordination into monasticism ritually obligate the clergies of  
Sattras and Gompas to articulate institutional religiosity through the votive Bhaona and  
Cham performances respectively, in order to propitiate the pantheon of deities, and carry  
forward the religious tradition. Therefore, expressing their identities as clergy, the ritual-  
performers seek spiritual communion with the invoked deities during the performances,  
and in the process transcend the realm of ordinary, and tap into the realm of  
extraordinary, so as to manifest divine or demonic forces through their ritually-  
empowered bodies. As specific roles in Bhaona and Cham performances correspond to  
distinct hierarchical monastic positions within the Sattras and Gompas, the votive  
masked performances also shape the performers’ understanding of their religious duties  
in the ritualistic performances, as well as their social status within the respective  
religious communities. Such immersive understanding of one’s identity, as mentioned by  
the research participant - Lama Thupten from Tawang Gompa, inculcates a sense of  
belonging to the religious tradition. Furthermore, when juxtaposed with non-eligible or  
non-performing clergies, religious participation in masked performances also elevates  
the social prestige of the performer clergy for being capable of providing deliverance to  
lay-adherents as well as contributing to the sustenance of Dharma through proliferation  
of religious worldview and ethos.

The meaning-making process of the devotee-audiences of Bhaona in Assam, and  
Cham performances in Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim encompass a wide range of  
entwined drivers of engagements, including social need to foster bonds with fellow  
adherents, cultural need to celebrate identity, intellectual need to know about religio-  
cultural history, emotional need to navigate through adversity and prosperity, religious  
need to articulate devotion, and spiritual need to connect to the numinous. Moreover, the  
accessibility of the pantheon of deities from close proximity through “Darsan” during

masked performances, generates a heightened sense of engagement with the votive masked performances, and enkindle deference for the ritual-performers through whom the devotees-audiences could physically touch their ‘object of worship’, and offer gamusa or khata as a sign of reverence. The votive masked performances not only bring the deities in front of the devotee-audiences through the ritual-performers, but also assure them to immediately vanquish the inner and outer obstacles within the auspicious ritual space of Namghar or Chamling.

### **4.3 Bhaona and Cham Masked Performances and Cultural Identity**

In certain communities across the globe, culture and religion is inseparably entwined, and represent fundamental aspects of everyday existence that are mediated through varied communicative practices, and are inter-generationally adapted by the communities. While culture is defined by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) as a “historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols”, serving to “communicate, perpetuate and develop” worldviews, religion is characterized as “a system of symbols which act to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence” (pp. 89-290). Therefore, highlighting on the interrelatedness of culture and religion, the anthropologist mentioned that the significance of religion in any cultural group is determined by its “capacity to serve for the individual or for the group, as a source of general, yet distinctive conception of the world, the self and the relation between them...” (Geertz, 1973, p.123). Consequently, the interplay between culture and religion is evident in distinctive religious rituals, which as symbolic actions carried out by communities adhering to specific belief systems, play crucial role in the formation and maintenance of cultural identity of the community through development of a sense of belonging, reinforcement of shared values, and rejuvenation of collective memory (Bell, 2017; Gifford, 2019; Berger, 2014). Moreover, religious rituals often incorporate cultural expressions such as music, dances, attires, and foodways, which enhance the overall experience of the members of the community through communal participation, and contribute towards sustenance of distinct cultural identity (Edmonds and Turner, 2018).

**Bhaona Masked Performances and Cultural Identity:** Krishna, the “pan-Indian deity”, is worshipped across the subcontinent in distinctive forms, such as “Radha-Krishna in North India, Jagannath in Orissa, Shrinathji in Rajasthan, Ranchor in



Gujarat, Vithoba in Maharashtra, Udupi Krishna in Karnataka, Guruvayurappan in Kerala, etc.” (Bryant, 2007). Even in the performative traditions, different Indian states have distinctive classical dances associated with the articulation of Krishna-Bhakti, such as Kathak of Uttar Pradesh, Manipuri Raas Leela of Manipur, Kuchipudi of Andhra Pradesh, Krishnanattam of Kerala, etc. Similarly, in the state of Assam, the neo-Vaishnavism as propagated by Sankardeva and other Vaishnava apostles has pertinent lived religious expressions through which the adherents articulate Navadha Bhakti towards Krishna. The performance space and performance repertoire of one of such neo-Vaishnavite religious expressions, known as Bhaona, have conferred a discrete identity to the performative tradition of Assam, in comparison to the Krishna-centric religious performances prevalent in different states of India.

**Performance Space, Purpose, Occasions and Cultural Specificity:** The religio-ritualistic Bhaona performances held in the religious institutions of Sattras and lay-Namghars, which are unique to the neo-Vaishnavism of Assam, imprint spatial identity into the votive masked performances. Similarly, the context of festivities in which Bhaona is performed, such as Bihu or anniversaries of Vaishnava apostles, encodes cultural specificity of Assam into the religious expression.

**Associated Rituals, Narratives and Cultural Ethos and Worldview:** The ancillary rituals associated with Bhaona performances such as Bor-Akhora, naam-prasanga, Dhemalir nach, muktimangal bhatima, etc. also espouse the idiosyncratic repertoire of Assamese neo-Vaishnavism. Likewise, the symbolic expression of offering Assamese gamusa to the ritual-performers, who are embodying the Vaishnava deities, is a distinct ritualistic practice inherent in the religious tradition of neo-Vaishnavism. Moreover, the performance of Ankiya Natas in Brajabuli language and singing of verses from the Kirtan Ghosa, which were composed by Sankaradeva, play significant role in articulating Assamese cultural identity, as Sankaradeva and his literary contributions are considered as a cultural icon of Assam. Furthermore, the exemplary narratives of Bhaona performances convey the neo-Vaishnavite ethos and worldview, emphasizing subjugation of mental afflictions such as kaam, krodh, lobh, moh, and ahankar, and articulation of Navadha Bhakti towards Krishna, which assist devotees in overcoming impediments and becoming a ‘true’ Vaishnava devotee.

