Navigating Generational Frictions Through Bihu Festival Performance in Assam, India

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Abstract: Drawing on research conducted during doctoral fieldwork in Assam, India from 2009 to 2016, this article investigates frictions that shape narratives of generational change. In addition to exploring how female performers in rural Assam creatively interpret the narrative themes of Bihu as they transition from youth to adulthood, I situate the work of singer Khagen Mahanta, whose performances contributed to the mass popularity of Bihu, alongside more recent musical innovations of his son, who has become an icon of Assamese youth culture. These discussions intersect with my experiences performing with artists who move between ritual contexts, festival stages, and competitions.

Résumé : À partir d'un travail de terrain mené dans le cadre d'une recherche doctorale dans l'État d'Assam en Inde, de 2009 à 2016, cet article enquête sur les frictions qui donnent forme aux récits de changement générationnel. En plus d'explorer la façon dont les interprètes féminines de l'Assam rural recréent les thèmes narratifs du Bihu au moment où elles opèrent leur transition de la jeunesse à l'âge adulte, je mets en contexte le travail du chanteur Khagen Mahanta, dont les interprétations ont contribué à donner au Bihu une grande popularité, de pair avec les innovations musicales plus récentes de son fils, qui est devenu une icône culturelle des jeunes assamais. Ces discussions s'entrecroisent avec mes propres expériences d'interprétation avec des artistes qui se déplacent entre contextes rituels, scènes de festivals et concours.

Featured on state television programs, public competition stages, and in intimate village courtyards alike, Bihu music and dance performances provide some of the most visible, gendered, and embodied examples of public culture in the northeastern Indian state of Assam. The annual Assamese Bihu festival is more than a temporal marker of the beginning of spring and a new calendar year, the ushering in of a new planting season in the agricultural cycle, and a celebration of fertility. Bihu also provides

a context in which relationships are cultivated and affirmed between families and friends, between humans and the natural world, and between individual selves and multiple imagined communities. In a society where over half the population works in agriculture (Saikia 2008: 45), the lyrical texts of Bihu songs resonate profoundly, describing human love as deeply connected to the natural world. Some Bihu songs carry a nostalgic tone, as the singer remembers village life as simpler and more plentiful than his or her current urbanized existence. And yet other songs express a longing to leave the village where daily toil in the fields is a heavy burden and urban life promises a better future. Bihu melodies are recognizable by their pentatonic contours, rising and falling around a minor triad, as men and women call out and respond to each other, dancing to the swinging three-beat cycle of the *ḍhul* drum (Diagram 1).

1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
ghen	ta	ki	di	ghen	–	tak	ta	ki	di	ghen	–

Diagram 1: Bihu rhythmic pattern with *ḍhul* drumming syllables.

Drawing on research conducted during my doctoral fieldwork in Assam, India, from 2009 to 2016, this article investigates frictions that shape narratives of generational change. In contrast to studies examining expressions of youth culture in South Asia through neoliberal practices of consumption (e.g., Saldanha 2002; Liechty 2003; Nakassis 2016), in this article, I focus on how intergenerational relationships shape young people's transition from youth to adulthood through the lens of the Bihu festival. Rather than emphasizing youth culture as a central locus for the production of youth agency, this approach demonstrates the importance of analyzing young people's experiences in the context of the families and communities in which they live (Cole 2008). I analyze the friction produced through intergenerational engagement with and interpretation of shared cultural practices in relation to social norms governing the performance of Bihu music and dance related to age, class, and gender. While recognizing pioneering studies that countered colonial constructions of South Asian women as submissive carriers of tradition through analysis of folk song texts (e.g., Raheja and Gold 1994; Raheja 1997), I seek to avoid reifying agency and resistance by attending to the ways in which possibilities for action are not always oppositional to broader structures of heteropatriarchy (Bedi 2016).

The transformation of Bihu song and dance into a folkloric performance tradition has also produced friction between cultural authorities,

ritual practitioners, and creative artists. From the early 1950s, when middle-class Assamese singers such as Khagen Mahanta began incorporating Bihu songs into their repertoire, through the early 2000s, when Bihu fusion projects created by Mahanta's son Papon became iconic of Assamese youth culture, performers in ritual contexts have also participated in the intergenerational process of recreating Bihu each year. The festival's association with youthful desire makes it a particularly fruitful context in which to investigate the problems and advantages of social regeneration, what Karl Manneheim called "fresh contact" in his classic essay, "The Problem of Generations" (1972). My own experiences performing in Assam with celebrity and everyday artists who move between ritual contexts, festival stages, and music and dance competitions inform this analysis of the ways in which young people creatively interpret the narrative themes of Bihu in their daily lives as they transition from youth to adulthood.

