

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF THE CHANGE AND CONTINUITY OF THE 'BHAONA' TRADITION OF ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

The performing tradition of Bhaona in Assam is unique and inclusive of its kind for it takes in skills, traditional values, motivations, and intellectual-spiritual course of the performers in narrating mythological characters besides the involvement of planners, organizers, Mukha makers, and audience. The shifts and deviations are noticed in the form, structure, and performance of the Bhaona including dialogue, stage, dress, make-up, and technical advancements with the gradual continuity of its participatory practice. The Bhaona tradition in Assam has shifted from a naive form that begins at Namghar, Sattras, and villages of Assam to an adaptable and informed variety as it moves to platforms, National and International. The changes in the tradition include the commercialization of the different components of the Bhaona tradition coupled with a widening scope of the audience at local, national, and international levels.

Keywords: Performing Tradition, Folklore, Bhaona, Assam

1. INTRODUCTION

From time immemorial, mythical tales, stories, and dramatic presentations have captured the attention of people. The rich cultural heritage of India with a wealth of traditions and diversity of performing arts, tends to change over time. Simultaneously, Assam has a magnificent tradition of performing art which has been preserved and cherished till today. The enactment of mythical tales of the epics Mahabharata and Ramayana, in the form of Bhaona, was pioneered by Srimanta Sankardev (1449-1568 A.D) who spearheaded the Bhakti movement in Assam in the 15th century. The Bhaona comprises varieties of the performance of a mythological story embracing narration, songs, music, and dance. Together all make a splendid

portrayal of visual narrative with content that attracts the attention of the audience and engages the audience in a sensory experience. The term "Bhaona or Bhawana" has a Sanskrit derivation which is from "Bhavana" which means effecting, bringing out or coming into existence, a quality, teaching, forming in mind or imagination, a site, a house, (in Mahabharata, Bhagavat Purana) a place where anything grows, feeling of devotion (in Pancatantra), a reflection, contemplation (in Buddhism), right conception and notion (in Jainism), the moral of a fable (in Hemacandra's Parisistaparvan), promoting and furthering (in Mahabharata), nature and essence, mental perception (in Ramatapaniya-Upanisad) (Dasgupta, 1922, 2014). Bhaona tradition in Assam represents the theatrical rendition of religious dramas, comprises mostly the mythical tales of the epics Mahabharata, Ramayana, and Puranas brought in by the renowned Assamese Saint and reformer, Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1568 A.D) and the Vaishnavas of Assam during the spread of Bhakti movement in Assam in the 15th century (Neog, 1988). Maheswar Neog mentioned in his work how the art forms, like Ankia Naat (One act play) and Bhaona, have carried a religious message, the portrayal of which shows the victory of good over evil, generally using mythological figures drawn from the Bhagavata and the Ramayana (Neog, 1984).

Sankardeva attempted to reform the caste-ridden Assamese society of the past by propagating Neovaishnavite religion and various literature, and composition of performing art forms, to appeal to people to reform their minds. Six plays that Sankardeva composed to propagate Vaishnavism in Assam, titled Patni Prasad, Keli Gopal, Kaliya Daman, Rukmini Haran, Parijat Haran, and Ram Vijay are called which are called Anakiya Nats (Neog, 1984).

Before the evolution of Ankiya Nat, there is evidence of the existence of various Indigenous dramatic or semi-dramatic art forms that prevailed in earlier Assam such as putola nach which has existed since 10th-11th century (reference of which is found in Panchalika Vihar, Kalika Puran), Kusan Gan (another form of folk performance of the Goalpara region), Bhdri Gan, Dhuliya Bhaona, Khuliya Bhaona, Putala-nach (Puppetry), Deodhani performance and Nat-nati nach (Sharma, 1996). Scholar like Dr. Kesavananda Deva Goswami is of the view that Sankaradeva's plays made a synthetic texture of all the sanskritic and indigenous forms (Deva Goswami, 2001).

Although it is difficult to find some distinct resemblance between ankiya nat and other dramatic forms of India, then the ankiya nat is evolved from the Sanskrit dramas combining the elements of local cultures and thus possess a few similar characteristics, such as (a) numerous prevalence of dances and songs, (b) simplicity of the subject matter, (c) Use of lyrical prose, poetic righteous songs, slokas and Bhatima (A kind of prayer song) (d) use of Brajawali language (e) dominance of the role of the Sutradhara, (f) use of masks, (g) dominance of mythological themes and religious motifs etc (Sarma, 1996). Sankaradeva visited many places in northern and central India and took inspiration to make his compositions. Hence, the Assamese Bhaona has close affinities with Kathakali of Kerala Yakshagana of Karnataka, Bhagavata Mela and Terrukuttu of Tamil Nadu, Bhavai of Gujarat, Lalit of Maharashtra, Raslila, and Ramlila of Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan and Yatras of West Bengal.

Sankardeva wrote "Cihna Yatra" the first ever play, in the Brajawali language, which started a primary base of theatre in Assam and was used as a tool for spreading Vaishnavism (Sharma, 2003). Chinayatra does not have a written script now. The play was acted out, drawing on materials such as cotton, and clothes while the artists performed this play by standing in front of the painting. Sankardev's plays

follow a certain mode of performance as the singing and dancing of Gayana Bayana followed by the narrator or Sutradhara who introduces the play with his dance and sloka recitation, announces the story, introduces the actors and strung together different episodes of the play (Mahanta, 1990).

In Assam, Bhaona performances can be broadly categorized into two variants. 1) Ankiya nats Bhaona represents the dramas of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, 2) Matribhasha Bhaona, a mere common form of Bhaona possessing secular elements that represent the scripted works of Mahantas (A Bhakata community) including plays and dramas, that doesn't necessarily include the Brajawuli idiom but rather the local language or Assamese (Neog, 1988). In the course of the Neo Vaishnavite movement, the Sattradhikaras (Head of Sattras Institution in Assam) of many Sattras have written and composed dramas and charted out theatrical performances that were performed in the Sattras premise which have been used as a tool to mobilize the village community.

The Vaishnavas consider Bhaona as sadhana or the exercise of the bhakti religion. They consider it not merely an act to entertain people, but with the significance of it as a great act of piety (Neog, 1984). The religious scripture of Bhagavata-Purana enumerated the abhinaya, or the acting of the deeds of the Lord as a way of devotion. Even today the Vaishnava community of Assam believes that the piety earned through the ritual play and performances has ten times more value than the Seva given to adherents of bar-Sabah, that is explicitly, a general meeting at Sattras.