**Costumes, Musical Instruments, Dances and Cultural Specificity:** The concept of Sutradhar anchoring the Bhaona performance has been inspired by the Sanskrit dramas; however, costumed in Jalikota chola, Ghuri, Karadhani and Sutradhar Pag, the distinctive Sutradhari nach presented by the Sutradhar during Bhaona performance, is a unique tradition prevalent solely in Assam. Similarly, the tradition of consecrating the Namghar through the Dhemalir nach of Gayans and Bayans, accompanied by the traditional musical instruments such as khol and bor-taal, could be juxtaposed with the pan-Hindu tradition of commencing rituals through Ganesh vandana. Moreover, the practice of preparing the headgear of Sutradhar by tying it in “Kosha”, which according to the Vaishnava legend of Assam, was used to wash the feet of the deities, further embeds region-specific religious connotation to the costumes of the Sutradhar. The decking of the female characters in traditional Assamese Mekhela and Riha, using Kingkhap of Ahom dynasty to embellish the crowns of Krishna and Rama, and wearing of ornaments made in the traditional Assamese designs such as Jonbiri, Dholbiri, Lokaparo, etc., also reflect the intent of articulating Assamese cultural identity through the Bhaona performances. For example, juxtaposition of Bhaona performance with Raas Leela of Manipur (a Krishna-centric devotional performance) depicts the cultural differences between the Assamese and Meitei<sup>65</sup> costumes of the same staged characters – Krishna and Gopis of Vrindavan. It also becomes important to highlight that besides Krishna, Radha is also considered as one of the revered central characters in the Raas Leela tradition of Manipur; whereas, rooted in the religious philosophy of Eka Sarana Naam Dharma, the Bhaona performative tradition did not incorporate the character of Radha, and only has Gopis, who share the sentiment of Bhakti, and not Sringara towards the Supreme Being - Krishna.



Fig.4.1: Krishna with Radha and Gopis in Raas Leela (left), and Krishna with Gopis in Bhaona (right)

Source of the photo of Raas Leela performance is Internet

<sup>65</sup>Meitei, an indigenous ethnic group, mostly reside in the Indian state of Manipur, and a majority of the Meitei population is adherents of Vaishnavism.

**Visual Conventions of Masks and Culture Specific Belief-System:** The visual conventions in the mask tradition of Bhaona performances further reiterate the embeddedness of the expressive medium in the Vaishnava religious tradition of Assam. The colors and contours of the Bhaona masks are influenced by the pan-India Hindu texts such as Bhagavata Purana, Ramayana and Mahabharata. However, the Vaishnava literatures of Assam such as Kirtana Ghosa, Sachitra Kirtanputhi, Chitra Bhagavata, etc. play significant role in determining the iconography of the masks used in Bhaona performances. For example, the mask representing the deity Narasingha is crafted based on the descriptions mentioned by Sankaradeva in the *Narasingha Dhyana*, which again is influenced by the poem *Prahlada Charitra*, written by the 14<sup>th</sup> century Assamese writer - Hema Saraswati. According to the description, the deity Narasingha is so tall that He touches the heaven, and His hairs and body are as white as the moon, with an extremely pointed tongue. Therefore, during Bhaona performances, Narasingha is enacted while donning Bor mukha, which elevates the height of the ritual-performer and also facilitates “suspension of disbelief” in the devotee-audiences. Narrating an incident, the research participant from Bihimpur Sattra - Gunin Mahanta mentioned that once the disappointed devotee-audiences of *Nrasingha Murari* Bhaona had left the performance halfway as the ritual-performer was impersonating the deity while donning a Mukh mukha that covered only his face, and did not provide the necessary ‘larger than life’, ‘awe-inspiring’ appearance in which the collective memory of the Vaishnavas of Assam are embedded.

Such a culture-specific phenomenon of Assam, as reflected through the mask tradition, could be juxtaposed with the portrayal of Narasingha in the performative traditions prevalent in other parts of India, such as Prahlada Nataka of Odisha and Kathakali of Kerala. In Odia culture, Narasingha is depicted by encrusting a medium sized white colored face mask on the ritual-performer, which has a prominent black moustache. Whereas, in Kathakali, the deity Narasingha is depicted by the ritual-performer through facial make-up in traditional Chutti design and a gilded headgear that are typical to the Kathakali tradition of Kerala.



Fig.4.2: Narasingha masks (from left to right) Bhaona of Assam, Pahlada Nataka of Odisha, and Kathakali of Kerala; Source of the photos of Pahlada Nataka and Kathakali is Internet

**Cham Masked Performances and Cultural Identity:** Within the religious tradition of Buddhism, there exist two ‘Vehicles’ namely, Theravada and Mahayana, which have distinct identities in terms of codified practices and associated beliefs. The Theravada tradition followed mainly in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, emphasizes the ending of Samsara and attainment of nirvana by the practitioners as a means of transcending the individual self. Whereas, the Mahayana tradition, predominantly practiced in Nepal, Bhutan, China, Malaysia, Vietnam, Taiwan, Korea, and Japan, emphasizes the Boddhisattva ideal in which the enlightened practitioners voluntarily reincarnate to liberate all sentient beings from the Samsara. Within the Mahayana school of Buddhism, exists a tradition of Tantric practices called Vajrayana that developed in the Indian subcontinent around the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE, and proliferated in Tibet, as Tibetan Buddhism, during the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, especially under the religious contributions of Padmasambhava.