The Assamese Bihu Festival and Generational Change

Unlike many other festivals in South Asia – for example Holi, Muharram, the Punjabi festival Vaisakhi, the Rajasthani festival Gangaur, or the Tamil harvest festival Pongal – Bihu is often described as "secular" and not marked primarily by rituals and traditions of one religious community. Even *Onam*, the post-monsoon festival famously celebrated in Kerala by people of all religions, castes, and classes, has its roots in Hindu mythology, annually marking the homecoming of King Mahabali who was sent to the underworld by an avatar of Vishnu. Cultural authorities in Assam and abroad continue to contest Bihu's origins, some claiming that indigenous communities in the region created Bihu (Goswami 2003; Borah 2005; Barua 2009) and others arguing that the *Āhum* carried Bihu with them from Burma during the 13th century (Gogoi 1969; Gandhiya 1988).

Rather than myths or practices associated with one of India's recognized religions, agricultural practices are commonly cited as the basis for Bihu festival rituals, which are performed during the first few days of Bohāg, the first month of the Assamese lunisolar calendar. Nonetheless, the influence of the Hindu devotional revival led by the charismatic reformer Xongkordew (1449-1569) is clear in contemporary Bihu ritual performance contexts.[1] Much like devotional revivals in other parts of India, Xongkordew's movement drew on local performance forms to spread a simple, direct message of devotional love (*bhokti*) by adopting and transforming melodies, rhythms, lyrical conventions, and performance practices. Xongkoriā

expressions of religious devotion to Vishnu through his incarnations as Krisno, Hori, and Rāma are abundant in *husori* songs performed by men as part of Bihu ritual practice. The ambulatory performances of young men and women who participate in ritual exchanges of song, dance, and blessings in the courtyards of village homes begin at the local *nāmghor* temple, marking it as an auspicious place to usher in the New Year.

While husori songs, which are performed by men, tend toward devotional themes and historical ballads, the lyrical themes of many mixed-gender Bihu songs communicate heterosexual romantic desire. This erotic passion is not expressed through evoking Krisno's relationship with Rādhā, as is the case in songs associated with the Holi festival, for example (Jassal 2012). Bihu songs derive their erotic force from metaphorical comparisons with nature, such as a man admiring the tight skin on a pair of ripe tomatoes, or a flower blooming to reveal something hidden inside. In contrast to the devotional revivals led by Kabir in north India and by Sri Chaitanya in Bengal, Xongkordew de-emphasized the role of Rādhā's erotic relationship with Krisno in his interpretation of Hindu scriptures, most likely due to his rejection of local Shakta traditions, which at the time incorporated esoteric sexual rites and blood sacrifice as part of the worship of the female aspect of the divine (Urban 2010: 151).

The expansion of Bihu song and dance performance contexts from locally focused village rituals in the northeastern region of Assam to proscenium stages statewide is marked by narratives of generational change. Although the "public" commemoration of Bihu beyond ritual practice concentrated locally in village communities is documented as early as 1918,[2] it was not until the 1950s that music and dance were incorporated into staged Bihu events and framed as entertainment.[3] The folkloricization of Bihu music and dance coincided with student union-driven social and political movements for Assamese linguistic and cultural sovereignty following Indian Independence, which supported a burgeoning sense of Assamese nationalism.

One of the first and best-known singers who actively collected and recreated Bihu songs as entertainment was Khagen Mahanta (1942-2014). Mahanta told me in an interview that during his childhood in the town of Nagaon, Bihu was not performed by people in middle-class families like his, but was associated with lower-class people (personal communication, April 11, 2009). During his travels to villages with his father who was a *xotro-dhikār*, the head of a Xongkoriyā monastery, Mahanta heard people singing and saw them dancing Bihu. When his singing career took off in his early twenties, he incorporated Bihu into his repertoire, envisioning the folk genre

as a medium to unite the people of the diverse and politically fractured state of Assam.

Mahanta explained to me that he was taking a risk by performing Bihu, which was not highly regarded by mainstream society in the 1950s. But as his fame grew, Mahanta became known for singing Bihu songs. Although his father originally disapproved, and was criticized heavily by others who insisted that Bihu was not appropriate for "our class of people," he ultimately decided to support his son's artistic endeavours. As a singer and later composer hired by All India Radio (AIR) in Guwahati, Khagen Mahanta and his wife Archana Mahanta, who was an AIR singer in her own right, participated in the process of codifying and institutionalizing regional folk musics, a project in which AIR played a central role across India (Fiol 2012). This story of generational friction specifically related to class and folkloricization features prominently in Mahanta's narration of his early career and his role in the transformation of Bihu.

The adoption of Bihu music and dance by the Assamese middle class as an expression of their own history and identity shares ideological links with other 20th-century revivalist projects worldwide. Revivals are driven by middle-class pursuit of an alternative lifestyle and value system rooted in a desire to connect with "place, a past, and other people" (Turino 2008: 156). A similar nostalgia for rural lifeways and the traditional values they could represent motivated Khagen Mahanta and other "core revivalists" (Livingston 1999) in their transformation of Bihu to generate the affective bonds required to amplify Assamese nationalist sentiment. The success of this transformation is marked by the fact that Bihu music and dance have become established in the mainstream of Assamese cultural production, signaling the profound impact of the ideological power of revivalist discourse in people's everyday lives (Bithell and Hill 2014).

