From the Paddy Field to the Phone Screen: Bihu, Social Media and the Remaking of a Festival in Assam

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ABSTRACT

Bihu is the central festival of Assamese social life. It marks the farming year and gives the people of Assam a shared language of song, dance and food. In recent decades its performance has moved from the village field to the organised stage and then to the phone screen. Most writing on Bihu either describes its origins and forms or laments its commercialisation, and little asks how ordinary people use digital media to take part in the festival. This paper examines how Bihu has moved from agricultural ritual to public spectacle and then to digital expression, who appears to take part in digital Bihu and who is left out, and what this means for ideas of tradition and authenticity. The study is qualitative and desk-based. It combines scholarly literature and published reports with structured observation of publicly available Bohag Bihu content on instagram and youtube during April and May 2026, selected by stated criteria and analysed through a six-step thematic analysis. The analysis suggests that social media has widened participation, especially for Assamese people living outside Assam, and has given young people a way to claim Bihu in their own style. At the same time, platforms appear to reward what is short, bright and shareable, while the quieter ritual parts of the festival and the voices of elders, rural households and smaller communities seem less visible. The paper separates what was observed, what published sources report and what is theoretical interpretation. It concludes that digital Bihu is better understood as a continuation of a festival that has always changed with its times than as a loss of tradition, and that the question of who controls its image deserves continuing attention. Because the study relies on a limited period of observation and includes no interviews, its findings are interpretive, cannot be generalised, and offer a basis for future fieldwork.

Keywords: Bihu, social media, digital heritage, tradition, cultural identity, Assam

INTRODUCTION

Bihu, in simple terms, is the group of seasonal festivals of Assam connected with the agricultural cycle. There are three. Rongali or Bohag Bihu falls in April, marks the Assamese new year and the coming of spring, and is the most joyful of the three. Kongali or Kati Bihu falls in October, when the paddy is still growing and the granary is nearly empty, and is marked by a quiet mood, lamps in the fields and at the tulsi plant. Bhogali or Magh Bihu falls in January, after the harvest, and is a festival of feasting. The songs, the dhol, pepa and gogona, the husori and the Bihu dance are known to almost everyone in the state. For many Assamese people Bihu is the clearest sign of who they are.

What has changed is the setting. Traditionally Bihu was sung and danced in open fields, under trees and in village courtyards, and learned by watching elders. Through the second half of the twentieth century it moved onto organised stages, and Bihu competitions and cultural programmes became a regular part of urban life, especially in Guwahati. Radio, cassettes and then television carried Bihu songs into homes. In the twenty-first century, with cheap mobile data and the spread of platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Instagram, Bihu has entered a new phase. Short videos of Bihu dances, reels of husori groups, photographs of traditional dress and food, and greetings in Assamese now fill the feed every April.

This development has drawn mixed reactions. Some see it as a welcome spreading of Assamese culture to the world. Others fear that the festival is becoming a performance for the camera and that its meaning is being thinned out. Both views have some truth, but neither listens closely to what people are actually doing when they take Bihu online. This paper therefore asks (1) how Bihu has moved from a ritual of the field to a stage event and then to digital content, (2) who appears to take part in digital Bihu and who is left out, and (3) how the digital turn affects ideas of tradition and authenticity in Assamese society.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Tradition, nation and identity

Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) argued that many practices which appear ancient are in fact recent or have been reshaped to serve present needs, so that tradition is continually made rather than simply handed down. Anderson (1983) described nations as imagined communities, held together because people who never meet believe they share something. Festivals, songs and common symbols help produce such belonging, and Bihu plays this role for the Assamese. Baruah (1999) and Misra (2000) show how the Assamese language and culture became central to Assamese nationality in the twentieth century, with Bihu among the symbols of a regional identity. Bihu is not the property of one community alone: the Bodo Bwisagu or Baisagu, the Deori Bohagio Bishu and the Mising Ali-Aye-Ligang, along with the seasonal observances of tea garden communities, show that whose Bihu is displayed online is itself a sociological question.