The Buddhist tradition predominantly practiced in the North-East Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim is associated with Tibetan Buddhism, with special reverence to Padmasambhava, who had played significant roles in the advent of the religious tradition in these regions. In the state of Arunachal Pradesh, especially in the Monyul region, Padmasambhava had travelled during the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE, on invitation of the Tibetan king Trisong Detsen, and consecrated the land after meditating in places such as Taktsang, Jiktsang, etc. The religious association of the Monpas with Tibetan Buddhism also furthered with the establishment of Khinmey Gompa of Nyingma school

in 15<sup>th</sup> century and Tawang Gompa of Gelug school in 18<sup>th</sup> century. Similarly, the religious history of Sikkim documents that Padmasambhava had visited the region in 8<sup>th</sup> century CE, during his quest for hidden lands around Tibet, and had identified Sikkim for being significantly located in the four cardinal directions to Tibet. The religious affiliation of the Lepcha and Bhutia ethnic groups to Tibetan Buddhism further deepened with the establishment of Pemayangtse Gompa of Nyingma school in 17<sup>th</sup> century, Tashiding Gompa of Nyingma school in 17<sup>th</sup> century, and Rumtek Gompa of Kagyu school in 18<sup>th</sup> century. Consequently, with the introduction of Tibetan Buddhism, the three major ethnic groups, i.e. Monpa of Arunachal Pradesh, and Lepcha and Bhutia of Sikkim, whose culture were previously structured around the Bon faith of Tibet, have been subsumed into the Tibetan Buddhist cultural identity, and get reflected through articulation of religiosity. The religio-ritualistic Cham performances, which reflect the idiosyncratic repertoire of Tibetan Buddhist religiosity, could be therefore argued to facilitate the formation and sustenance of Tibetan Buddhist cultural identity.

**Performance Space, Purpose, Occasions and Cultural Specificity:** The monastic Cham performances held within the Chamling, which is unique to the architectural structure of the Tibetan Buddhist Gompas, imprints spatial identity into the votive presentations that are performed by the inmates of the Gompas. The ritual purpose of Cham performances also reflects the distinctive Tibetan Buddhist belief system of deity embodiment by the performer-Lamas, in order to conduct ritual-actions, such as pacification of fierce deities, magnetization of peaceful protectors, destruction of malevolent spirits, and enrichment of all sentient beings. Similarly, the context of Cham performances, comprising of propitiation of the Dharma protectors of Tibetan Buddhist pantheon, such as Mahakala, Palden Lhamo, Yamantaka, etc., imprints religious specificity of Tibetan Buddhist culture into the performative tradition.

**Associated Rituals, Narratives and Cultural Ethos and Worldview:** The ancillary rituals associated with Cham performances such as crafting and burning of Torma, creation of sand mandala, offering of khata to the ritual-performers, unfurling of Thangka, etc., espouse the religious philosophy fundamental to the Tibetan Buddhist culture. For example, the sand mandala created by the bhikkhus prior to Cham performance, metaphorically depict the Universe, and also facilitate the transformation of the ordinary body, speech and mind of the meditating bhikkhus into an enlightened

being, so as to be ritually empowered to perform Cham. Similarly, certain ritual icons (also called ritual implements) used by the ritual-performers during Cham performances, symbolize the Tibetan Buddhist worldview of destruction of illusions of human minds with the help of transformative weapons. For example, ritual icons such as *ral gri* (ritual-sword) and *phurba* (ritual-dagger) are Tibetan Buddhist symbols of wisdom, as the sword and dagger are believed to cut through the veils of ignorance, severing the knots of illusion that obscure absolute truth about enlightenment, and bind sentient beings to the Samsara. Furthermore, the narratives of Cham performances such as *Ja Cham*, *Bardo Cham*, *Lengan Cham*, *Khindak Palkyi Cham*, *Dung Cham*, and *Gelong Cham*, connect the devotee-audiences to the Tibetan Buddhist ethos and worldview, such as compassion, harmony, after-life journey of the consciousness, Karma, etc. Similarly, *Zhanag Cham* and *Ngag Cham* reinforce cultural identity through commemoration of the religious conflict and the enduring presence of Tibetan Buddhism as a religious tradition in Tibet.

**Costumes, Musical Instruments, Dances and Cultural Specificity:** The practice of embodying deities for conducting ritual-actions through masked performances exists in other performative traditions around the world, like Theyyam of Kerala or Topeng of Bali. However, the distinctiveness of Tibetan Buddhist religious tradition becomes evident during the Cham performances with the help of costumes, musical instruments, and dances. The appliquéd brocade costumes adorned by the ritual-performers exhibit the Tibetan Buddhist cultural identity, as the Tibetan-style of clothing infused with the religious connotations of the five-Buddha colors (yellow, green, red, white, and blue) and five bone ornaments, are unique to the Cham performances. Similarly, the ritual of consecrating the Chamling through ritual-dance of *Phag Cham*, in accompaniment with musical instrument such as *Dungchen*, which help in assembling the Dharma protectors of Tibetan Buddhist pantheon in the ritual-space, reflect the ritual-knowledge and belief system pertaining to Tibetan Buddhism, and thereby affirm the Tibetan Buddhist identity.