The paired voices of Khagen and Archana Mahanta, with their playful, flirtatious singing style, persist in the Assamese imagination as one of the iconic sounds of Bihu (Fig. 1).[4] Charming and sweet, singing of love and longing, their recorded voices and memories of their performances evoke the imagery of young love.[5] Their songs celebrate the nascent fertility of the adolescent woman by comparing her changing body to a new moon or a blossoming flower. These changes in the natural world are associated with the springtime Bihu season, and the glowing moonlight and smell of new flowers are compared to the intoxicating presence of the newly fertile young woman. The following song, recorded by the Mahantas in 1974, provides a typical example:

No junti ulāle, boronti xolāle	The new moon appeared, its hue has changed
Xolāi bore gose pāte	The Peepul tree changes its leaves
Āmār lāhoriye, boronti xolāle	Our (female) friends, their hue has changed
Mugā rihā mekhelā gāte	On their bodies, silk *rihā mekhelā*[6]

Contemporary Debates: Opportunities and Anxieties

Today, the sound of Bihu can be recognized by its iconic rhythms and melodies as they reverberate from the ritual spaces of village courtyards, and as they are blasted from loudspeakers in urban Guwahati. Performers and sounds travel in processions through the streets, across television screens, and on buses and trains. State-managed, protectionist economic policies were transformed through reform efforts that opened up the Indian economy to

Fig. 1. Image of 45rpm vinyl record featuring "No junti ulāle" and other Bihu songs performed by Khagen and Archana Mahanta in 1974. Disc photographed by the author at the home of Anil Saikia in Moran, Assam, on May 6, 2009.

global market forces in the early 1990s, making a wide variety of items such as cell phones, cars, and fashionable clothes available to consumers wishing to project an upwardly mobile lifestyle (Lukose 2009; Jeffrey 2010). Economic liberalization facilitated the arrival of satellite television, adding hundreds of channels to the previously limited, state-run Doordarshan programming (Mankekar 1999), which created a new platform for Bihu.

In the early 2000s, Assamese news channels launched into 24-hour broadcasting, featuring live and repeat broadcasts of Bihu stage performances and competitions, as well as a proliferation of serial dramas and reality television-style Bihu song and dance competitions. Feature-length Bihu-themed VCD films portray stories of romance and betrayal set during the Bihu festival season, and incorporate song and dance sequences similar in function to Bollywood film songs. In this context, Bihu song and dance sequences advance a film's plot by amplifying narrative themes as protagonists play out hidden desires, and by mobilizing creative strategies to portray a variety of femininities and masculinities (Mason 2014). Increasingly, Bihu music albums are accompanied by music videos circulated on YouTube. The dance choreographies performed in these film sequences and music videos differ from those performed in competitions, where movements are strictly observed by judges, most of whom belong to corporate-sponsored cultural organizations (*xobhā*) and participate in annual judging summits to standardize Bihu song and dance.

Advertising media agencies use Bihu songs, images of women and men in iconic Bihu dance poses, and symbolic Bihu instruments (like the double-reed buffalo horn "*pĕpā*") to market products to consumers for whom regional affinity often replaces the social relations afforded by geographic proximity. During the past few decades, Bihu has become an even more powerful symbol of Assamese nationalism through the increased intensity of advertising, which caters to an upwardly mobile Assamese consumer public. Bihu sounds and symbols, once confined to the springtime festival season, create "concrete resonances" (Mazzarella 2003: 20), which have become part of an everyday politics of identity. Some performers are creating new styles of Bihu music and dance, incorporating lyrical political messages, thicker orchestrations, electronic sounds and beats, and modified choreographies.

In this environment of media excess, the plurality of modes of expression has created a variety of opportunities for Bihu performers of different class and caste backgrounds to thrive, while also increasing cultural purists' anxieties about the preservation of "traditional" modes of performance. In this context, "traditional" has come to mean preserving particular melodic, rhythmic, and lyrical conventions as well as creating a more standardized

choreographic repertoire for Bihu dance, and enforcing respectability regarding performers' dress and comportment. Ritual performances have been influenced by the folkloricization of Bihu, as performing troupes move back and forth between village courtyards and competitive Bihu shows in the same night, sporting matching costumes and sharing repertoire across these different contexts. Young female performers' dress, often covering the full length of the arm with a long-sleeved blouse, reflect expectations that have become more conservative. While I learned about many of these performance practices through rehearsing and performing with Bihu performers in a rural area of northeastern Assam, it was through interacting with their families that I recognized the ways in which intergenerational relationships created opportunities for young people to creatively engage with the narrative themes of Bihu.