In the past, Bhaona was to spread and edify Vaishnavism with an educational purpose at hand to cultivate secular egalitarian values in traditional Assamese Society (Mahanta, 1990). Yet entertainment played a major role in the past as well, as the trend was to reform society and teach people through the medium of dance and music.

With passes of time, the entertainment element renders that makes Bhaona a more engaging community art form. Villagers participate, engage, and derive pleasure, and by and large, villagers have a tool to mobilize them. That's how the Bhaona tradition gave a distinctive personality or attributes to the village communities of Assam who are engaged in this performing art. The transferring of the entertainment element in the shades of popular culture in Bhaona performance is perceptible after the 1990s in the post-globalization era, although the educational element is non compromisingly fit in for all time.

The shift in Bhaona from past forms to the present is space-centric as Bhaona has emerged from the confinement of Sattras, an enclosed village community to a national and international platform. The art form Bhaona nowadays is no longer a naïve form performed in Sattras, rather it has been a refined, urbane, and informed art form with the shifts and innovations in it over the years. The innovations in the traditional art form, Bhaona have aided the rise of Bhaona as an identity marker of Assamese culture.

Sattras and Namghars are the two Vaishnava institutions in Assam that are invariably associated with Bhaona performances. The Sattras represent the assembly house of bhaktas (religious devotees). On the other hand, Namghar or Kirtan-Ghar represents the prayer hall, the central structure within a Sattras. Almost all Vaishnava villages in the Brahmaputra valley keep one Namghar each. Bhaonas are gradually performed by the village youth of the village Namghars.

Ethnographic fieldwork has revealed that villagers in Assam typically organize two forms of Bhaona namely annual Sabah Bhaona and "offered" Bhaona. Annual

Sabah Bhaona is preferably celebrated during April- May of the year and the expenditure is borne by the villagers. The other form, "offered" Bhaona is performed by an individual or a family as a contribution to the religious and cultural organization of the village. Beyond that, the Bhaona institution has gone through many changes and deviations over the years which makes it a subject of study.

The paper discusses the evolution of the Bhaona tradition, its change and continuity, and how these changes have culminated during the Bhakti Phase and post-globalization phase. It further investigates how the trajectory of Bhaona as art that stepped out of the Sattras and Naamghar, reached an international platform with innovation and unconventionality with competing media attention, without ceasing the devotional character of it.

2. EVOLUTION OF BHAONA ARTFORM

Mayuri Bordoloi, (2004) explains the concept of performance about Bhaona by stating this quote i.e. according to P.J Claus and Frank J, Korom, "Performance is a live presentation which is never repeated identically, It has a fleeting existence and is the product of a performer, an individual in the society.... Performance studies make little use of the standard idealized concept". The author vividly describes the phenomenon of continuity and change in the performance tradition in the Bhaona. The traditional practices of Bhaona have been changing with time since this performing art tradition stepped out of the Sattras and Naamghar by becoming more secular than devotional.

In the ideal of Sankardeva, Madhavdev, and other religious gurus of later times also composed plays and these plays were also acted. When a new sattradhikar takes the garland in a Sattras, there are traditions of composing a play and performing the same (Devgoswami, 2014). As Kapila Vatsayan says, "Sankardev and his disciples Madhavdev made the rules for writing the play and its performance mandatory to establish as the new head of Sattras." In this way, the tradition of writing Ankiya play and Bhaona became an integral part of Sattras and Namghars.

Sankardeva propagated the Devotional Vaishnava religion, which aimed at the common people rather than the royal family. In the meantime, Sankardev faced indignation from the Ahom king and the Brahmin sect but succeeded in propagating the religion over a large area (Sarma, 1996). Sankardev took the stories of Nat-Bhaona from the Bhagavata-Purana and took into account the ordinary village society of that time, where the audience came close to the narrator and actor and listened to them. Audiences from the stage or in the surroundings on seeing the Leela (Works of god) of God have become fascinated and avowed with the Maya of Krishna.

Maheshwar Neog in his work describes the structural elements of Bhaona performance. During the Bhaona performance, the entire Namghar, a space for congregational worship, is separately marked out by bamboo posts and bars. Chous are life-size representations of animals and other inanimate objects kept in choughar (greenroom). Neog mentioned how a large chou of the serpent demon Kaliya was built for Sankardev's Bhaona, Kaliya-Daman where the performers in the characters enter it and speak from within. Then, various non-human characters are made of bamboo wickerwork and covered with a cloth such as bears (representing Jambuvat), elephants (for Indra's Airavat), monkeys (representing Hanumat), and birds (for Garuda, Jatayu), horses, etc.

Mukha also forms a striking feature of Assamese Bhaona. These masks were made specifically for unusual appearances like the four heads of Brahma, ten heads

of Ravana, Rakshasas like Subahu and Maricha (Rama-Vijaya bhaona), and the bird-like face of Garuda, and so on. This has been a custom in many Sattras that nobody without a mask could represent kings. The bahuwa (jesters or buffoons), who are introduced in performance for pure entertainment and are not part and parcel of the cluster of Bhaona performers have their odd masks. Rows of readymade masks with names attached to them are kept in the storeroom of Sattras. In the last four centuries, numerous changes have been recorded in attire and dress. The Sutradhara is dressed in white garments. The dress of Balarama or Krishna boons some peculiarities whereas the kings and warriors wear gaudy costumes. The women characters in Bhaona are made to put on exhaustive makeup. In the early years, vermilion (hangul), yellow arsenic (haital), chalk (dhal), indigo, brown ochre (gereu), collyrium, mica, and lamp-black were used in the make-up of actors. Jute fiber, rags, yak tails, and properly dyed hair of different animals were used to represent hair; sometimes tufts of artificial hair were glued to the masks (Neog, 1984).

Mayuri Bordoloi (2004) in her study on the performance tradition of Bhaona makes a comparison of various accessories used in Bhaona during the past and at present. In the past, lights of large Chandeliers (Gacha), torches of burning cloth soaked in oil (Ariya), and other lamps known as Mahata, Mata, or Mahala were used. Today it is replaced by gas lights, petromax lamps, electric lights, etc. Make-up used by performers has also changed from using raw ingredients like haital (Yellow Arsenic), lamp black, and Dhalmati (Chalk) to modern cosmetics. Changes are noticed in mask making as today's masks are lighter and livelier. Changes in the headgear of the Sutradhara are another noticeable aspect.

