



## **Mask Dance of Sikkim: Ethnography of the Masks and Aesthetics of Good Luck**

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### **Abstract**

Sikkim comprises various communities who live in peace with each other, respecting each other's faith, tradition, and culture. The Sikkimese-Buddhist people celebrate many festivals which are unique in their own ways. One of the most prominent festivals is the Kagyed' dance, which contributes to the rich traditions and cultural heritage of Sikkim. Kagyed is a practice dedicated to the worship of the Tantric gods of Buddhism, followed by a symbolic Mask dance signifying the end of evil for the protection of the Buddhist people. Sikkim's famous mask dance or *Chaam* (Dance) is performed on the festive occasion of the New Year to expel evil from the surroundings - society and the lands. These dances differ from one another in form and subject, but they all deal with the victory of good over bad. The history of the mask dance of Sikkim is closely linked to mysticism and theology. The mask dance portrays the story of Guru Padmasambhava who is regarded as the founder of Buddhism in Tibet and Sikkim. In this article, an attempt has been made to carry out an extensive study of the Bhutia community with a special focus on the Mask Dance of Sikkim, highlighting its history, ethnography, aesthetics, and significance.

**Keywords:** *Mask Dance, Chaam, Sikkim, Mysticism, Buddhism, Bhutia community.*

### **Introduction**

Sikkim, being the second smallest State of India and the smallest in the Northeast, is a benchmark for tourism. Imbued with history and mysticism, concealed by verdant valleys and shielded by a cavalcade of holy peaks, the remote state is luring visitors by leaps and bounds. Its colourful festivals rightly remain its pride, and so is its cuisine delicately prepared from

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organically grown vegetables or ferns freshly plucked from the forests. Each village has trekking and biking trails leading to hidden lakes and ancient monasteries – the ideal routes to discovery for its wealth of rare flora and fauna. One could even visit monasteries, gaze at the ancient murals, or watch monks perform the mask dance to ward away evil.

Monasteries and monks play a dominant role in the social-cultural life of the Bhutias who are a part of the community that forms a chunk of the State's population. Their chief deity is the Tutelary Galaxy of Buddha and Bodhisattvas, the guardian deities, local and family deities. Most of the festivals in Sikkim are a celebration of religious events. The Bhutias observe festivals related to the New Year, Guru Padmasambhava's Birthday, and the Annual Chaam (dance) performed in the monasteries. Gutor Chaam is an annual ceremonial mask dance performed in major monasteries; the dance concludes with the burning of sacrificed objects called Torchen, signifying the burning of all evils. The Guru Drangmar Chaam, which falls in February-March, is another unique mask chaam that revolves around Nen-Seg-Phug-Sum (kill-burn-bury or triple demolition) aimed at destroying evils to bring peace in the world. The festival culminates with the unfurling of a 100 ft Ghyo-ku, a gigantic, appliqued Buddhist scroll, which shows Lord Buddha flanked by his two disciples, Sariputra<sup>ii</sup> and Mangalputra. This article undertakes an extensive study of the Bhutia community with a special focus on their culture and practices with a view to navigating the history, ethnography, aesthetics, and significance of the Mask Dance of Sikkim.

### **History and demography of Sikkim**

The history of the state of Sikkim dates back to the fourteenth century when a prince of Tibet, Khye Bumsa,<sup>iii</sup> travelled to Sikkim and encountered the Lepchas respecting a divine command. This contact led Thekong Tek (Lepcha chief) and Khye Bumsa to enter a blood brotherhood treaty at Kabi Longtsok in North Sikkim. Thus, marking Lepchas and Bhutias as brothers in the territory of Sikkim.

In 1644 A. D three Lams from Tibet – Gyalwa Lhabtsun Chenpo, Kathog Rigzin Chenpo, and Ngadak Sempa Chenpo arrived at Yuksam (West Sikkim) and consecrated Phutsok (Khye Bumsa's descendant as the "Chogyal" or king of righteousness. Lhabtsun Chenpo also gave his family the title of "Namgyal" to the king. Thus, the Namgyal dynasty ruled Sikkim for around 333 years, starting with the first capital at Norbugang in Yuksam. The capital was later shifted to Rabdentse, followed by Tumlong and Gangtok. However, Sikkim faced frequent invasions from

Bhutan and Nepal, especially in the 18<sup>th</sup> century during which much of Sikkim's territories were lost. The colonial period was also not in favour of the people and the administrators of the state.

The last king, Palden Thondup Namgyal, came to the throne in 1963 and ruled until his kingdom became the 22<sup>nd</sup> State of India on May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1975. Lendup Dorje Khangsarpa of the Sikkim Congress became the first Chief Minister. He was followed by Nar Bahadur Bhandari from 1979 till 1994. He was then followed by Dr. Pawn Kumar Chamling of the Sikkim Democratic Front.