Youthful Desires: Bihu Performance in Rural Assam

While I had spent a total of around six months in Assam's metropolitan centre Guwahati between the years of 2009 and 2011, working with folklorist-musicians and celebrity actor-dancers involved in the Bihu industry, I had yet to visit any of Assam's rural areas, and was intent on expanding my understanding of Bihu through participating in ritual performance. During the spring of 2014, I spent time in a rural area of Dhemaji, a northeastern district of Assam, after making contact with a local NGO called Rural Volunteer Center (RVC). I soon met Priyanka Das, the niece of an RVC employee who performs with a Bihu troupe called Kāsi Jun (Crescent Moon). Most of Kāsi Jun's members live in Betoni Pam and other villages around eight kilometres' distance from RVC. As Kāsi Jun rehearsed for the Bihu season that happens annually during Bohāg (mid-April to mid-May), they patiently taught me to sing and dance some of the loosely choreographed routines they had prepared to perform in ritual contexts at village homes and as part of stage competitions.[7] Through conversations and participation in performance with members of Kāsi Jun and their families, I learned how Bihu both narrates and facilitates the transition from childhood to adulthood. I also tuned in to many of the debates that surround Bihu performance and found that they opened up a way of understanding contemporary experiences of youth and adolescence in Assam.

Recognizing that youth is a social construction and therefore not delineated by a fixed age range, the concept of youth emerges here as a frame to think about how people learn about their bodies and sensually

orient themselves to the world. I approach "youth" as a social shifter that not only indexes the relationships between people of different age groups, but also articulates diverse experiences of personhood and agency within wider sets of social relationships (Durham 2004; Cole 2008; Vila 2014). In this part of Assam, households often include three generations according to the "joint family" system, and age is defined more in relation to one's place in the family and marital status than chronological years of life. Intergenerational relationships are complex and varied in joint families, as daughters are expected to join the household of their husbands after marriage (Lamb 2000). In this context, the Assamese concept of *gābhoru* provides critical orientation toward the way youth is socially constructed and gendered in Assam. Evocative of the physical transformation associated with young women's bodies during adolescence, gābhoru marks a life stage that begins with the onset of menstruation and ends with marriage. Referring to the swelling tissues that reveal a budding fertility, gābhoru combines "*gā*" (body) and "*bhoru*" (full), conjuring up the image of ripe fruit and grounding feminine youth in the changing adolescent body. *Ḍekā*, a word often used to describe masculine youth, has no such physical connotation, and can also be used as a general term for "unmarried young person" regardless of gender.

The terms *gābhoru* and *ḍekā* also index a particular repertory of Bihu songs and dance movements associated with adolescence. *Ḍekā-gābhoru* Bihu is distinguished from the Bihu songs and dances associated with other life phases such as childhood and married life.[8] For many of the women I work with in Assam, becoming gābhoru is marked by rituals associated with the onset of menstruation celebrated in the style of a wedding called *tuloni biyā*. I understand this coming-of-age ceremony as one of many contexts in which girls learn what it means to inhabit a gābhoru body. Beyond the evocative physical connotations, gābhoru also indexes social responsibilities associated with female adolescence. Bihu songs narrate this transformation by incorporating proverbs that articulate the challenges associated with becoming a woman. One song warns, "Don't get born as a gābhoru. Others will make you work while they eat," expressing the plight of the woman who labours first for her parents and later for her husband and his family.[9]

Bihu song narratives romanticize interactions between the *gābhoru nāsoni* (young female Bihu performer) and the *ḍekā bihuwā* (young male Bihu performer) in contemporary Assamese social life. The focus on the female performer as one who dances, marked by the use of the word *nāsoni* (dancer) highlights her embodied movement as a prominent feature of her role, in contrast to the male performer *bihuwā* (one who Bihus) or *ḍhulīyā* (drummer). As young men and women take on the roles of nāsoni

and bihuwā through performance, these experiences become rehearsals for everyday romantic interactions. For example, flirtatious Bihu songs called *jurā-nām* (pair songs) provide opportunities for young women and men to role-play by teasing each other and expressing desire openly through performance (which I explore in more detail below). Discussions amongst and about young women and men create a heightened awareness of physical and emotional changes and the accompanying responsibilities and new roles to which these young people will be recruited. The embodied performance of Bihu creates a context in which young people can be physically close without touching by dancing in sync and singing romantic lyrics while catching each other's gaze.

My decision to focus on young women's experiences in my research was motivated in part by the spaces I was able to access as a woman. I learned about the intimate connections that grew out of relationships during the Bihu season, heard stories of eloping couples, and sang about young love while dancing with the members of Kāsi Jun. I spent time with nāsoni Sima Gogoi, Dulumoni Saikia, Simimoni Borgohain, and Pallabi Konwar, who each invited me to stay in their homes for a few nights leading up to and during the springtime Bihu season in 2014. During these moments, I learned their opinions about and experiences in romantic relationships, their anxieties and expectations regarding love and marriage, and the role of Bihu in facilitating interactions with young men.