The shifts noticed in the adoption of better lighting devices, with lighter and livelier masks are invariably keeping in tune with the time as per accessibility and availability of items on hand. Using the available elementary items available on hand requires less effort to carry and hold on to performers, eventually making Bhaona user-friendly, effortless performance painlessly operable, and capable of creating a lasting impression among the audience.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, different forms of Bhaona came into existence that were significantly different from Sankardeva's form. Some of the newer forms that emerged were Dhura Bhaona, Phaujiya Bhaona, Cukraganar Bhaona, Juri Bhaona, Baresahariya Bhaona and Matribhasar Bhaona (Bordoloi, 2004).

Among them, the Dhura Bhaona and the Phaujiya Bhaona have been influenced by Bengali culture. While Maheswar Neog has classified this form of Bhaona as 'pseudo-Bhaona', Nabin Chandra Sarma has called it a folk form of Bhaona performance. The Dhura Bhaona, emerged in Barpeta Sattras which is traveled to Kamalabari Sattras later. Dhura Bhaona is performed and led by the sutradhara who by holding a whisk moves about singing, dancing, and explaining the narrative. Phaujiya Bhaona was drawn from Bengali Jatra with a predominant role of sutradhara. It was evolved in Koch Behar and Barpeta under Mathura Das Ata, and in later phase it moved to Kamalabari Sattras (Sharma, 1996).

Recently, a converging trend is also noticed between Bhaona and Ojapali. This converging trend is seen because of the religiosity involved between the two art forms (Bhuyan, 2018).

3. METHODOLOGY

It attempts to study the Bhaona tradition in line with the noticeable innovations and deviations in the expansion and transmission of Bhaona culture as a tool of communication. The objectives of the study are

- 1) To review the evolution of Bhaona during the Bhakti Phase, and post Globalization phase with the changes and continuity from the past to the present
- 2) To assess change and continuity of performing tradition of three forms of Bhaonas in Assam namely Mukha Bhaona, Boka Bhaona, and Baresahariya Bhaona with related socio-economic implications
- 3) To investigate various organizational and technological innovations in pursuit of preserving the art form of Bhaona
- 4) To explore the communication strategy involved in the Bhaona to engage with the audience and their participation in the traditional art form.

An ethnographic fieldwork that includes participant observation interviews and documentation is carried out across the Sattrā institution in Assam. For “Boka Bhaona”, Kangkhapar Majthai Sattrā of Na-Ali Dhekiajuli Assam is chosen. The site chosen for “Baresahariya Bhaona” is Jamugurihat, Sonitpur district, Assam, and for “Mukha Bhaona in Ankia Naats”, Notun Chamaguri Sattrā of Majuli, Assam is chosen.

A personal interview is carried out with the members of Prajanmya Unmesh, an NGO to identify the organizational innovations shifts, and adaptations that are anticipated to spread the reach of Bhaona culture from Namghar, Sattrā to a wider platform at the international level. Prajanmya Unmesh, an NGO in Assam, socio-culturally rooted, has introduced Assamese Bhaona to the international platform in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Russia.

Influential contributors in the field of Bhaona like Prasanna Goswami, Tilok Bora, and Pobitra Manahata have been instrumental in popularizing and modernizing Bhaona and contributed to preserving and promoting the art form ensuring its continued relevance and appreciation in contemporary culture. Sri Prasanna Goswami, (Son of Shri KoshoKanta Deva Goswami) of Notun Chamaguri Sattrā of Majuli, has been contributing in preserving the tradition of mask making. Tilok Bora, the Principal of Mahatma Gandhi Junior College Jorhat, Assam has been actively involved in Bhaona and served as a Judge of a few All-Assam Bhaona Competition. Pobitra Mahanta, a freelance journalist and the Joint Secretary of Kala Kristi Unnayan Samiti of Kankhapar Majthai Sattrā, and Nandutsav Boka Bhaona has been contributing to the existing literature on Boka Bhaona. Personal interviews with them elicited responses about the myth involved in the narrative of Bhaona; how Bhaona interprets the cultural context and how Bhaona addresses the fundamentals of the social life of the people which is summarized in the analysis in the paper.

The paper also discusses the relationships between the mask tradition and its maker, user, social setting, and the environment from which it emanates while trying to uncover the abstraction of mask culture.

4. EARLY HISTORY OF MUKHA CULTURE

“Mukha” or “masks” were first used in the “Cihna Yatra” a Dance drama by Srimanta Sankardev, an Assamese Polymath and the first Khanikar (mask maker) of the Sattriya tradition, in the year 1468 AD. The masks were crafted by Sankardev at the special request of the Bhakats (Devotees) when the devotees wished to see the

14 parishads of God, namely Brahma, Rudra, Vishnu, Saraswati and so on which they heard only in Mythological Texts. Some of the crafted masks like Garuda and Hara for the Cihna Yatra Bhaona have been weighty and not meant to be worn. Those masks are kept alongside the painted background during the Bhaona performance.

In Sankardev's Bhaonas, masks were used to depict some special characters and to portray gods, animals, or demons. Like in the Rama-Vijaya Bhaona, masks were used to depict the fierce characters of Marish, Subahu, and Taraka; in Parijata-Harana, the mask were used to portray the characters of Garuda and Narakasura and in Keli-Gopala mask was used for the character of Sankhasura. Aesthetically, one of the main purposes of Mukha in Bhaonas is mainly to express the Navarasa (nine poetic emotions) that are difficult for the bhaoriyas or actors to express with bare faces.

The mask-making practice of Sattriya Culture which was first started by Sankardev, was then, carried forward to only three Sattras of upper Assam namely Notun Chamaguri Sattr (Majuli), Khatpar Sattr (Sivasagar), and Bor Alengi Bogiai Sattr (Jorhat). Out of these three, the Notun Chamaguri Sattr Majuli is known as the cultural hub of the Sattriya Mask Making culture and has been trying to preserve the mask-making culture on a large scale. Many Sattradhikars and their sons had mastered the art of Mask making. They have been carrying it forward to the younger generations. Out of the few, some of the prominent people were Late Rudrakanta Deva Goswami, previous Sattradhikar of Chamaguri Sattr, and his two sons namely Sri Dharmakanta Goswami and Sri Hemchandra Goswami have done commendable work in mask making. On the other hand, Shri Hemchandra Goswami played an important role by incorporating innovations in the mask including the speaking and movable masks with moving eyes.