Currently, Sikkim, the 22<sup>nd</sup> State of India, is led by Sikkim Krantikari Morcha with Prem Singh Tamang as the Chief Minister. English and Hindi are widely used for official purposes; nine languages have been officially recognized by the Sikkim Government, which include Nepali, Lepcha, Bhutia, Sherpa, Limboo, Tamang, Gurung, Rai, Mangar, Newari, and Sunuwar. Sikkim comprises various communities who live in peace with each other, respecting each other's faith, tradition, and culture. Buddhist monasteries co-exist with Churches, Mosques, temples, and gurdwaras. The dominant communities are Bhutia, Limboo, Lepcha, Sherpa, Rai, Gurung, Magar, Tamang, Chettri, etc.

### **Historical background of the Mask dance of Sikkim**

The Buddhist Sikkimese people celebrate many festivals which are unique in their own ways. The Sikkimese-Buddhist people celebrate many festivals which are unique in their own ways. One of the most prominent festivals is the Kagyed dance, which contributes to the rich traditions and cultural heritage of Sikkim. Kagyed is a practice dedicated to the worship of the Tantric gods of Buddhism, followed by a symbolic Mask dance signifying the end of evil for the protection of the Buddhist people.

Sikkim's famous mask dance or Chaam (Dance) is performed on the festive occasion of the new year to expel evil from the surroundings- society and the lands. These dances differ from one another in form and subject, but they all deal with the victory of good over bad. The history of the mask dance of Sikkim is closely linked to mysticism and theology.

The mask dance portrays the story of Guru Padmasambhava<sup>iv</sup> who is known as the founder of Buddhism in Tibet and Sikkim. The mask dance came into being with a cult known for dancing to expel evils, demons, and enemies. The Chaams also bring good luck for the new year. The dancers wear unique masks symbolizing animals, birds, demons, dragons, etc, and each mask has a history and folklore associated with it. The dance is performed with bright colours of dresses, with the sound of cymbals and trumpets.

The mask dance of Sikkim is closely linked to mysticism, theology, and Buddhist faith, along with pertinent facts. To know the history of the mask dance, one should know about Guru Padmasambhava, also commonly referred to as Guru Rinpoche. He is regarded as the founding father of Tibetan Buddhism. He was one of the most Indian Buddhist mystics and introduced Tantric Buddhism to Tibet around 749 A.D. Around the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Guru Chokyi Wangchuk, also known as Dharmashwari, a Tibetan lama, sat for meditation in order to meet and seek blessings from Guru Padmasambhava. The lama sat in meditation for days, and finally, through mystic practices, he travelled to “Sangdapheri Palace” (Heaven) wearing a black hat and riding a white horse. Here, mysticism meets religion. At a great copper hill, he met Guru Rinpoche and sought blessings from him. Upon meeting Guru Padmasambhava, the lama was asked to spread a message to the people on earth. The message was to explain to the people that they should practice the Chaam Dance from then on, as the dance would mark the destruction of evil and the victory of good over bad or dark forces.

Today, all over the world, the Chaam Dance is performed annually on the 10<sup>th</sup> month of the calendar. In India, the Chaam Dance is organized in the month of February due to weather reasons. A prayer service is offered on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of every month, as it is believed that the 10<sup>th</sup> day is the most auspicious of all, and it is on this day that Guru Rinpoche would put all his mystical abilities into practice.

### **Different forms of mask dance: the combination of faith and legend**

The mask dance portrays the story of Guru Padmasambhava who is regarded as the founder of Buddhism in Tibet and Sikkim. After completing his spiritual mission in Tibet, Guru Padmasambhava started looking for the four major hidden lands around Tibet. The reason for searching for the hidden lands was to create spiritual resorts for the Buddhist followers. It is said that Guru Padmasambhava made his first visit to present-day North Sikkim to test an omen in the lake, after finding the holy lake in the North District he miraculously landed on Tashiding Hill of West Sikkim with twenty-five disciples; thereafter he addressed the entire landscape and marked the hills of the west as a centre point of the sacred land. It is said that Guru Padmasambhava explored the entire area, blessing and sanctifying lakes, hills, and caves. His footprints were found on different rocks of the land. At the same time, he exorcised several demons and nagas<sup>v</sup> who attempted to hinder his spiritual works.

Chaam Dance, or the mask dance, consists of 11 different types of performances by the Sikkimese lamas of various monasteries. Each performance has a different meaning and

significance, and masks appear symbolic and different from each other. These masks represent different forms of Gods and Angels.

**Chamcho:** The first form of Chaam dance represents the removal of the devil and evil forces that exist amongst us. This dance signifies the request to Guru Padmasambhava for protection.