Competitive Bihu for a New Generation

I woke up on a warm morning in mid-March at Dulumoni Saikia's home, a two-room structure with smooth, hard-packed earthen floors and thatched bamboo walls weatherproofed with mud and an aluminum roof. After Dulumoni and Priyanka Das realized I was awake, they cleared away the mosquito net and joined me cross-legged on the bed. For both Dulumoni (16 years old) and Priyanka (17 years old), this was the third Bihu season performing with Kāsi Jun. I asked them to clarify some of the lyrics from the previous night's Bihu performances, but Priyanka was more interested in probing my notebook full of Bihu songs I had learned from elsewhere. Our singing drew the attention of Dulumoni's aunt, who joined us as we rehearsed the songs in my growing collection (Fig. 2).

As the morning wore on, we spoke at length about Priyanka and Dulumoni's experiences performing Bihu in different contexts. Their enthusiasm and excitement about Bihu was palpable during these

Fig. 2. Priyanka Das, Dulumoni Saikia, and Dulumoni's aunt at the Saikias' home in Kenduguri village near Silapathar, Assam. March 16, 2014. Photo by the author.

conversations as they narrated encounters with other nāsoni and bihuwā, as well as with parents and other authority figures. They also critically and creatively reflected on gender and sexuality during these conversations. During a particularly memorable conversation, Priyanka and Dulumoni talked about the change they experienced crossing over from the children's competitive Bihu category (*konmāni*) into the *bihuwotī* category for gābhoru girls. Dulumoni lamented, "In konmāni competitions, wherever I competed, I would win. Now I'm getting *ḍāngor* (big, older), but my body is …" She lifted her hands, waved them stiffly from side to side, and continued, "Now I don't feel like dancing in front of the boys." Dulumoni explained that while she used to win every time in the children's category, it had become harder for her to win in the gābhoru category, because she had not yet developed the curves characteristic of a proper nāsoni. She felt her body was under more scrutiny on stage, and she had become wary of dancing in front of the boys who would be watching her (personal communication, March 16, 2014).

Priyanka recalled a Bihu song in jurā-nām (pair-song) style, which she once performed in a bihuwotī competition. In jurā-nām, women and men sing alternating stanzas to each other in a flirtatious, teasing style. The first phrase of a jurā-nām is sung unaccompanied with a fast, unmetered tempo, alternating between the dominant and subdominant notes of the pentatonic scale. After the first phrase, the singer pauses and everyone around shouts "*Hoi*!" ("Yes!" or "It's true!") to affirm the claim made in the jurā-nām. This exchange is repeated, and then followed by a witty turn of phrase sung to a

melody that descends back to the tonic. A *jāt-nām* refrain section normally follows after the second phrase and is repeated at the end of each jurā-nām stanza. In this case the jāt-nām was "*Seleng bākor oi, rāngoli modāror pāt*" ("Oh beautiful dress, oh colourful leaf"), and is unrelated to the meaning of the jurā-nām, but functions as a link between different jurā-nām stanzas. Since it is a very well-known jāt-nām, everyone around can join in singing together, as Dulumoni, her aunt, and I did when Priyanka reached the jāt verse.

> *Eii – pāsfale jeurā kune āxā kore*   [Response: *Hoi hoi hoi!*]
>   *posile suri ni khāi*
>
> (Who will trust an old bamboo fence?
>   Thieves will use it for cooking!)   (Yes! True!)
>
> *Ei posile suri ni khāi*   [Response: *O hoi!*]
> (Thieves will use it for cooking!)   (So true!)
>
> *Pokiyā lorā loi kune āxā kore? Du dinote pāhori jāe!*
> (Who will trust a "mature" boy? He will forget you in two days!)
>
> *Seleng bākor oi, rāngoli modāror pāt*
> (Oh beautiful dress, oh colourful leaf)

When Priyanka sang the phrase "*pokiyā lorā*" (mature boy), she paused to exclaim "*Rā rā kenekuā!*" (What how?!) before she continued singing. This break and interjection marked a particularly poignant moment in her spontaneous performance, which was otherwise sung without much flourish or embellishment. Priyanka's exclamation communicated a sense of embarrassment at having been required to sing the phrase that literally translates to "ripe" boy, in public as part of the competition, since it was chosen not by her, but by the Bihu troupe's director, an older man. Priyanka described this competitive performance experience as an uncomfortable one, where she was required to sing an embarrassing phrase, asking us, "Can you believe it?!" She went on to explain that a boy approached her after her performance and asked for her mobile number.