In 1972, the Late Koshakanta Deva Goswami, one of the previous Sattradhikar of Chamaguri Sattr of Majuli, stressed the conservation of 'mukhas'. To conserve the mukhas, he organizes a Bhaona with all the characters adorned with mukhas. In 1980, he wrote a play or Bhaona namely "Kalangamusar" which was performed using mukhas and showcased in various places of Majuli. After this play, he wrote another dance drama based on the story of the Lion and Mouse, which was again performed wearing mukhas by all the characters. In the play, mukhas were used for the characters of Lion, Mouse, Poachers, and other animals of the jungle-like deer, tigers, etc. Koshakanta Deva Goswami wrote another Bhaona based on the 'Dashavatar' in Brajawali Language and his brother wrote a Bhaona based on Ramayana namely "Sita Haran- Bali Vadh- Ravan Vadh" in Brajawali language. Both these Bhaonas employed the extensive use of Mask culture.

In the past, Mukha Bhaonas were limited to the Namghars. Gradually the platform of Bhaona was no longer restricted to Namghar. In stage performance, larger fractions of the audience would watch the Bhaonas without any difficulty. Garamur Sattar's Sattradhikar, Shri Pitambar Deva Goswami played a major role in bringing the Bhaona to the stage. He brought women into the then, male-dominated performing tradition of Bhaona. Earlier women were not allowed to perform on the stage inside the Namghar or Sattr. Only male members were liable to be recruited as actors. Women's roles were therefore played by men and the monks in the Sattras because of their looks as they had long hair and clean-shaven faces. Gradually the number of stages has been increased across Majuli in Assam. In Majuli, Mukha Bhaonas are performed mostly during Raas Utsav, an annual festival being performed during the autumn season in Assam narrating the story of Lord Krishna.

5. THE SHAPE AND STRUCTURE OF MUKHA AND ITS INFLUENCE

The shape of Mukhas is based on different characters mentioned in the Hindu mythologies which include mythological, divine, kings, demons, and sub-human characters. In the past, these masks were made of clay and bamboo. Nowadays, mostly thin strips of bamboo are prepared and woven into a hexagonal pattern to prepare the endoskeleton of the masks. Then it is covered by a paste of cow dung, potters' clay, lime, and strips of gauze muslin cloth applied over the endoskeleton of the masks layer by layer. Several layers of these cloth strips are applied one after another which is sun-dried with added embellishments. After they are dried, they are painted with colors.

In the past, the masks were very heavy and stiff i.e., no movements were possible. The colors used were made from natural ingredients which were Hengul (Vermilion), Haital (Yellow Arsenic), Indigo, and lamp black. The Gum was also extracted from tree seeds (Bel tree seed). The benefit of the use of natural colors lies in washability and permanence. Nowadays, the masks are more lightweight and flexible including the speaking masks and movable masks with moving eyes. The paint used in the masks shifted from organic colors to artificial paint available in the market. In the past, these masks were made of clay and bamboo. Nowadays, thin strips of bamboo are prepared and woven into a hexagonal pattern to prepare the endoskeleton of the masks.

In earlier times, masks are made exclusively for usage in Bhaonas. Nowadays, masks are made to be sold with fine decoration as gift items which provides a source of livelihood to many young in Assam. With connoisseurs and other tourists eager to buy these attractive and aesthetic masks as wall hangings and decoration pieces, the art form is slowly getting propagated and preserved.

Although the use of the larger masks has been reduced in size and weight, then the larger masks e.g., Lutukori Mukha still prevailed with the head and hands separately built. The bounciness adds to the dramatic feature of the performance and makes the performance more realistic and spirited. Two Sattras, Natun Chamaguri Sattri in Majuli and Khatpaar Sattri in Sivasagar have adopted this new innovative mask-making method to satisfy public demand. The new developments in the masks of Bhaona are introduced to serve society. This innovation in mask culture includes elasticity in the mask form in a manner so that the eyes and lips can be stirred. Even some masked characters in Bhaona can artificially move separate units of the masks during the performance, which has improved the visual and physical elements according to the modern-day needs of the community.

Masks involve the presence of the socio-cultural milieu of different societies. In the post-globalization era, masks are used for different purposes besides the overwhelming socio-religious uses. Various ceremonies and festivals with socio-religious significance demand the usage of the mask. Given that, people belonging to a higher caste, lower caste, and tribal populations are engaged in the art of mask-making.

Mask-making tradition has attracted attention from the Government of late and drawn the attention of the local people. Simultaneously, various organizational innovations have made the Mukha culture reach the national and international stage.

This craft is taught in a gurukul setup of the past which has drawn new learners, who have learned this art via seminars, exhibitions, workshops, and other demonstrations, the kind of organizational innovations that are being recently adopted by Sattrā and other organizations at village and state level level. The mask makers have shown interest and awareness in making these crafts with a genuine interest in learning the art form pioneered by Sankardeva. The mask makers are habitually the youngsters or lads who come to stay at Sattrā to learn about Vaishnavism and different art forms including Bhaona and mask culture. Eventually, the masks of smaller sizes are sold with the intent to spread the art form so that people are aware of the majestic culture.

People of the Chamaguri Sattrā usually enact the Bhaona on the special request of local people; on some other occasion when a foreign tourist wants to watch the Bhaona using Mukha. This form of Bhaona has been also performed in various places of Assam such as in Guwahati- Kalakshetra, Ravindra Bhawan, etc, Duliajan, Digboi, Sivasagar, Jorhat, Lakhimpur-Sahitya Sabha, Nagaon- Bordowa Than, Nehru field and so on. To cater to the national audience, Chamaguri Sattrā has organized the Mukha Bhaona in various places outside Assam namely; Kolkata- Rabindra Sadan, Delhi- Indira Gandhi National Centre for Art, Bhopal-Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya, Bihar- Gandhi Maidan, Orissa, U.P, Sikkim etc. Currently, some foreign culture enthusiasts have been trying to take the Mukha Bhaona to the international platform.