2.2 Media, networks and digital culture

Appadurai (1996) argued that media and migration together create new imagined worlds in which images and sounds travel far from where they began and are taken up in new ways. Castells (1996) described a network society in which identity becomes a source of meaning that people consciously build. boyd (2011) describes social network sites as networked publics, where audiences are invisible, public and private blur, and content is easily copied and spread. Miller and Slater (2000) showed that people absorb the internet into existing ideas of who they are, which suggests that digital Bihu should be studied as culture and not only as technology.

2.3 Recent work on digital heritage, social media and cultural change

More recent works have moved from asking whether heritage is "preserved" online to asking how it is remade by participation. Giaccardi (2012) and her contributors argue that social media turns heritage from something presented by institutions into something that ordinary people also produce, comment on and contest. Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013) describe "spreadable media", in which audiences, not only producers, decide what circulates and in what form. Burgess and Green (2018) show how participatory platforms such as YouTube reward some kinds of content and creators over others. Together these works suggest both wider participation and a selective, platform-shaped visibility, the two tensions that this paper examines in Bihu.

Work on Bihu itself has begun to address the digital turn. Sonowal and Choudhury (2024) present a review study on whether social media helps promote the Bihu dance of Assam. An editorial by Bhuyan (2025) in *The Sentinel* reports that Facebook, Instagram and YouTube have become important means of sharing Bihu performances, and that Assamese communities in places such as the United States, the United Kingdom and the Middle East celebrate Bihu locally with the help of social media. These sources are useful but largely descriptive or promotional in tone. They say little about who is visible and who is not, or about the relation between digital participation and ritual practice. This literature review is selective and not systematic, and the gap it identifies is everyday digital participation in Bihu, which the present paper tries to address.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Objectives and design

The study aims to trace the movement of Bihu from field to stage to screen, to understand who appears to participate in digital Bihu and in what ways, and to gain a brief insight into how this affects tradition and

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authenticity. The working assumption is that new media do not replace a living festival but become one more place in which it is practised, bringing both new participation and new exclusion. The design is qualitative and desk-based: secondary sources combined with structured observation of publicly available online content (a form of non-participant, "lurker" netnography; Kozinets, 2020). No interviews were conducted.

3.2 Platforms

Observation covered Instagram and YouTube. These were chosen because they are the platforms most commonly named in reports on digital Bihu (example Bhuyan, 2025) and because they carry the main forms of Bihu content: video, short reels, photographs and greetings. WhatsApp groups and Telegram were excluded because their content is private or not easily searchable. Facebook was also left out as I didn't have access to it.

3.3 Observation period

Content was observed from April, 2026 to May,2026 , which covers the weeks around Rongali (Bohag) Bihu . Kati and Magh Bihu were not observed.

3.4 Content selection criteria

Content was located through search terms and hashtags , e.g. #BohagBihu, #RongaliBihu, #Bihuassam , #gorubihu and through the public pages of cultural groups, performers, influencers and YouTube channels . An item was included if it met all of the following: (a) it was publicly viewable without logging into a private group; (b) it was posted during the observation period; (c) it was clearly about Bohag Bihu (dance, song, husori, dress, food, greetings or ritual); and (d) it showed enough information (caption, language, account type) for its theme to be noted. Content was excluded if it was private, was an advertisement with no Bihu content, or could not be identified as Bihu-related. In all, approximately 20-30 items were reviewed. Items were not drawn by random sampling and were not counted for frequency. Because platforms recommend content according to the viewer's history, the starting point was the researcher's own feed.

3.5 Procedure for thematic analysis

Observation notes were analysed following the six phases of thematic analysis set out by Braun and Clarke (2006). (1) I familiarised myself with the notes and the items. (2) I coded each item for type of content (dance, song, husori, dress, food, ritual, greeting), language, apparent maker (household, student group, club, professional artist, brand), form of presentation, and tone of audience response. (3) I grouped codes into candidate themes. (4) I reviewed the themes against the coded items and the literature. (5) I named the final themes: from field to stage to screen, who takes part, homeland and migration, shareable Bihu and ritual, and authenticity and commercialisation. (6) I wrote up the analysis, marking in each case whether a statement rests on observation, on published sources or on theory (see Section 5.6). Themes were not quantified.

3.6 Ethics

Only publicly accessible content was viewed. No private accounts or groups were entered, no one was contacted, and no individual user is named or quoted. Examples in Section 5.1 are described in general terms so that the original poster cannot be identified.