The significance of the song's meaning and the subsequent story struck me an example of how the narrative themes of Bihu are creatively interpreted by performers in their daily lives. The song Priyanka performed at this competition suggests that an old bamboo fence is like a mature boy

because both are unreliable and untrustworthy. Young bamboo is stiff and makes a sturdy fence, while an old or mature bamboo fence becomes dry and brittle, and therefore is easy for thieves to steal and use for their cooking fires. Similarly, the song suggests that mature boys can't be trusted, because one day they will love you and two days later they will forget you. When Priyanka narrated her interaction with the boy who asked for her number, her exasperation was clearly expressed, and was creatively linked to the meaning of the song itself.

My reflections on interactions with young women like Priyanka and Dulumoni are influenced by the work of Jennifer Coates (2013), who demonstrated how the talk of adolescent girls takes on a widening range of discourses and voices as they mature. Coates argued that girls are social agents who resist and subvert these discourses instead of merely being shaped by them (Coates 2013). Priyanka's narration of competitive performance and her discursive use of song in the example above demonstrate how Bihu music and dance performance provides opportunities to role-play romantic intimacy, and how Bihu song texts can serve as vehicles for voicing "adult" themes in everyday speech. My research therefore contributes to the growing body of ethnomusicological scholarship on South Asia that demonstrates how female performers embody multiple personas through speech, song, and dance, and thereby engage in identity play, creatively resist fixed categories, and experiment with practices of self-making, as Carol Babiracki demonstrates in her work with nacnīs in Jharkhand (Babiracki 2008).

Most parents of the nāsoni in Kāsi Jun grew up in this region in the 1970s and 1980s, when Bihu was just emerging as a respectable pursuit for people of all classes to perform, having previously suffered from considerable stigma. Kāsi Jun nāsoni Sima Gogoi's mother Dipali spoke to me about her childhood growing up in a village near Betoni Pam. Dipali described to me how, like many other girls at that time, she dreamed of dancing Bihu, but her parents did not allow it. Other women of Dipali's generation told me similar stories featuring parents who were suspicious of this emerging form of public femininity that was not yet sanctioned by cultural authorities who drove public discourse on maintaining the purity of Assamese womanhood. Thus, Dipali and Mintu Gogoi's enthusiastic support for their own daughter and younger son's participation in the Bihu industry represents a generational shift in orientation toward the gendered norms of public performance and respectability politics. They invest financially by purchasing costumes and ornaments, by paying for instrument repairs and petrol for Mintu's motorcycle, and by regularly feeding the entire troupe in the early morning after all-night performances.

They invest their time, as Mintu accompanies Sima to rehearsals and performances, acting as guardian for the troupe.

The shift in respectability politics associated with Bihu performance over the past few decades that has opened up opportunities for young women like Sima, Priyanka, and Dulumoni to perform Bihu in presentational and competitive contexts is related to ongoing projects of revival and classicization across the Subcontinent. Scholars in ethnomusicology, anthropology, and history have analyzed the processes by which diverse music and dance practices were consolidated into "classical" traditions during the 20th century (Neuman [1980] 1990; Allen 1997; Bakhle 2005; Weidman 2006; Subramanian 2008). Many scholars have furthermore demonstrated that the processes involved in classicization have negatively affected hereditary female performers, undermining their authority, dismantling their patronage structures, and ultimately erasing them from history (Qureshi 2006; Maciszewski 2006, 2007; Schofield 2012; Soneji 2012; Morcom 2013; Putcha 2013; Walker 2014). These processes of classicization have unfolded differently in Assam, however, where the local classical dance form, *Xotrīyā* (Sattriya), was for centuries practiced by celibate men (*bhokot*) living in monasteries (*xotro*) on the river island Majuli, devoted to following the teachings of Xongkordew. One of the first professional female Xotrīyā dancers in Assam, Indira P. P. Bora, was instrumental in pursuing classical status for the performance tradition, which was recognized by Sangeet Natak Akademi in the year 2000 (Viswanathan and Janaki 1999; Thakur 2005).

While Indira and her daughter Menaka Bora are forthright about their intention to shape Xotrīyā performance to fit the conventions of a classical dance form, Bihu reformers have generally been less so in acknowledging their complicity in changing Bihu performance practices. The investment in discourses of preservation obscures the ongoing transformation of Bihu songs and choreographies driven by middle-class and elite sponsors of Bihu events and training workshops that set the standard for performance troupes like Kāsi Jun as they participate in judged competitions. That said, these competitions provide important opportunities for performers to travel beyond their communities, as Kāsi Jun did during Bihu season in 2013, in order to compete and perform in Guwahati.

