



GLOBALIZATION AND ASSAMESE BIHU: CULTURAL CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

Dr. Swapan Jyoti Nath ^{*1}

^{*1} Assistant Professor, Khagarijan College, Nagaon, Assam, India

Abstract

Globalization, as a transformative socio-economic and cultural phenomenon, has had far-reaching implications for local traditions worldwide. In the Indian context, regional festivals like Assamese Bihu, a cornerstone of Assamese cultural identity, have witnessed dynamic shifts under the influence of global interconnectedness. This paper explores the evolving nature of Bihu in response to globalization, examining the balance between cultural preservation and transformation. It analyzes how Bihu traditionally a community-centric agrarian festival, has adapted to modernity through media, diasporic engagement, commercialization, and cross-cultural exposure.

Keywords: Globalization, Assamese Bihu, Cultural continuity, Cultural change.

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1. Introduction

Globalization, the process of increased interconnectedness among countries through trade, communication, and culture, has significantly influenced traditional festivals like Bihu in Assam. While globalization brings new opportunities for cultural exchange, it also poses challenges to the authenticity and traditional values of such indigenous celebrations. Globalization, marked by increased cross-border flows of people, information, and goods, has reshaped traditional cultures and practices across the globe. Bihu, the traditional festival of Assam, India, is not immune to these transformations. Comprising three distinct festivals—Rongali (Bohag), Kongali (Kati), and Bhogali (Magh) Bihu—this celebration reflects the agrarian rhythms and socio-cultural ethos of the Assamese people. This paper investigates how globalization has influenced the practice, representation and perception of Bihu within Assam and among the Assamese diaspora.

2. Traditional Context of Bihu and Conceptual Framework

Bihu, the most vibrant and culturally significant festival of Assam, traditionally reflects the agrarian lifestyle, seasonal rhythms, and social cohesion of Assamese society. Comprising three

main festivals—Rongali, Kati, and Bhogali Bihu—it celebrates different stages of the agricultural cycle, blending rituals, dance, music, and communal gatherings. In its traditional context, Bihu is deeply rooted in folk practices, with performances using instruments like the Dhol and Pepa, and songs that celebrate love, fertility, and nature. However, in the context of globalization, Bihu has undergone visible transformations. The conceptual framework to study this shift includes key dimensions such as cultural identity, continuity, and change. While core elements of Bihu remain intact, modern influences such as media, commercialization, and diaspora celebrations have altered its form and presentation. This evolving nature of Bihu reflects the dynamic interplay between preserving cultural heritage and adapting to global cultural flows, raising critical questions about authenticity, identity, and sustainability of indigenous traditions in a rapidly changing world. Historically, Bihu is deeply rooted in Assamese rural life. Each version of Bihu corresponds to a particular agricultural phase:

- Rongali Bihu (Bohag Bihu) marks the Assamese New Year and the onset of sowing season. It is vibrant and celebratory, involving dance (Bihu Naas), music, and community feasting.
- Bhogali Bihu (Magh Bihu) coincides with the end of the harvesting season, emphasizing abundance and feasting.
- Kongali Bihu (Kati Bihu) is observed during a lean agricultural period, with rituals to protect crops and cattle.

Traditionally, Bihu has been localized, agrarian, and community-focused—largely untouched by external influences.

The conceptual framework of the study "Globalization and Assamese Bihu: Cultural Continuity and Change" is grounded in the intersection of cultural studies, globalization theory, and regional identity. This framework views Bihu not merely as a seasonal or festive event but as a cultural expression deeply embedded in the Assamese socio-cultural fabric. Traditionally, Bihu has symbolized agricultural cycles, community bonding, and folk traditions expressed through music, dance, and rituals. However, with the advent of globalization—marked by increased media exposure, commercialization, migration, and cultural exchange—Bihu is undergoing visible transformations in its form, practice, and social significance. The framework draws upon theories of cultural continuity, which emphasize the preservation of identity through adaptation, and theories of cultural change, which highlight the shifts brought about by global forces. It also explores how Bihu is reinterpreted in urban contexts, digital platforms, and diasporic communities, reflecting both resistance to and incorporation of modern influences. This conceptual approach allows for an analysis of how globalization affects indigenous traditions like Bihu—whether it leads to cultural erosion, hybridization, or revitalization—while also understanding the agency of the Assamese people in negotiating their cultural heritage within a globalized world.

3. Impact of Globalization on Bihu

Globalization has significantly influenced cultural practices across the world, and Assamese Bihu is no exception. Traditionally rooted in agrarian society, Bihu reflects the rhythm of nature, local customs, and Assamese identity. However, with the growing impact of global trends, media exposure, and urbanization, several changes have been observed in the way Bihu is celebrated today. One notable change is seen in costumes. Earlier, people would wear handwoven traditional

attire such as the Mekhela-chador made from Paat (mulberry silk) or Eri (castor silk), but now synthetic fabrics, readymade garments, and fusion styles influenced by Bollywood and Western fashion have begun replacing or blending with traditional wear. Similarly, food habits associated with Bihu have undergone transformation. Traditional dishes like pitha, laru, doi-chira, and maasor tenga are still prepared, but their preparation is increasingly replaced by store-bought versions or supplemented with non-indigenous foods and beverages influenced by global tastes and urban lifestyles.