The primary occupation of the people of Chamaguri, Majuli is agriculture alongside other works such as basketry, boat making, domestication of animals, etc. Common people and villagers usually don't show any inclination towards mask-making. In Natun Chamaguri Sattrā, Satradhikar, the head of the sattrā and his sons have been exemplary mask makers who added many aesthetic dimensions to mask making. Hemchandra Goswami, the son of Rudrakanta Dev Goswami, has established an institute, 'Sukumar Kalapeeth' to train village youth in the art of mask making.

6. PERFORMING TRADITION OF BOKA BHAONA

On the day of Boka Bhaona i.e., one day after Janmashtami, all the Vokot - Baishnab and Gupini assemble in the Sattrā. Kirtan Gosha is read in the first half of the day and Naam Prasanga is organized in the second half. In the evening, the Boka Bhaona celebration is carried out.

The structural aspect of Boka Bhaona depicts the way it is organized. To organize the Boka Bhaona performance, the people of Sattrā dig up clay from a clean place most preferably paddy fields. The clay is extracted from 6 to 8 inches below the ground and brought to the Sattrā in a Bullock Cart or Tractor. The clay is spread evenly in an open space, then flowers, Sandalwood, Tulsi leaves, Milk, Ghee, and so on are mixed with this clay.

In the Namghar of the Sattrā, the Janma Jatra play of Gopaldev (a prominent poet, dramatist, and chief preacher of the Vaishnava sect in eastern Assam) is organized as per Satriya traditions which includes geet-nat and Gayan bayan. Then, all the Gup Balaks including children, teenagers, and males played in the clay came out of the Namghar chanting the songs of the play and formed a circle around the clay. In the next round, Gup Balaks continue to chant the songs of the Janma Jatra play and start applying clay to each other. After playing for some time, the Gup Balaks take a turn toward the village pond singing along with gayan bayan and taking a holy bath. After their bath, they come back to Namghar and end the Boka

Bhaona with prayers and consume mah prasada, a combination of many food items offered at Namghar. Then, the people who attend the Bhaona take some leftover clay to their respective homes as they consider it to be pious and use it as tilak.

7. BOKA BHAONA: PRESENT AND PAST DISTINCTIONS

In Hindu mythology, Nandutsav is celebrated on the birth of Lord Krishna and amid festivities, villagers welcome him offering milk, butter, fruits, and many food items. Later on, in addition to offered items, clay was included along with milk, butter, fruits, and many other things, thus, which brought the Boka Bhaona to exist. Since 1704, the Sattras have been keeping the tradition of sporting clay in the form of Boka Bhaona alive to celebrate the occasion of Janmashtami.

Every year hundreds of devotees from the neighboring villages take part in the Naam-Prasanga inside the Namghar, and then play with clay heaped in front of the Namghar. This Bhaona has been playing a major role in culturally connecting the people of the neighboring villages for the last 200 years.

The reach of Boka Bhaona is limited to only a few places. The Boka Bhaona has been celebrated on a large scale annually in Kangkharap Majthai Sattras, Jorhat, although the festivity has declined over the years with lessening interest of local people. The Boka Bhaona has been organized every year in connection with 'Nandutsav' in a few places in Assam namely Kangkharap Majthai Sattras of Jorhat, Namti in Sivasagar, Roha in Nagaon, and Jamugurihat in Tezpur. Boka Bhaona is only performed by the people belonging to the Kal Sanghati who follow the teachings of Gopaldev.

In the past, the villagers surrounding the Sattras took part actively in organizing and performing Boka Bhaona as the workload was within their comfort level and was accompanied by villagers' interest, motivation, and capacity. Nowadays, local people and villagers are engaged in different professions for which the villagers could not invest the similar time and efforts as they anticipated earlier. However, the rituals involved in organizing the Janma Jatra Play of Gopal Dev have not changed over the years. The Bullock Carts were used in the past for carrying boka or clay which comprises the main ingredient of this form of Bhaona and has been replaced by tractors nowadays with passes of time taken in the new invention. In the past, people used to have an abundant supply of milk, ghee, and sandalwood to be mixed with the clay. Nowadays, the quantities of ingredients supplied have been reduced as people will have to buy these ingredients from the market.

The Boka Bhaona Kala Kristi Unnayan Samiti has been set up by the villagers of Kangkharap, Jorhat with the active involvement of the elders of the village. They ensure that the tradition of Boka Bhaona is celebrated every year and keep the tradition passed on to the next generation. The Committee helps the people of the village to come together and organize the Bhaona every year without any chaos.

8. SIGNIFICANCE OF BARESAHARIYA BHAONA

Parasmoni Dutta and Madan Sarma, (2009) in their writing give a detailed account of the unique festival of Vaishnava theatrical performance "Baresahariya Bhaona" and how this community drama festival offers an example of rural communities' belief in simple faith and a desire to retain their cultural-religious traditions and adapt themselves to the cultural homogenization. The festival commences on a full moon night in early spring which attracts thousands of spectators consisting of Vaishnavite farmers and middle-class urbanites from different parts of Assam (Dutta & Sarma, 2009).

Baresahariya Bhaona has been celebrated for more than 200 years in Jamugurihat, Sonitpur district of Assam at intervals of five or six years since 1797. Baresahariya Bhaona festival was first organized by the people who migrated to Jamugurihat in the late eighteenth century. Historical testimony says that the migration to a new place necessitated inter-community bonding and maintaining group solidarity at a time when peace was threatened due to periodic conflict with the tribes living within the borders. It gave birth to the Baresahariya Bhaona festival and made Bhaona an instrumental guide to working collectively.

In the past, the festival was very essential for the agriculture-based society for their mutual survival. Earlier this festival was directly connected to the lives of the local community, nowadays, it has attained a symbolic significance. The Bhaona festival has turned into a fair with the inclusion of other shops to attract people in different ways to assemble and enjoy the performance. Marketing logic, nowadays facilitates change in the rituals whereas some practices are still carried out in the same manner as they were first started.

In Namghar, there is only one stage, and therefore only one Bhaona is performed at a time. However, for the performance of Baresahariya Bhaona, there are multiple stages in a concentric circle where multiple Bhaonas are performed simultaneously at a time.