**Ginbap:** The second form of dance signifies asking for a blessing from Guru Padmasambhava.

**Sirkem:** This dance represents offerings to the Gods. The lamas dance with food in their hand, and they place it in the middle. The foods commonly offered are wine, tea, fruits, and packets of chips and biscuits.

**Tomnam:** The most frightening performance is the Tomnam, where Lamas with wrathful and enraged masks come onto the stage and perform the dance. These masks are manifestations of Guru Rinpoche, who, in his time, would scare the evil forces by changing his personality physically and emotionally. The dance signifies scaring away and chasing the devil away.

**Chok Cen:** The Chok Cen dance signifies offerings to the evil spirits with optimism and hopes to make them happy and hence not disturb and bother the lives of the people. The Chok Cen dance also represents asking forgiveness to Guru Padmasambhava for all the mistakes and sins that we have done whilst living on this earth.

**Ging:** This specific dance performance celebrates the wisdom of Guru Rinpoche, and the actions signify the methods of “The Guru’s practices” while tackling the evil forces and spreading peace amongst the people.

**Kadin Chenma:** Legend has it that once, five angels requested Guru Rinpoche to come down from heaven and give blessings to each and every human being on earth. Henceforth, Kadin Chenma represents the five angels, and finally, Gur Rinpoche’s face is revealed in the ceremony as he steps in front of the stage, which represents his ascent from heaven.

**Guru Chengay:** The eight different faces of Guru Rinpoche are introduced in this act. It was understood that in the past, the great guru acquired eight manifestations. Appearing in various places and bodily forms, Guru Padmasambhava guided beings towards Enlightenment. Reaching out to them in whatever world or state of mind they might exist in.

**Khandu Dengma:** This mask dance represents the five angels worshipping Guru Padmasambhava. It is an act of praise by the angels.

**Changba and Gyajin:** The mask dance also relates to Hindu mythology, and this specific dance represents it. It celebrates 'Brahma'<sup>vi</sup>, who is believed to be the creator of the earth, and 'Indra'<sup>vii</sup>.

**Phardo Chaam:** The last dance, which marks the end of the mask dance, is an individual dance by the eight manifestations of Guru Padmasambhava.

After each dance, the audience is blessed by the dancers, and then they return and head towards the monastery.

### **The mask dance: legends, rituals and symbolism**

For the people of Sikkim, Guru Padmasambhava is "The patron saint of the State." Hence, the mask dance is one of the major acts and an effort by the members of the monastery and the people of the state to worship him, cherish him, seek blessings from him, and pray to him for protection from any mishaps.

Due to the mystic history and proofs of his tantric practices, the people of Sikkim especially those who follow Buddhism truly believe in the powers and supremacy of Guru Padmasambhava, therefore the mask dance does not just portray the story of his birth, his upbringing, and the skills he possessed to spread dharma but at the same time the people believe that conducting the dance and following the rituals would be an act of cleansing evil forces and spreading peace around the land of Sikkim. Therefore, the dance is conducted every year and is considered one of the biggest festivals in the calendar year for the people of Sikkim.

The author had the opportunity to go on a trip to a nearby monastery that the locals call "Hingsang Gumpa." The aim of visiting the monastery was to meet the heads of the institution and conduct an interview. Unfortunately, nobody could take out their time as an important prayer service was going on there. The lama named "Tenzing" asked the authors to revisit the next day and promised to sit for the interview then.

The next day, Tenzing lama kept his promise and had kept aside some of his schedules beforehand to just take out some time for the interview. Luckily, he was joined by his senior student, and the interview lasted for 35-40 minutes. There were problems faced whilst conducting the interview, for instance, Tenzing Lama and Sonam Lama were more comfortable speaking in the Tibetan dialect, hence another senior person had to sit alongside who acted as the translator. In this span of time, the authors discussed how the mask dance began to its

significance, the dates, and the reasons behind doing such acts every year. While working on the research, it was evident that the best place to get the answers would be a nearby monastery where the festival of Mask Dance happens annually. As such, the visit to the Migyur Dechen Laytrolling Monastery, located at Gyalshing, West Sikkim, was carried out to get hold of firsthand information so that one could get a better and a detailed understanding of the dance.

The most fundamental observation of the trip to the “Hingsang Monastery” was that the legendary stories of “Padmasambhava” had been discussed with their mythological and theological meaning and significance. During the informal talks, it was revealed by the lamas why people consider the dance an act to cleanse evil forces. Every year, preparations for the dance event are taken very seriously and considered as one of the most important dates in the calendar year for the members of the monastery and the Tibetans around the world. The masks were kept by the lamas in their storeroom, and they prohibited the visitors and tourists from touching them.