For members of Kāsi Jun, the experience of Bihu has always included both ritual and staged competitive performances. Thus, the collective memory of their village communities contributes an important perspective on the incorporation of Bihu performance into mainstream Assamese culture. The stories told by some of the mothers of Kāsi Jun members regarding their desire to perform, and the social pressures that led their own parents to

refuse, convey a powerful message to young women regarding the value of Bihu performance as representing at once a connection to a collective Assamese identity and a newly achieved freedom to perform in public. In this case, as well as in the case of Indira and Menaka Bora, the backdrop of generational friction creates a productive energy from which mothers' and daughters' interests align. However, the conservative agenda maintained by contemporary cultural authorities continues to reinforce normative expectations of gender and sexuality, which complicates narratives that would suggest the liberating potential of Bihu performance.

Angaraag "Papon" Mahanta: The Prodigal Son

The concerns voiced by cultural authorities in Assam with guarding folk music from the "inflections of other genres or the mass media" have characterized folk music scholarship worldwide (Bohlman 1988: xiv). Debates among members of corporate-sponsored cultural organizations (xobhā) about performance practices and recording techniques find a wide audience via panel-style talk shows on Assamese news channels. The eclectic mix of voices on these talk shows includes anyone from professional drummers, dancer-actresses, and university-trained folklorists to respected members of the Assamese elite whose opinions on cultural issues are given airtime. Anxiety about generational change is a recurring theme as purists decry the proliferation of Bihu-inspired pop songs, the incorporation of overtly erotic lyrics, and the apparent disregard by the younger generation for Assamese values and tradition.

Despite this cacophony of publicly displayed concern for the future of Assam's cultural traditions, through my work and travels in Assam during the past ten years, I have interacted with people at various stages of life who are deeply, critically, and playfully invested in discourses of identity. These professional and everyday performers position themselves in creative ways with respect to traditional expressive cultural practices such as those associated with the Bihu festival. One unique experience I have enjoyed over the years is a friendship with Angaraag "Papon" Mahanta, the son of Khagen and Archana Mahanta, who has become famous in Assam as a singer of pop, rock, and folk fusion genres as well as an icon of Assamese youth culture. His more recent success as a singer of both mainstream and indie-style Hindi film songs has earned him celebrity status throughout India and abroad. In April 2015, I joined Papon and his band East India Company on their annual Assam Bihu tour, during which we performed twenty shows over two months.

As part of the Bihu tour, Papon and his band performed hits from his first and second Assamese pop albums *Jonaki Raati* (2005) and *Sinaki Osinaki* (2009), as well as fusion arrangements of Assamese folk songs made popular via the band's studio performances on the fifth episode of Coke Studio's third season in 2013.[10] In order to avoid criticism from cultural purists, Papon would wait until after the ritual period during the first few days of the Bihu festival season had passed before incorporating Hindi language hits[11] into the set.[12] Near the end of each show, I joined Papon and the band in performing an extended sequence of Bihu songs, dancing in between sung verses. Many of the Bihu songs Papon selected for our set were made famous by his parents, and he always made a point to introduce these songs with stories about learning from his father. Papon and I sung these songs during the Bihu tour as his parents did, alternating male and female solo verses.

Papon and his band preserve the lyrical, melodic, and rhythmic structure of these Bihu songs while incorporating a pop-rock aesthetic through the use of electric guitar, electric bass, keyboards harmonizing with minor triads, drum kit, and "world" percussion (djembe, conga, rainsticks, chimes), as well as the traditional Bihu ḍhul drum and *tāl* cymbals. The electric guitar distortion and heavy bass lines convey Papon's iconic Bihu style, which he describes as rooted in the sexy Bihu groove. Musicians in the band create solos to play between sung verses, and melodic flourishes to echo the end of sung phrases, emphasizing the iconic Bihu minor third, which are vetted by Papon during rehearsal. Papon's vision for what he once called a "new, modern Assam" through his Bihu performances creates a productive friction between preserving tradition and creating a cosmopolitan sound. This tension resonates with similar struggles that both young urban Nepalis face when creating Nepali Lok Pop (Greene 2002: 44) and Garhwali musicians in Uttarkhand as they navigate maintaining a "folk element" while still capturing audiences' attention with new, fresh sounds (Fiol 2011: 39).

One particularly evocative Bihu song that we performed on many stages across Assam during the tour is set up as a kind of playful battle between a young man and woman who are arguing about who can best perform specific tasks associated with gendered labour. The song focuses on the man's role as builder of the loom and the *ḍhěkī* rice grinder, and the woman's role as weaver of cloth and preparer and server of food. The two characters question each other about their abilities to perform these skills in a teasing, flirtatious manner by singing alternating verses with parallel lyrical structures and repeating the same melody.