Unlike other types of Bhaonas, a single theatrical performance cannot be enjoyed in Baresahariya Bhaona. As there are multiple stages in Baresahariya Bhaona, each team performs for a limited time in one stage, then they move forward to another stage in a circular pattern and the next team comes in. In this manner, they cover all the stages and the story keeps on changing every few minutes with the arrival of a new team. So, it becomes difficult for people to follow when they sit in front of separate stages. However, the purpose of the Baresahariya Bhaona festival is not to make people follow the story or plot but to showcase the spectacle of multiple Bhaonas performing simultaneously under one roof on different stages.

9. PERFORMANCE TRADITION, RELIGIOSITY, AND THE PARTICIPATORY CULTURE OF BHAONA

The Bhaona as a religious act is deeply rooted in the spiritual and cultural renditions of Assam. Originating from the neo-Vaishnavism movement initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva, it serves as an art form for devotional worship and spiritual education. The religious aspect of Bhaona is evident in ritualistic elements including the invocation of deities, the recitation of sacred texts, and use of traditional music and dance. The enactments typically depict stories from Hindu scriptures particularly focusing on the life and teachings of Lord Krishna. The staging of Bhaona involved the local people of the villages who simultaneously congregate to experience the richness of the mythological cult and embrace the characters, and the morals they utter in their everyday life. The performances of Bhaona develop ideal situations for direct learning and observation of moral behavior that develops through identification with the good characters that conquer evil and epitomize goodness which is to be imbibed by the young and old of a village, thus, Bhaona tradition has been contributing to form the moral fabric of society.

Bhaona encourages audience interaction through narrative structure and participatory elements. Interactive roles of the audience include responding to the dialogues, singing along the devotional songs, and joining in with the dance movements. Through divine narratives, Bhaona aims to inspire devotion, reflect moral lessons, and foster a deeper understanding of spiritual concepts. Through

Bhaona, participants and spectators engage alike in a collective act of worship and devotion reinforcing spiritual connection and cultural identity. Bhaona by captivating audiences with its immersive and engaging performances, contributes to the moral and ethical development of individuals within the community. Participant villagers and audiences are inspired to invest intellectually and emotionally in the lives of the protagonists, their acts, beliefs, choices, and values, all are held up as standards to be followed. The stories performed in the Bhaonas are morally and culturally rich to inculcate good values amongst the audience. Bhaona's performance is such that can be understood by each member of the Assamese society irrespective of their level of literacy.

The creation of Bhaona performances is a collaborative effort. There are multiple ways in which people have directly or indirectly participated in Bhaonas. Watching or participating in Bhaona fosters a sense of community belonging among audience members and it provides a shared cultural experience that strengthens social ties. Bhaona intertwines educational value with entertainment enriching cultural life and providing a platform for both learning and enjoyment among the audience, spectators, receptors, and participant villagers. Bhaona plays a crucial role in transmitting cultural heritage and traditions to younger generations. It helps preserve and pass down folk tales, historical narratives, and traditional art forms. Participation in Bhaona requires understanding and mastery of the Assamese language as well as skills in expression, enunciation, and theatrical performances. It thus contributes to language development and communication skills.

The Vaishnavites of the Sattras contributed to the evolutionary development of the Bhaona tradition. It is believed that more religious-minded people tend to participate in Bhaonas more. Hence, more than adolescents and adults, aged people are found to congregate more around the Bhaona festivals. However, Bhaona festivals are community festivals, held with a combined effort of both adult and elderly people of the village that ensure the participation of all including young, women and children of the village in performance.

The theatrical expression of Bhaona characterized by vibrant costumes, and masks, has offered economic opportunities to local business communities and shop owners of costume and props, mask makers, and stage builders, thus, supporting local craftsmanship. In line with the potential for business around the performance tradition of Bhaona, many petty unorganized hands nowadays, have availed the opportunities to earn a source of living by making and renting decorations and items to the Bhaona performers and selling the same to Bhaona enthusiasts.

Bhaona attracts tourists interested in experiencing Assamese culture firsthand contributing to local tourism economies. People across India and abroad e.g., England, and France have visited Sattras and started learning the process of Mask making, few even take up Bhaona for the research work.

The evolutionary shift and innovations in Bhaona witnessed the introduction of comical characters such as bohuwa by the playwrights to avoid making the Bhaona monotonous. These comical characters interact with the audience with humorous dialogue delivery to keep the audience engaged.

10. COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES AND ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONS TO PRESERVE THE BHAONA

The communication strategy involved in the Bhaona to engage with the audience and their participation in the traditional art form is Education entertainment, a unique methodology for putting educational issues in an

entertaining medium by designing positive, negative, and transitional role models for the educational values that were being promoted. It is more relevant to implicate it in the performing art of the Bhaona tradition concerning the way Bhaona performs its role through its messages in entertaining and educating audiences at the same time to live a valued life. Miguel Sabido, a Mexican TV producer, initially called EE "Entertainment with a proven social benefit" in the 1960s, then Everett Rogers re-named it "Entertainment and Education" in 1979, and later Patrick Coleman simplified it to the current form "Entertainment-Education" (Sabido et al, 2004). With the work of Miguel Sabido, mass education, and behavior change via the media grew as a concern and ambition. EE communication practice involves abundance and diversity. A growing number of recent works have contributed to a furthering of the thinking around EE (Fuenzalida, 2011; McKee et al, 2004; Singhal and Rogers, 2004; Storey, et al.,1999) and contributed to a gradual broadening of its epistemological, theoretical and methodological foundation.

Bhaona by retaining EE strategy enables local communities to establish their agendas, while local communities' participation could help define their communication needs and lead to the creation of culture-centered entertainment campaigns that synthesize information in a format that joins together different levels of thought, feeling, and behavior. Performing art-based communication interventions mobilizes individuals for a specific social cause that demands concerted public action. Bhaona interventions could activate cognitive, emotional, empathetic, and culture-centered communication. Bhaona narratives accede to the important symbolic value that responds to social situations and, by making any innovative practice a socially accepted cultural practice, Bhaona can remind community members about social ills, and risks and suggest ways to prevent them.