**Visual Conventions of Masks and Culture Specific Belief-System:** The visual conventions in the mask tradition of Cham performances underscore the embeddedness of the expressive medium in the Tibetan Buddhist religious tradition. The colors and contours of the Cham masks are determined by the existing iconography of the pantheon of deities, and also the visionary dreams of highly empowered Rinpoches. For example,

as mentioned by the research participant - Lama Thupten of Tawang Gompa, the five-skull crown and fierce expressions on the masks representing the Dharma protectors such as Mahakala, Phalden Lhamo, Yamantaka, etc., serves as a symbolic representation of the Tibetan Buddhist belief system. The adherents believe that during Cham performance, when a ritual-performer embodies a Dharma protector to carry out ritual-actions and confront with “barche” (negative afflictions), the anger in the Dharma protector, as channelized through the mask into the body of the ritual-performer, subjugates the negative afflictions. The five skulls which symbolize wisdom-awareness, transmute those negative afflictions into positive emotions, such as desire transforms into the wisdom of contentment, wrath transforms into the wisdom of compassion, greed (or ignorance) transforms into the wisdom of reality, attachment transforms into the wisdom of discernment, and pride transforms into the wisdom of equality.

#### **4.4 Bhaona and Cham Masked Performances, Globalization and Digital Technology**

In this section, with the help of four themes such as - 1) heritagization of masks and masked performances, 2) folklorization of masked performances, 3) cultural tourism through masked performances, and 4) connectivity-interactivity-autonomy through digital technology and masked performances, the researcher analyzes how the Bhaona and Cham masked performances have re-contextualized and negotiated in a globalized technology dependent world.

##### **4.4.1 Heritagization of Masks and Masked Performances**

In the global discourse, the term ‘heritagization’ emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century to define a transformative process in cultural production and consumption, whereby tangible and intangible assets of historic importance are creatively constructed as objects of exhibition in the present, with an intent to address varied contemporary needs of the custodian communities, who are situated in the globalized arena (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1995; Harvey, 2008; Park et. al., 2019). During the heritagization process, religio-ritualistic practices are turned into ‘living heritage’, following the directives of UNESCO such as Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity (2001) and Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003). The UNESCO directives have underlined the importance of recognizing rituals as heritage, in order to safeguard the practices from being endangered by the onslaught of social, cultural, and economic globalization. However, in such an evolving context,

rituals are being creatively constructed, exhibited, and traded as cultural property, thereby transforming ritual knowledge into heritage (Brosius and Polit, 2011).

The recognition of ritualistic practices as intangible cultural heritage also creates a discursive field that brings in newer performative context(s), along with the involvement of plurality of new agents in the transmission activities (Handler, 2011; Berliner, 2010). The inscription of Bhaona and Cham masked performances in the National List for Intangible Cultural Heritage has therefore introduced new performative spaces, which extend beyond the ritual context and encompasses events such as Republic Day Parade, national cultural festivals, etc. Additionally, other than the traditional chief custodian members, the Bhaona and Cham performances have been witnessing the engagement of new agents, ranging from small-scale tour operators to influential bureaucrats from State as well as Central Government, with varied interests other than religious obligations. As elaborated by the local tour operators from Majuli, Tawang and East Sikkim during in-depth interviews, the State Government and tour operators serve as new custodian members of Bhaona and Cham performances, while collaborating with the intent to highlight the masked performances as cultural signifiers of their respective states, which in turn would help in situating the states on the cultural map of India. The concerted efforts therefore focus on spreading awareness among tourists about the intangible cultural heritage, including Bhaona or Cham masked performances, and facilitating trips to the tangible cultural heritage – the Sattras or Gompas, in order to experience the institutionalized masked performances. During this process, the new custodian members also negotiate with the traditional custodian members to convince them to host tourist-based Bhaona or Cham performances. Moreover, the inclination of the Central Government to preserve, promote and disseminate the masked performances as a soft power of India, could be derived from the Ministry of Culture, Government of India's objective, which states:

“Culture plays an important role in the development agenda of any nation. It represents a set of shared attitudes, values, goals and practices...A country as diverse as India is symbolized by the plurality of its culture...The Ministry's task is to develop and sustain ways and means through which the creative and aesthetic sensibilities of the people remain active and dynamic. The functional spectrum of this Ministry is



wide, ranging from generating cultural awareness at grassroots levels to promoting cultural exchanges at international level.”(indiaculture.gov.in)

The increased interference of the Ministry of Culture <sup>66</sup> with the Bhaona performances, as a reflection of national heritage policy, has contributed to the emergence of a new form of knowledge transmission pattern through re-institutionalization of the teaching-learning process in academic institutions and cultural organizations of national repute. Other than National School of Drama, Bhaona performances and associated mask-making has also been re-institutionalized in academic institutions, such as Dr. Bhupen Hazarika Centre of Performing Arts (Dibrugarh University) and Majuli University of Culture. However, restrictions from the custodian members of Tibetan Buddhist religious tradition have limited the scope of incorporation of Cham performances into academic courses, and have only permitted re-institutionalization of mask-making in Government institutes such as Craft Centres.

Depending upon the teaching-learning spaces, the chief custodian members from the Sattras and Gompas have differentiated the acquired knowledge, which could be framed into two analytical categories, such as liturgical training and vocational training. For example, the intergenerational apprenticeship through which only the bhakats and bhikkhus receive liturgical training within the sacred precincts of the Sattras and Gompas is juxtaposed with the standardized pedagogy based short-term vocational training acquired by any enrolled students in secular classrooms. While the inmates of the Sattras and Gompas learn and practice the tradition as an articulation of religious obligations, the students in the academic institutions are motivated to undertake the vocational courses to develop a skill in fine arts that is promoted and often sponsored by the Government. In the Sattras and Gompas, the ritual-experts as Gurus not only impart knowledge about masked tradition, but also about the doctrinal scriptures in which the practices are embedded, so as to ritually initiate the Sishyas into the path of religio-spiritual pursuits. Whereas, in the classroom-based training, the appointed teachers mentor the students to mostly acquire skills that could be traded as capital in Bourdieuan sense (1967) for economic gain, after the completion of the certified course. Moreover, juxtaposed with the exclusive spaces of the Sattras institution of Assam, the academic

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<sup>66</sup>National School of Drama (NSD), where Bhaona is being taught, is an autonomous organization under the aegis of Ministry of Culture, Government of India.

institutions and cultural organizations have provided more inclusive spaces, in terms of enrolling enthusiast women and foreigners for learning Bhaona and mask-making.