THE SETTING: BIHU IN ASSAMESE SOCIAL LIFE

Bihu is rooted in a rice-growing society. Its three forms follow the stages of cultivation: the sowing and new year in spring, the anxious waiting of autumn and the feasting after harvest. The songs speak of love, of the seasons, of the work of the field and of the joys and troubles of village life. In the village, Bihu was learned informally. Young people picked up the songs and steps from elders and from each other, and the husori groups going from house to house were a means of social contact as well as blessing. Food, the exchange of the traditional gamosa, visits to elders and the washing of cattle were part of an interlocking set of customs.

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Urbanisation changed this. As more people moved to towns and cities, the field was no longer the centre of the festival. Community committees began to hold Bihu programmes on stages, with a fixed schedule, an audience, competitions and sponsors. This brought Bihu to people who had never lived in a village and gave dancers and singers a public platform, but it also made the festival a performance in which one group performs for another. Television and recorded music extended this further. When Bihu entered social media, then, it entered a culture already used to seeing the festival as something to be displayed.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Each subsection below is labelled by the kind of evidence behind it: **Observed** (seen in the public content reviewed), **Reported** (stated in published sources) or **Interpretation** (an argument drawn from theory, not directly shown by the observation).

5.1 From the field to the stage to the screen

Observed: In the content reviewed, much appeared to be made by ordinary households, students, college groups and village clubs, with the phone as the only equipment, alongside content by professional artists and cultural pages. Some of the Items observed consisted of e.g. A short reel by a college group dancing in a courtyard, shared on Instagram in April ,2026; a husori group's video on Youtube; a greeting post in Assamese by an instagram page.

Interpretation: The shift from field to stage was a shift from participation to audience. The shift from stage to screen allows the audience itself to become the performer. In this sense digital media may have returned some of the informality of the old festival, even as they place it before a much larger and invisible audience.

5.2 Who takes part

Observed: Young people seemed the most active, using trending music, edited clips and new fashions in traditional dress. Women were highly visible as dancers and as the faces of the festival. Elders, who hold most of the knowledge of the ritual and the older songs, seemed far less visible, and their knowledge was usually shown only when a younger relative recorded it.

Interpretation: The high visibility of women is consistent with their long place in Bihu dance, but it raises questions about how the camera looks at them and how their images are used and commented upon. Access to a smartphone, reliable data and digital skills is likely to be uneven between town and village, richer and poorer households, and different communities, so what the feed shows appears weighted towards the urban, the young and the connected. Age, place and community are hard to judge from public posts, so these impressions rest on limited evidence.

5.3 Homeland, migration and belonging

Reported: Published commentary notes that Assamese communities abroad use social media to celebrate Bihu in their localities (Bhuyan, 2025).

Observed: Greetings and videos appeared to come from people marking the festival away from Assam. Location tags on Instagram posts, such as Delhi, California suggests this.

Interpretation: This fits Appadurai's idea of cultural forms travelling through media and migration, and shows how digital Bihu can strengthen the imagined community described by Anderson, since people far apart can feel that they celebrate on the same few days. At times it produces a nostalgic mood in which Bihu stands for the village and childhood left behind.

5.4 Shareable Bihu and the fate of ritual

Observed: The parts of Bohag Bihu that appeared most often were dance, music, dress and food, which are lively, colourful and brief. The quieter ritual parts, such as washing the cattle on the first day, visits to elders the husori blessings, were much less visible.

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Hypothesis, not finding: Because observation was carried out around Bohag Bihu, Because observation was carried out around Bohag Bihu, the suggestion that Kati and Magh Bihu receive far less attention, and that platforms favour the cheerful over the contemplative, needs further study. The same applies to any claim that young people who learn Bihu mainly through the feed take the part for the whole, for which this study has no evidence.

Interpretation: Drawing on boyd (2011) and Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013), content that is short and shareable is more easily copied and spread, so the festival that circulates online is likely to be an attractive part of Bihu but a part.

5.5 Authenticity, commercialisation and diversity

Observed: Some posts mixed Bihu with film songs, changed steps or fashionable costume, and some pages and brands used Bihu greetings and content for promotion. Comments on such posts included both praise and criticism of changes.