Schools, colleges, educational institutions, NGOs, trusts, and other organizations have adopted and accepted the Bhaona tradition because of the educational-entertainment component inherent in it. Educational institutions and other organizations have started diffusing the innovations of the Bhaona tradition by accepting and accommodating changes in story, language, dress, props, and so on. Guwahati University has carried out a series of performances in alignment with the Bhaona tradition by incorporating dialogue on the importance of stopping fake news through the character Krishna. Students have performed on various subjects like road safety wearing helmets, illegal liquor, sharing fake messages, and merging with the Bhaona. Another Bhaona titled Sita Haran carried out on the theme, swachh Bharat Abhiyan, with a twist in it, by depicting a character who spits around the entire Rajmahal during the Swayamvar or marriage ceremony, who finally invited ill fate, thus sharing the message with the audience that the concept of spitting in and around is not good.

Of late, an effort to popularize the Bhaona tradition is seen among the organizers, i.e., Asom Sattr Mahasabha, Sangeet Natak Akademi, Sattriya Kendra Centre, and the Srimanta Sankar Foundation that encourage people's participation.

Sattras nowadays organize "All Assam Bhaona Samaroh" and create a platform to exhibit the cultural wealth of Assam. Natun Kamalabari Sattr during 2009 and 2010 organized ankiya Bhaona samaroh and integrated the participation of the Muslim Bhaona party in it.

Few NGOs and schools in Assam have started organizing events like penal discussions on Bhaona (recently held in Chatia H S school) to stimulate learning about the traditional cultural heritage of Assam. The organization of various Bhaona competitions has nowadays created awareness about the Bhaona tradition.

Premier NGO Aranyam in Golaghat District mobilized the local community and organized all Assam Bhaona competitions for 12 days (Bhaona competition.....,2021). The event witnessed many Bhaona groups, i.e., more than 20 groups taking part in the Bhaona performance, demonstrating the rising interest of youth in Bhaona performance. Bhaona competitions encourage innovations and stimulate creativity among performers and playwrights. Participants may experiment with new themes or modernize traditional narratives to address contemporary social issues, thus broadening the scope of Bhaona's impact. Organization of Bhaona events highlight emerging talent and give a platform to both established and new artists. Performances get visibility through these platforms, and get greater recognition and support which in turn can amplify the social messages they convey. Competitions often involve multiple groups or teams, fostering collaboration and exchange of ideas. Competitions can draw large audiences, including community members who might not otherwise engage with Bhaona. This expanded audience base increases the potential for social awareness and reform.

An increasing number of workshops and educational programs on Bhaona have helped people understand its historical and cultural significance. NGOs and Universities, both State and Central in Assam are trying to integrate Bhaona performances with broader social reform agendas. These collaborations can amplify the impact of Bhaona by combining its cultural appeal with structured advocacy efforts.

The organization of public performances and festivals has served as platforms for discussing relevant social issues and mobilizing community support for reforming societal ills. Bhaona competitions and awareness initiatives play crucial roles in revitalizing this traditional art form, expanding its audience, and enhancing its impact on social reform. By encouraging innovation, fostering collaboration, and integrating with broader social agendas organizations help ensure that Bhaona remains a powerful tool for cultural and social change.

In the gradual evolution of performance, the Bhaona tradition has embraced the innovations in the platform, a shift from Namghar, and Sattras to a bigger stage with more audience and diverse exposure which further takes a toll on the participatory culture with commercial intent. With numerous Bhaona competitions coming up, a separate group of people commonly known as Bhaona organizers is equally contributing to creating a larger exposure to the Bhaona tradition.

With time, there has been a change in the tastes and preferences of the audience. The audience now prefers to watch Bhaonas in short intervals unlike in earlier times when a single Bhaona was used to be performed the whole night until dawn. Now they are also attracted to more dramatic performances with better costumes, masks, props, music, and lighting. In the past, the costumes and props were made by the performers themselves. Now, there are special shops that provide customized costumes and props for specific characters. There is variation in the dress of Lord Krishna and other characters, usually petrifying, whereas customized dresses and masks are made for demons and Rakshahs. The kings and queens wear elaborate glittering costumes. The colorful variations in dresses and fanciful effigies of the Bhaona tradition are used to attract the audience to the performance. Scripts are now made according to the spectators' current preferences.

11. CHANGE AND CONTINUITY OF BHAONA: TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS

Initially, the Bhaona art form was disseminated via interpersonal communication channels, where performers directly interact with the audience in a community setting in a village. Over the years, many experimentations have been carried out with new scripts or themes while retaining the core elements of Bhaona to appeal to contemporary audiences. Bhaona scripts are translated into English language to connect with larger national and international audiences. Adding subtitles to the recording of the Bhaona performances helps non-Assamese speakers understand the dialogues and narratives of the old performing tradition of Assam. Moreover, English language summaries and scripts of Bhaona plays help in appreciating the stories and cultural context. Producing English language content such as articles, documentaries, and online courses helps in educating global audiences about the traditional art form of Assam.

Innovation in Bhaona often involves blending traditional practices with modern technology and creative approaches. In the attempt to preserve the Bhaona culture, noticeable innovations are seen in terms of digital channels, such as websites and social media sites that have provided space for retelling the Bhaona stories. The performance of Bhaona has been digitized and materials related to it like, text, pictures, live performances, and recordings are stored in various digital galleries or digital libraries. The digital media has possibly made the Bhaona performances recordable and unloadable on social media and online video-sharing platforms, making it easier to reach the global platform, helping to keep this cultural tradition alive and accessible.

Meanwhile, Mobile phones and digital text have emerged as efficient facilitators of the folk process. Mobile phones and email act as a transmitter of the message, unlike the traditional storyteller. Mobile phones with high-quality cameras allow for easy recording of Bhaona performances which have been further shared on social media platforms, YouTube, and other channels reaching a broader audience and helping to preserve the art forms. Artists and organizers nowadays use digital media to promote upcoming Bhaona events, share updates, and engage with audiences through social media apps. This increased visibility helps attract new viewers and supporters. Recent innovations such as the Assamese Bhaona app include the Bhaona videos held in different places in Assam. The app entails a provision for getting more videos with links to Assamese Bhaona on YouTube. Websites and social media sites also have published various videos, articles, pictures, and other information related to Bhaonas.