#### **4.4.2 Folklorization of Masked Performances**

The term ‘folklorization’ has been incorporated in the lexicon of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in the year 2001, followed by the recommendation of the Intangible Heritage Unit of the Division of Cultural Heritage of UNESCO. However, the origin of the concept can be traced back to the sociologist – Peter Heintz’s concept of ‘folklorism’, proposed in the year 1958, and also the folklorist – Hans Moser’s concept of ‘folklorismus’, proposed in the year 1962 (Hafstein, 2018). Folklorism or folklorismus or folklorization can be defined as a dynamic socio-cultural process through which cultural expressions move away from the original cultural ecology, and enter an alien context(s) for external consumption. Thereby, altering the original meaning of the tradition in the alien context(s), and also assigning re-invented functionality to the tradition. In such situations, the cultural expressions often become less complex, aesthetically and semantically, as a result of strategic re-stylization, in order to facilitate easy comprehension by the cultural outsiders (Moser, 1962; McDowell, 2010; Zeijden, 2015; Seitel, 2001).

The scholar Zoltan Biro (as quoted by Vajda, 2015) had described about four types of folklorism namely, everyday folklorism, scientific folklorism, representational folklorism and aesthetic folklorism. However, the Bhaona performances of Assam, and Cham performances of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim have undergone mainly two types of folklorism namely, scientific folklorism and representational folklorism.

Scientific folklorism can be defined as an adaptive practice in which cultural expressions thrive through scholarly interpretations (Vajda, 2015). Research articles, cultural photographs and audiovisual documentaries on Bhaona and Cham masked performances, produced as deliverables of sponsored research projects, and curated as digital database on the websites of ethnographic museums, Zonal Cultural Centres, and socio-cultural organizations of national repute like – Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, National Museum, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, North East Zone Cultural Centre, Sahapedia, etc., are examples of scientific folklorism. The guiding objective of the sponsoring institutions and content contributors is to stimulate scientific discourse on

the Bhaona and Cham traditions through dissemination of emic-etic perspectives, developed through collaboration between the custodian communities and scholars working on various domains. It is imperative to note that such digitally available scientific contribution does not serve the traditional purpose of masked performances, such as reinforcing the religio-cultural order in the lives of the communities yielding the traditions. However, the universal accessibility of the increasing scholarship ensures continuity of the discourse on Bhaona and Cham masked traditions. The compendium furthers knowledge exchange between the custodian communities and academicians, enkindles interest about the traditional expressions in prospective researchers, practitioners and art-connoisseurs, and also provides authentic information for the promotion of cultural tourism.

Representational folklorism entails the strategies deployed by ideologues and artisans to select elements from their traditions that could be promoted nationally and globally, as stage performances and decorative artifacts, in order to direct the cultural outsiders how to gaze on the cultural expressions, and eventually develop an image of the communities yielding the traditions (Vajda, 2015). In the states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, the Bhaona and Cham masked performances, along with the associated masks, have been selected as cultural signifiers by ideologues (State Governments and Central Government of India), artists (indigenous performers), and artisans (indigenous mask-makers), so as to strategically develop the images of the respective states as well as India for national and global audiences. The artisans such as Hem Chandra Goswami in Majuli, Lobsang Tashi in Tawang, and Duduk Bhutia in East Sikkim, reiterated during the in-depth interviews that the initiatives undertaken by the respective State Governments to commercialize Bhaona and Cham masks and masked performances as neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist memorabilia, reinforce the identity of the cultural groups as ardent devotees of neo-Vaishnavism and Tibetan Buddhism, and also contribute to the packaging of the collective identity of the respective states as proponents of religious traditions which espouse egalitarianism and compassion, in an otherwise divisive apathetic world. Another example of representational folklorism of Bhaona and Cham masked performances are exemplified by the participation of Sattria inmates in the Republic Day Parade of New Delhi in 2018, in order to showcase the Bhaona tradition in the tableau of Assam, and the participation of Gompa inmates in the same parade in 2019, in order to represent the Pang Lhabsol

masked ritual in the tableau of Sikkim. The presence of tableaux showcasing Bhaona and Cham masked performances, along with tableaux representing other Indian states, Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO), Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, Ministry of External Affairs, etc., help in developing India's image as a nation-state with diversified yet united cultural groups rooted in age-old cultural heritage, and at the same time, committed towards scientific and military advancements.

#### **4.4.3 Cultural Tourism through Masked Performances**

Cultural tourism entails a touristic exploration with the concomitant aim to foster cultural exchange between tourists and host communities by developing an understanding of the tangible and intangible heritage of the host communities, which include social customs, cultural festivals, religious rituals, architectural sites, etc. Along with generating revenue for revitalization of the heritage, such touristic endeavors also aspire to inculcate appreciation of the host culture (Taghvaei and Safarabadi, 2012; ICOMOS, 1997, 1976).

In the Indian context, cultural and economic globalization, coupled with the “Look (Act) East Policy”<sup>67</sup>, and a concerted national agenda to assimilate the North Eastern Region of India into the ‘mainstream Indian life’, has significantly boosted cultural tourism in North-East India, which so far has remained partially isolated owing to the geo-political situations (Menon, 2007; Patgiri, 2023). In North-East India, the rich cultural heritage of the indigenous groups, as an interactive field, has been instrumental in attracting national and international tourists, thereby facilitating cross-cultural communication (Chanu, 2015). Consequently, the institutionalized Bhaona and Cham masked performances of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, which serve as “vessels” for storing religio-cultural worldviews of the neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist religious communities, have also been incorporated into tourist itineraries,

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<sup>67</sup>Look East Policy - The policy was formally put into action in the year 1991, as a reinvigorated effort to enhance the relations between India and the countries of Southeast Asia, in the face of the collapse of the cold war era structures. The considerations at the time were primarily, but not limited to economic reasons (Kesavan, 2020).