Rituals too have witnessed a shift. The Husori tradition—where groups sing and perform Bihu dances from house to house—has declined in urban areas, replaced instead by stage performances and televised shows. Globalization has also led to the commercialization of Bihu celebrations, with sponsorships, professional competitions, and media coverage altering its communal and rural essence. Yet, despite these changes, cultural continuity persists. Many Assamese people actively seek to preserve their heritage through local festivals, school programs, and community efforts that revive traditional songs, dances, and customs. In this way, Bihu has become a site where continuity and change coexist—adapting to modernity while still retaining its core cultural values.

3.1. Media and Technological Influence

Media and technological advancements have significantly influenced the celebration and perception of Bihu in contemporary times. With the rise of television, radio, social media, and streaming platforms, Bihu performances are now broadcasted widely, allowing the festival to reach audiences far beyond Assam. This digital exposure has popularized Bihu songs and dances among younger generations and the Assamese diaspora, ensuring its continued relevance. However, the influence of media has also led to commercialization and stylization of traditional performances. Stage competitions, reality shows, and online content often prioritize glamour and mass appeal over cultural authenticity. Technological innovations such as sound amplification, modern instruments, and digital recording have enhanced the quality of performances but also altered the original folk aesthetics. While media and technology have helped preserve and promote Bihu globally, they also raise concerns about the dilution of its traditional essence and the balance between cultural preservation and modernization. With the rise of satellite television, internet, and social media, Bihu has moved from courtyards and village fields to global digital platforms. The broadcast of Bihu celebrations on regional and national TV channels, and more recently on platforms like YouTube and Instagram, has turned Bihu into a performative and sometimes commercial spectacle.

3.2. Commercialization and Sponsorship

Corporate sponsorship has begun to play a prominent role in Bihu functions, especially in urban areas like Guwahati. Stage performances, Bihu competitions, and even fashion shows during Rongali Bihu reflect an evolving festival ethos, raising concerns over commodification and dilution of traditional values.

3.3.Diaspora and Cultural Export

The Assamese diaspora across the globe, especially in North America, the UK, and the Middle East, have adapted Bihu to their multicultural surroundings. These celebrations often blend Assamese traditions with host country customs, promoting cultural dialogue but also generating hybrid forms of the festival.

3.4.Tourism and Cultural Branding

Bihu is now marketed as a tourist attraction. Government and cultural organizations present Bihu as a symbol of Assam's identity to global audiences, thereby fostering cultural pride but also shaping the festival into a "performance" for outsiders.

4. Tensions between Authenticity and Adaptation

While globalization has amplified Bihu's reach and relevance, it has also raised concerns over cultural authenticity, homogenization, and loss of ritual depth. The traditional elements of Bihu—such as village youth gathering under the moonlight, traditional instruments like the Pepa and Toka, and community bonding—are increasingly replaced by commercial music, synthetic costumes, and competitive stage formats.

However, others argue that adaptation ensures survival. By embracing modern platforms and engaging youth through new forms, Bihu remains a living, dynamic tradition rather than a static relic.

5. Gender and Identity in Globalized Bihu

Globalization has also influenced gender roles within Bihu. In earlier times, Bihu dance and music were community-based and gender-normative. Today, the increased visibility of female performers, the emergence of Bihu as a professional career path, and the infusion of feminist discourse challenge traditional boundaries. Similarly, Bihu now offers a platform for ethnic identity expression, particularly for marginalized groups seeking representation.

6. Conclusion

Bihu stands as a powerful symbol of Assamese identity, resilience, and adaptability. In the face of globalization, Bihu has transformed—not merely in form, but in function. It is now a vehicle for cultural diplomacy, identity politics, and global Assamese connectivity. While these changes present challenges to cultural purity and continuity, they also offer opportunities for reinvention and global recognition.

Ultimately, the future of Bihu lies in balancing preservation with innovation, ensuring that while the rhythms may change, and the heartbeat of Assamese culture remains strong. In conclusion, the impact of globalization on Assamese Bihu has brought both opportunities and challenges. While it has expanded the reach of this vibrant festival beyond regional boundaries, giving it a global platform and renewed visibility, it has also introduced elements of commercialization and cultural

modification. Despite these changes, the core spirit of Bihu—its deep connection to nature, agriculture, community, and identity—continues to endure. This balance between preserving tradition and embracing change reflects the dynamic nature of culture itself. Moving forward, it is essential for communities, cultural institutions, and the media to promote Bihu in ways that honor its roots while thoughtfully integrating modern influences. In doing so, Assamese Bihu can remain a living, evolving celebration that continues to unite generations across time and place.

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*Corresponding author.

E-mail address: swapanjnath2016@gmail.com