Digital media has brought in other innovations such as using apps for choreography, digital soundscapes, and virtual reality experiences, thus contributing to the growth and sustainability of the Bhaona art form by making it more accessible and engaging for a global audience. Mobile apps and messaging platforms allow to building of a community around Bhaona and foster a deeper connection between artists and viewers. This way, digital media, and mobile phones

Yet the stark divide between producing and consuming digital Bhaona persists between the urban and rural audiences. Rural communities as spectators are not motivated much to produce Bhaona for digital platforms, eventually consuming the same for it requires an improved digital literacy and information literacy to access the Digital Bhaona. It also requires skills to use digital technologies to engage in both cultural consumption and production. The digital collections of Bhaona are

available on YouTube, but then, the quality of YouTube videos is not good enough to cater to the interest of the heterogeneous elite, speaking diverse languages especially English speaking one and audiences from the Hindi heartland of India. To increase the reach and consumption of Bhaona, political willingness, and sustained institutional effort are required to provide co-creative infrastructure for the community and distribute novel cultural content to the audience via several platforms such as physical, online, and broadcast.

12. CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN BHAONA: ORGANIZATIONAL INNOVATIONS

The organization, Prajanmya Unmesh, a socio-cultural organization located in Jamugurihat of Sonitpur district of Assam is run by three siblings namely Arup Saikia, Sandhya Gitimallika Baidya, and Gitimallika Saikia has a team of approx. 50 students comprising students from 8th standard to graduation 1st year. They performed English Bhaona in some places in Assam and across India, namely 'Udyog Parva' Bhaona was performed on September 15, 2018, in New Delhi, 'Ravana Badh' Bhaona on January 11, 2019, in Navi Mumbai. They have taken Bhaona to the international platform. They performed 'Keli Gopala' and 'Ravana Badha' in Dubai on October 31, 2019, and in Abu Dhabi on November 1, 2019. They also conducted a week-long workshop on Bhaona in Russia in July 2019.

Arup Saikia, director of the NGO, Prajanmya Unmesh, translated the Bhaonas from Brajawali into English to connect with an audience not conversant with Assamese which met him face criticism from the conservatives including the locals of Jamugurihat who have been peevisish at any deviation in Bhaona from its pure form of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva. The organizers uploaded videos of Bhaona on their social media platform that demonstrated how they followed proper rituals such as opening with Nam Prasanga, lighting of the 5 sakis or earthen lamps, and performance of Gayana Bayana in the evening in proper Assamese tradition and Assamese language.

Over the 10 years, the organization, Prajanmya Unmesh has been engaged in translating, adapting the art form, directing and coordinating the Bhaona performance, and attempting to preserve the rich culture of the performance tradition of Assam. The organizational innovation to the Bhaona tradition is acclaimed on the international stage and enacted Bhaonas have received sponsorship from the state government of Assam and Prime East Channel of North East India. The organization's innovation with a few people's efforts with an intent to broaden the scope of Bhaona performance to the international platform complements the shift of Bhaona tradition.

The emerging role of the organization in transitioning the platform of Bhaona from Local to National and International levels can't be denied. Various organizations in Assam, e.g., Sankar Sangha and All Assam Sattria Sangha are actively involved in the preservation of Bhaona Culture. The concept of English Bhaona has attracted youth groups. Accordingly, many youths have taken the language as the medium of their participation in the performance tradition and manifest their talent and creativity at the national and international levels.

The merits of organizational effort lie in instilling a sense of duty among youth to popularize the rich tradition of Bhaona across the national and international platforms, simultaneously providing scope for ambitious youth to get recognized through Bhaona.

The number of the audience watching the performance of Bhaona has increased. Sandhya Gitimallika Baidya mentioned during the interview that the performance of English Bhaona in Mumbai attracted nearly 700 people. The figure is considered large in comparison to local Bhaonas organized in villages with merely 100 or 200 people.

Mr. Saikia responded about the preservation of the Bhaona tradition, “Intellectual assets cannot be kept within the narrow confines of a particular language. One has to change with the times and showcase the cultural wealth to the new generation across the globe. Hence, it might take time to get acceptance for the shifts in terms of forms, language and structural components of the Bhaona tradition as Bhaona is not only an art form but it has a very spiritual aspect attached to it.”

Nordveit (2010) argued that post-globalization observes global and local unification of cultural and economic specifics. The fear of loss of culture is justifiable in the face of loss of history and identity with the globalized, generic drive. However, the claims of the post-globalization era simultaneously called for respect for history and local specificity which too can't be ignored.

Simultaneously, open stage performance of Bhaona has already been popular in villages of Assam as it could draw more numbers of audiences and attract more people to participate in the tradition.

Moreover, with the spread of the performance tradition of Bhaona, more stories are getting published in the national newspapers on such innovations, e.g., national dailies like The Hindu, and The Times of India have provided coverage of the Bhaona performance on an international platform in contrast to the coverage of the local performance.

13. CONCLUSION

The stage, presentation technique, language, costume, story, characters and mask, war scene, and the use of Brajawali contribute to expanding the reach of the Bhaona tradition to the Pan-Indian audiences. Age-old storytelling and quasi-dramatic performing arts have already led the appreciation level to a greater extent. The lighting system, music, and sound system used in Bhaona have been improved. With the availability of professional makeup artists, decorative costumes, and props, the characters of Bhaona are given a personalized touch.

Performers who are already practicing the Bhaona and become part of the flagbearer organization's effort to create a wider reach of the performing art ought to consider being familiarized and habituated with both Brajawali and Assamese languages apart from English or other languages while delivering the dialogues and Bhaona bochon. This effort may complement the struggle for the revival of the endangered heritage of one culture. Organizational innovation has already received clamoring responses from the audience.

'Bhaona', a form of dramatic representation, is evolving with time. Bhaona has been working as a great tool of communication in the cultural field. The Bhaona tradition has already received acceptance in India. The overall art form, Bhaona has been innovated to a large extent taking to language, stage, music, consumption, and so on. The innovation is found in the language used like modern Assamese and English language instead of Brajawuli. With the efforts of upcoming organizations like Prajanmya Unmesh and many others, the Assamese Bhaona has been able to receive international acclamation.

To make the Bhaona tradition distinct, social institutions like schools colleges, and village groups may encourage students and community people through

awareness campaigns to attend Bhaona performances and become a part of Bhaona culture. Schools can make it a part of their educational curriculum and contribute to making Bhaona, a tool for education, invariably a popular entertainment-based educational medium. With an ardent effort to conserve this traditional art form, Bhaona can be an event for the society to experience, observe, and imbibe the educational spiritual values inherent in enacting stories, thus, serving to grow a decent society.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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