Act East Policy - Initiated in the year 2014, as a continuation of its former version, the ‘Look East Policy’, the ‘Act East Policy’ was designed to promote economic, strategic, and cultural relations with the Asia-Pacific region. The implementation of the same is also in line with India's long-term goal of developing India's Northeast which is a gateway to Southeast Asia (Kesavan, 2020).

resonating Geertz's (1995) observation that rituals become a means through which "encapsulated" belief system could be performed not only for cultural insiders but also "for visitors" (p.113). Moreover, it is imperative to highlight that the geographical landscape of Majuli as the largest inhabited riverine island in the world, the geo-political landscape of Sikkim as once a sovereign Monarchical State in the Himalayan region, and the geo-political landscape of Tawang as a land witnessing territorial dispute between India and China, play significant role in situating the institutionalized Bhaona and Cham masked performances in the discursive fields of production and consumption of Culture. It is crucial to note that, unlike the Sattras in Assam, the Gompas in Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim have been constantly opposing the incorporation of Cham performances as tourist attractions. For example, in the year 2012, the inmates of Tawang Gumpa ceased involvement in the Government of Arunachal Pradesh sponsored Tawang festival, citing that the renaming from Buddha festival to Tawang festival has altogether altered the nature of the festival. Nevertheless, while Cham is not performed since 2012 for general tourists, it is still being presented within the Tawang Gumpa for highly esteemed dignitaries visiting Tawang during tourist seasons.

Touristic intervention has altered the ritual structure and meaning of the Bhaona and Cham masked performances through appropriation of the ritualistic practices in a commercial context, which lacks the contextual complexity inherent in ritual context. The de-contextualized Bhaona and Cham performances are not an integral part of the larger framework of the religio-ritualistic occasions, but are embedded in the tourist seasons-based travel itinerary. In order to further enhance convenience for tourists, such performances are simplified, shortened and presented as condensed versions of the original repertoires, typically ranging between ten to thirty minutes, which otherwise traditionally take place within the 'sacred' precinct of the Sattras for seven to eight hours or two to three consecutive days in the Gompas. The custodian members from the Sattras and Gompas are also instructed by the tour managers and Government officials to recreate a 'spectacle' of the original repertoires by presenting episodes which are visually entertaining, starkly exhibit the uniqueness of the performative traditions, and also precisely portray the embedded religious philosophy in simplistic and universally comprehended themes. For example, in the Majuli district of Assam, the episode of *Sankhacuda badh* from the Ankiya Bhaona *Keli Gopala* is often enacted for the tourists. In the episode, Krishna, the compassionate lover dancing with the Gopis of Vrindavana

in moonlit night, transforms into an invincible combatant to slay the demon Sankhacuda, whose hegemonic masculine ego had compelled him to abduct a couple of Gopis for coercive sexual encounter. The episode exhibits the cultural costumes and mask tradition of Assam, aesthetically appeal through pleasing dances and engaging battles, along with summarizing the “dustok domon santok palon” (subjugating the vicious and preserving the virtuous) philosophy embedded in the religious teachings of neo-Vaishnavism. The episode also intends to appeal to the cultural outsiders by underscoring the global problem of human rights violation through perpetration of gender-based violence. Similarly, in the Tawang district of Arunachal Pradesh, an episode from the *Durdak Cham* is mostly presented for the dignitaries visiting the Gompa. In *Durdak Cham*, four bhikkhus impersonating the Lords of the Cemetery perform visually engaging acrobatic dance movements, while donning ‘exotic’ skeletal masks and costumes associated with Tibetan Buddhism. The representative performance also simplifies the complex ritual significance *Durdak Cham* has for the initiated adherents, and limits its meaning to the Buddhist philosophy of being enlightened about the impermanence of life, in order to overcome inner obstacles that bind sentient beings to the Samsara. Therefore, contextualizing Schechner (2003) it could be argued that in the commercial context of Bhaona and Cham masked performances, in which entertainment dominates, performances are “class-oriented, individualized, show business, constantly adjusting to the tastes of fickle audiences” (p.134).

Commercialization of Bhaona and Cham performances has also altered the traditional functionality and meaning of the associated mask traditions. In ritual contexts, masks - as ritual paraphernalia not only serve theatrical purpose of iconic representation of the portrayed characters but most importantly function as spiritual conduits for the visiting powers. Such divine and demonic ritual symbols embedded in the performative traditions of neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist religious communities, have been commoditized into decorative artifacts in the global market. The re-invented functionality of the Bhaona and Cham masks resonates with the anguish in the anthropologist Nelson Graburn’s (1984) proposition – “authenticity to memento”, which encapsulates the ‘souvenirization’ of cultural expressions as “pseudo-traditional objects” that are only meant for sale in the marketplace, shorn of the contextual embeddedness.