Tenzing Gyamcho, aged about 67, is a teacher at Hingsang Gumpa (West Sikkim). He was with his student Sonam Gyaltzen. Both of them answered the questions rationally and simply. When asked about the meaning and the idea behind the Tibetan Mask dance, Tenzing lama narrated the story of Guru Chokyi Wngchuk and his vision and communication with Guru Padmasambhava, and how he was asked to carry out the mask dance, which would help the people receive the blessings of the Guru.

While discussing the meaning and significance of Chaam, he explained that the simple meaning of Chaam was ‘Dance’. As for the materials used, they both explained that traditionally, wood was used to create the mask. Since the performance lasted for quite a while, it was difficult for Lamas to adjust the wooden mask on their head. The weight of the wood was problematic. To cope with the issue, lamas in recent times have adjusted to masks made up of Fibre as it felt more comfortable and lighter. The duration of the dance, on average, lasts for 2 hours. But there are other ceremonies together with the mask dance; hence the total duration of this celebration lasts for a day or 2 and sometimes 3, depending on the monastery.

It was stated that the mask dance ceremony is more of a celebration than a ritual and that it celebrates the victory of good over bad and also the beginning of a new year. Hence, it is an occasion for celebration. People coming to view the mask dance have one thing in mind, and that is to cherish Guru Padmasambhava and to seek blessings from him. In this process, they are blessed by the senior lamas and the mask dancers, and they are also given cho (eatables offered

to Guru Padmasambhava). It is also entertainment for the viewers as the mask dance is quite unique and different from other types of dances. As for the benefits to the performers, the basic benefit was that they represented Guru Rinpoche and his story, which was no doubt a great contribution to the Tibetan community.

Tenzing Lama explained that the masks represent the eight different manifestations of Guru Rinpoche. Each mask has its own story and significance. As for the wrathful or the scary face, it was said that not all faces are scary, and the ones that are in the face that Guru Padmasambhava would make to chase the evil forces away. As for the other masks, some look happy, some look shy, some look evil, and some look lustful. He explained that all these faces also signify the inner emotions of a person.

The Mask Dance of Sikkim is a very important event for the people of the state. It is still very active today, and the government tries its best to preserve it by showcasing it outside the state and by holding the event every year. But there is a little fear amongst the people, especially those working in the monastery, that the upcoming generation would take it for granted and would lose the essence of the culture. The reason is that the children coming out of the state have more focus on the outside world than on their own state. Parents prefer to send their kids outside and the children entering and interacting with the monastery is very limited.

During earlier times, the population involved with the monastery was large, as people were quite religious and wanted their kids to learn religion and its practices. Today, due to modernization, globalization, and better scope, parents work hard to send their children to focus on Westernized school education rather than religious scriptures. The mask dance, for instance, occurs every year in Sikkim, but few know about the significance and its history. The main reason is that people who study abroad tend to settle there; they do come back to the state occasionally to focus more on business, jobs, and money rather than the culture.

The best suggestion for such a problem, perhaps, would be to ask the government to initiate cultural chapters for the students studying in Government schools as well as private institutions. An overview of different cultural practices, their significance, and history would help the upcoming generation to be in touch with the customs and practices, which would help to solve the problems to some extent.

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<sup>i</sup> The Kagyed dance is a customary festival celebrated annually in Sikkim, primarily by the Tibetan Buddhist community. It is performed on the 28th and 29th day of the tenth month according to the Tibetan calendar, which typically falls in December.

<sup>ii</sup> Sariputra was one of the top disciples of the Buddha. He is considered the first of the Buddha's two chief male disciples.

<sup>iii</sup> Khye Bumsa is named in the Sikkimese migration narratives as a 13th-century prince from the Minyak House in Kham in Eastern Tibet. His father migrated to the Chumbi Valley along with his family and established a kingdom. Khye Bumsa expanded it further by establishing an alliance with the Lepchas in present-day Sikkim. The Chogyal rulers of Sikkim are said to be the descendants of Khye Bumsa.

<sup>iv</sup> Guru Padmasambhava, also known as Riponche, was a Legendary tantric Buddhist Vajra master from Oddiyana. He fully revealed the Vajrayana in Tibet, circa the 8<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries.

<sup>v</sup> Nagas: a member of a class of mythical semidivine beings, half human and half cobra.

<sup>vi</sup> In Hinduism, Brahma is the creator god of the universe, one of the three main deities in the Trimurti, along with Vishnu and Shiva. Brahma is often depicted with four faces and hands, representing the four Vedas, the four cardinal directions, and the four ages.

<sup>vii</sup> Indra is a significant figure in Hindu mythology, often referred to as the king of the Devas (gods) and the ruler of Svarga (heaven). He is the god of rain, storms, and lightning.