Interpretation: Hobsbawm and Ranger's idea that tradition is continually remade helps here: the answer to "what is Bihu" is not fixed at one moment in the past, and stage Bihu was itself once new. Commercialisation can support artists but can also turn a shared festival into a marketing season. As for diversity, when Bihu on the screen is shown mostly in one form and one language, the festivals of smaller communities may be overlooked or presented as variants of a main form, though social media also lets these communities tell their own stories. Which happens depends on who posts and who is heard. The present observation did not systematically examine content from these communities.

5.6 Summary: what rests on what

Claim	Observation	Published sources	Theory
Participation has widened, with ordinary people making content	Partly (impression from items reviewed)	Partly (Bhuyan, 2025)	Spreadable media; networked publics
Young people are most active; elders less visible	Yes (impression, not counted)	Not directly	Digital divide reasoning
Diaspora use digital Bihu to stay connected	Limited	Yes (Bhuyan,2025)	Appadurai; Anderson
Shareable parts travel; ritual is less visible	Yes for Bohag Bihu only	Not directly	boyd; Jenkins et al.
Digital Bihu is continuity, not loss of tradition	No (ritual practice not examined)	Partly	Hobsbawm and Ranger; Miller and Slater
Smaller communities may be overlooked	Not systematically examined	Not directly	Identity politics literature

DISCUSSION

The material suggests that digital Bihu is neither a simple loss nor a simple gain. People do not appear to be leaving Bihu for the screen; they are carrying it onto the screen and adapting it to a new kind of public. This fits Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983) view of tradition as remade and Miller and Slater's (2000) finding that new technologies are absorbed into existing identities. The reading of digital Bihu as continuation rather than loss is a theoretical interpretation. The study did not examine what has been lost or kept in ritual practice itself.

Three points follow. First, participation: social media seems to have opened the festival to people who were once only watchers and to those far from Assam, strengthening the belonging Anderson (1983) described. Second, selection and voice: platforms reward what is quick and attractive, the audience is unseen, and

content can be detached from context (boyd, 2011), so ritual elements, elders, rural households and smaller communities may be less visible. This matters because the knowledge of the old songs and rituals lies largely with them. Third, control: my reading is that anxiety about authenticity is really anxiety about who decides how Bihu changes and who benefits. Digital media could help if the holders of older knowledge are brought in, for example through recording and sharing of older songs and customs by cultural groups, schools and colleges. These are suggestions for further inquiry rather than conclusions drawn from the data.

LIMITATIONS

The study is qualitative and desk-based, relies on secondary sources and observation of public content at a limited time of year, and so cannot be generalised. Observation was confined to Bohag Bihu, so statements about Kati and Magh Bihu are hypotheses. Content was not randomly sampled, and because the sample was small (about 20–30 items) it was not counted for frequency analysis, so statements about how much content comes from households, young people or elders are impressions. Platform recommendations shape what is seen, and the starting point may have skewed the window. Age, place and community are hard to judge from public posts. There is no baseline of participation before social media, so the claim that participation has widened is a reading of the material, not a measured change. The study has no interviews and does not cover the many communities who celebrate their own forms of the festival in depth. The reference list is selective and not a full review of writing on Bihu.

Future work should include interviews with cultural practitioners, young participants, elders and members of the Assamese diaspora, in rural and urban settings, a systematic and counted sample across platforms and across Bohag, Kati and Magh Bihu, and closer study of smaller communities' festivals.

CONCLUSION

This paper has looked at Bihu as a festival that has moved from the paddy field to the stage and now to the phone screen. On the evidence available, social media appears to have widened participation, strengthened ties between Assamese people at home and away, and given young people a means of claiming Bihu in their own style, while favouring the bright and the brief and showing unevenly who is heard. Whether this amounts to continuity of tradition is an interpretation that fieldwork must test. What can be said is that the people who hold Bihu's older knowledge, and the smaller communities that celebrate it in their own ways, deserve a place in how it is shown.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical approval: The study did not involve human participants or animals. It used only published works and publicly accessible online content, and no individual user is identified, so ethical approval was not required.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The study draws on published literature listed in the references and on publicly accessible social media content, which can be viewed on the respective platforms. No separate primary dataset was generated or stored, and the observation notes are not publicly archived.

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