Consequently, the altered functionality of the masked traditions as commercialized products has perturbed the custodian members from the Sattras and Gompas. Expressing his distress, the research participant of in-depth interview – Janardan Goswami (Deka Sattradhikar of Dakhinpat Sattra) mentioned, “it is disheartening to observe that now-a-days Bhaona performances are not solely held for fulfilling the religio-spiritual needs of the neo-Vaishnavite community”, but are rather reduced to “aestheticized recreational endeavors” meant for “spectator-connoisseurs”, who are mostly uninitiated into the religious tradition. Another research participant - Lama Thupten from Tawang Gomba responded with a similar reaction, as he said, “it is appalling for the Lamas to see that the audiences for whom they are performing Cham are not the assembly of propitiated Dharma protectors and lay-devotees seeking ritual-blessings”, but are affluent bureaucrats for whom watching Cham performance is mostly a schematic means of “consuming cultural signifiers through which the ‘exotic’ Tibetan belief system is being reproduced”. The anguish observed during the in-depth interviews with the chief custodian members from the Sattras and Gompas pertaining to the difference in the viewing intent of the masked performances between cultural insiders and cultural outsiders, resonates Geertz’s (1973) observation that “ for visitors religious performances can, in the nature of the case, only be presentations of a particular religious perspective, and thus aesthetically appreciated or scientifically dissected, and for participants they are in addition enactments, materializations, realizations of it – not only models of what they believe, but also models for the believing of it” (pp.113-114).

The custodian members from the Sattras and Gompas, therefore, anticipate that the growing commercialization of the Bhaona and Cham masked performances might turn devout ritual-experts into profit-driven heritage practitioners or “touree”, reduce the mode of articulating institutional religiosity to performing arts, and shear of the ritual-efficacy of the masks and the masked performances. Consequently, it might bring in alteration in the cultural values that the ritual-performers and devotee-audiences have so far inter-generationally acquired through participation in the ritualized masked performances. Therefore, in order to preserve the religio-spiritual significance of the institutionalized masked performances, the custodian members from the Sattras and Gompas mark criteria to distinguish between votive performances for devotee-audiences and commercialized performances for tourists, resonating Schechner’s (2003) observation that a performance could be called ritual depending upon “where it is

performed, by whom, and under what circumstances” (p.130). In religious parlance, such distinctions could be further framed into two analytical categories such as sacred practices in ritual context wherein efficacy dominates, and profane performances in commercial context wherein entertainment dominates. For example, the commercialized Bhaona and Cham masked performances do not include the rituals that serve as conduits for propitiation of the neo-Vaishnavite or Tibetan Buddhist deities, such as consecration of the performance space, consecration of masks, ritual-fasting by performers, congregational prayers, etc. Such performances also do not contain any episodes featuring the most venerated deities, such as Narasingha (in Assam), Palden Lhamo (in Arunachal Pradesh) and Mahakala (in Sikkim). Moreover, the chief custodian members from the Gompas refrained the commercialized Cham performances from being held outside the Chamling, as the research participant Lama Thupten mentioned that “the Dharma Protectors of Tibetan Buddhism do not dance on the streets”; on the other hand, the chief custodian members from the Sattras insisted that the commercialized Bhaona performances could be held anywhere but not within the precinct of the Sattra-Namghar.

#### **4.4.4 Connectivity-Interactivity-Autonomy through Digital Technology and Masked Performances**

**Connectivity and Interactivity:** The “Network Society” of Manuel Castells (1996) in Marshall McLuhan’s “global village” (1992), has curtailed physical distance by smudging of the geographical boundaries; thereby bringing epochal alterations in the way people digitally connect and interact with another individual around the globe (Chattapadhyay and Chakraborty, 2022). Connectivity and interactivity, thus, can be defined as dynamic communicative process that bestow the users of the “Digital Habitats” with the agency to select and control exchanged messages in the communicative media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, etc. The exchange of meanings between the sender(s) and receiver(s) of messages, as a characteristic feature of connectivity and interactivity, also acts as a facilitator of communal practices in the digital platforms. The sender(s) of the digital texts, pertaining to cultural expressions, purposively design the uploaded messages (words, photographs, videos, etc.) to elicit desired response from the receivers, who again decode the content of the texts based on their embeddedness in socio-politico-cultural context(s) (Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013). Digital Age has thereby brought about a paradigm



shift in the traditional definition of ‘performer’, ‘audience’, ‘performance space’, and ‘performative intent’ of the cultural practices (Chattapadhyay and Chakraborty, 2022).

In the evolved communicative context, a devotee-audience of a live Bhaona or Cham performance is not merely a secondary participant operating within the institutional constraints of Sattras or Gompas, but rather an active ‘performer’ who is continuously working towards proliferation of the religio-cultural expression by capturing the lived experiences of the traditional performance space, editing the recorded videos and photographs, and sharing the intentionally crafted messages with virtual community. Drawing parallel between the ritual-performers of Bhaona and digital content creators, an audience of Bhaona performance from Majuli district elaborated during focus group discussions that as successful staging of Bhaona depends upon the expertise of the ritual-performers to effectively evoke Krishna Bhakti among devotee-audiences; similarly, successful identity representation as a neo-Vaishnavite depends upon the content creators’ ability in editing the hour-long documented footage of Bhaona performance into short clips, especially including the intricate Sutradhari nach, Dhemalir nach, divine and demonic mask traditions, etc., which highlight the uniqueness of the performative tradition of Assam. On a similar note, the research participant of in-depth interview - Lama Sonam Rinchen from Rumtek Gompa (who is also in-charge of documentation of monastic rituals) highlighted that identity representation on digital platforms through dissemination of performance videos pertaining to Cham and other monastic rituals has become more significant for the Tibetan Buddhist religious community, in order to “maintain connection with transnational adherents residing in countries like Bhutan, Nepal, etc., and also acquaint the uninitiated global audience with a culture that has withstand ‘genocide’ in Tibet”<sup>68</sup>. Therefore, it is imperative to underline that the digital platform has expanded the traditional performance space of the institutionalized Bhaona and Cham masked performances, and developed into a site whereby neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist identities are routinely (re)presented to reach diversified audiences with varied intent.

The proliferation of Bhaona and Cham performances on digital platforms has significantly increased the possibility that every user of new media will eventually

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<sup>68</sup>Lama Sonam Rinchen had referred to the annexation of Tibet by China.

become an audience of the performative traditions. The virtual audiences, who are primarily cultural outsiders and thus uninitiated into the religious traditions, behave similar to the traditional devotee-audiences in terms of actively searching and viewing the content pertaining to the masked performances. However, unlike the devotee-audiences, the virtual audiences are not expected to ‘believing in’ the ritualistic masked traditions with devotional gaze; instead, they could freely critique the performance and provide feedback through ‘Like, Share and Comment’ options.

**Autonomy:** Borrowing Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts of rhizome, heterogeneity and multiplicity as mentioned in the book “*A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*” (1987), the scholar Nico Carpentier (2007) shared his reflections on the intersection between Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and community media in the article titled “*The on-line community media database RadioSwap as a translocal tool to broaden the communicative rhizome*”. Carpentier’s approach could be incorporated to analyze how the digital space has guaranteed relative autonomy to the enthusiast learners, aspiring performers, and lay-audiences of the Bhaona performances from the authorial rigor of the chief custodian members. On the other hand, in the states of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, the digital space could only provide limited autonomy to the lay-audiences of Cham, as the relatively more stringent authorial rigor of the chief custodian members from the Gompas have strictly prohibited the learning and performing of Cham by laypersons. Therefore, unlike the Bhaona tradition of Assam, there are no enthusiast lay-learners or aspiring lay-performers of Cham in the states of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim who could harness the democratic potential of the digital spaces.

Re-institutionalization of Bhaona and associated mask tradition as academic and vocational courses has limited the interference of the ritual-experts from the Sattras in the knowledge transmission process. Nonetheless, in the classroom-based teaching-learning spaces also the ritual-experts retain authority either through direct involvement as teachers or partial involvement as members of the advisory committees. However, with the advancement of new media technologies, any person with discernible knowledge on Bhaona and mask-making gained autonomy to upload tutorials in social media platforms, and become an instructor of the cultural expressions; thereby, concurring the proposition of Szuts (2013) that the democratic nature of new media

bestows equal level of media representation without differentiating between cultural elites and laypersons.

New media has also significantly restored the egalitarianism envisioned by Sankaradeva by providing a democratic space for uploading performance videos to non-Sattra skilled performers of Bhaona (having access to digital platforms), who have hitherto not been accorded the performance space in the Sattras or lay-Namghars for belonging to certain caste and gender. For example, recalling how new media has revolutionized his career as a performer, the research participant of in-depth interview - Monoranjan Payeng mentioned that although he performs the role of Krishna in his Mising lay-Namghar, the Sattras have never permitted him to enact such a role because he is not a Brahmin. Therefore, it has always been an unattainable dream of his to be regarded as a performer of the same caliber that the Vaishnavite society accords to those who enact the roles of deities in the Sattra-based Bhaona performances. However, after sharing his performance videos on Facebook, he garnered appreciation from thousands of viewers, along with requests to perform as Krishna from the lay-Namghars situated across the state of Assam. On a similar note, another research participant – (the chief of the Mahila Samiti in Majuli) expounded on how a YouTube video featuring an all-women Bhaona performance from Guwahati inspired the women of Majuli to approach the ritual-experts from the Sattras for training them in Bhaona and mask-making. Although she reaffirmed that the women of Majuli want to conform to the religious norms and refrain from performing Bhaona within the Sattras and lay-Namghars, she also acknowledged that the democratic space of social media has provided them a platform to share the videos of their miniscule Bhaona performances, and receive recognition as performers of a tradition that has so far been only practiced by the male members of the Vaishnavite society.

New media has also provided relative autonomy to the lay-audiences from the spatio-temporal bindings of the ritualistic Bhaona and Cham performances, as the uploaded photos and videos of the masked performances could be retrieved anytime and anywhere, according to the convenience of the viewers. The accessibility of the uploaded photos and videos has also enabled the viewers to watch certain masked performances, which are excluded from the purview of the lay-audiences. For example, during Raas festival in Auniati Sattra of Majuli, the lay-women are not granted permission for ritual-

viewing of Bhaona performances held inside the Sattri-Namghar, as according to the norms prescribed by Auniati Sattri, women should not be allowed to venture inside the Kewaliya or Udasin Sattri after the sunset. Similarly, during the Vajra Kilaya Drubchen in Rumtek Gompa of East Sikkim, the lay-adherents are not allowed for ritual-viewing of the *Tsa Cham*, performed inside the Lhakhang, as according to the norms prescribed by Rumtek Gompa, certain sacred ritualistic dances could only be viewed by the ritually empowered inmates of the Gompa. However, live streaming or recorded videos and photographs of such Bhaona and Cham masked performances are circulated through the Facebook pages of Auniati Sattri and Rumtek Gompa respectively, providing the lay-adherents autonomy to access the mediated performances, which they are denied in the traditional spaces. Nonetheless, it is also imperative to highlight that the viewing experience of such brief mediated versions of Bhaona and Cham masked performances would never generate the same impact as it does in the traditional religious spaces, amidst other devotee-audiences.

In the present chapter, with the help of thematic analysis, the researcher attempted to analyze the Bhaona and Cham masked performances in terms of - social significance of the masked performances in the contemporary communicative processes of the neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist societies; dynamics of meaning-making process within the neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist societies; role of masked performances in enkindling neo-Vaishnavite and Tibetan Buddhist cultural identity; and the negotiation between cultural outsiders, Government, and the chief custodian members from the Sattris and Gompas to accommodate global forces within the performative traditions. In the following chapter, the researcher provides concluding remarks while summarizing the major findings of the present research, describes about the limitations of the present research, states the further scope of research that could be conducted on Bhaona and Cham masked performances, and also mentions about certain recommendations based on the ethnographic exploration by the researcher.