O nobou, gāmusā bobo jānā ne?	O sister-in-law,[13] do you know how to weave *gāmusā*?[14]
O nobou, āmāk ekhon dibā ne?	O sister-in-law, will you give us one?
Āmār ghoror xijoniye ākou	The women of our home
Gāmusā bobo nejāne	Don't know how to weave gāmusā.
O kokāideu, tǎtor xāl pātibo jānā ne?	O elder brother, do you know how to build a loom?
O kokāideu, serekī xājibo jānā ne?	O elder brother, do you know how to thread *serekī* spool?[15]
Āmār ghoror xijone ākou	The men of our home
Tǎtor xāl pātibo nejāne	Don't know how to build a loom.
O nobou, sirā khāndo āse ne?	O sister-in-law, is there any ground *sirā*?[16]
O nobou, bātit bhorāi dibā ne?	O sister-in-law, will you put some in a bowl and give me?
Āmār ghoror xijoniye ākou	The women of our home
Ḍhěkī dibo nejāne	Don't know how to use the ḍhěkī.[17]
O kokāideu, ḍhěkī pātibo jānā ne?	O elder brother, do you know how to build a ḍhěkī?
O kokāideu, ṭhurā logābo jānā ne?	O elder brother, do you know how to attach a *ṭhurā*?
Āmār ghoror xijone ākou	The men of our home
Ḍhěkī pātibo nejāne.	Don't know how to build a ḍhěkī.

As we sang back and forth (Figure 3),[18] Papon used the percussive vocal technique called *hěsā* (pressure), which approximates a glottal stop in order to mark the Bihu rhythm on lyrical syllables that last longer than one beat, indexing a rustic authenticity. I attempted to draw attention away from my poor *hěsā* execution by pantomiming the motion of weaving at the loom and pumping the *ḍhěkī* with my leg at the appropriate times. This song held special significance for me, because I had learned to understand the *ḍhěkī* as symbolic of collaborative female labour – one person cannot operate it alone. Beyond providing sustenance for the family, it also creates an important space for sharing stories and songs in the village household. As we performed, I remembered time spent in Dhemaji chatting with Priyanka's aunt and cousin as they ground rice into flour with the *ḍhěkī* to make *pithā* sweets during the previous year's Bihu.

Figure 3: Author performs with Papon and East India Company at Geetanagar Field in Guwahati, Assam, India. April 17, 2015. Photo by Jitu Saikia. Used with permission.

When we performed this song, Papon would pause between verses and address the audience. For example, sometimes he would ask how many people know what a *ṭhurā* is, and then proceed to explain the construction of the *ḍhěkī*. Other times, he would ask how many women in the audience know how to weave, or how many have actually used a *ḍhěkī,* reinforcing the importance of these skills to the performance of gendered Assamese identity. These pedagogical addresses to the crowd, often numbering in the tens of thousands, and many more via television broadcast, echoed his father's performance style, which was also punctuated by humorous asides, stories, and cultural lessons. Papon incorporates this pedagogical style of performance beyond Assam when he performs in other parts of India and abroad, educating his audiences about India's Northeast region through stories of his connection to the land and people with a nostalgic flair that signifies his own distance from everyday life in Assam.

Since settling in Mumbai, Papon has successfully made a name for himself in the Bollywood film music industry, and he often uses his platform during corporate-sponsored events and tours to speak about Assam. For example, Papon and East India Company were recently featured on Red Bull's 2016 seven-part documentary series called *Hometown Heroes*. The series, which can be viewed on YouTube, documents Papon's journey from Assam to

Delhi and beyond, incorporating the band's travels on the Red Bull tour bus, their shows atop the bus in Guwahati and Shillong, and candid confessional-style interviews with Papon and his family and friends. In Episode 1, "Where it All Began,"[19] and Episode 2, "Becoming the Prodigal Son,"[20] Papon speaks about his relationship with his father, and how he inherited the motivation to "document" Bihu through performing and recording Bihu songs. When performing for audiences beyond Assam, Papon and the band normally play his Hindi film hits, but he also often includes one Bihu song medley, made famous through his appearance on Coke Studio, at the conclusion of the set. He sees himself as an ambassador of Assamese culture, and incorporates the pedagogical style inherited from his father as a way to bring his audiences into Bihu as a universal expression of romantic desire.

He begins with a version of this story, addressing his audience in English or Hindi: "This is also maybe my story, maybe anybody's story. It's about this boy who met this girl last night. And again he wants to meet her tonight. You know, so … " And with a mischievous grin, he begins to sing the jurā-nām section of his famous medley, rehearsing the "Hoi!" response with the audience a few times before launching into the verse in Assamese: "My house is on one side and your house is on the other side, and in between is the river; If I were a bird, I would fly, with wings in place of my hands." Just as the story is integral to communicating the essence of Bihu to non-Assamese audiences, Papon's own story of the generational friction experienced between him and his father is central to his narration of his role as cultural ambassador. His own story of transforming Bihu for a new generation that earned the disdain and later approval of his father echoes that of Khagen Mahanta's struggle with his father. In this sense, the friction between generations actually represents continuity as the two artists, Papon, and his father before him, have built careers shaped around these narratives.

Conclusion

The 2015 Bihu tour was mutually beneficial for both Papon and me in a few concrete ways. While I learned a great deal about touring in Assam, technical aspects of Papon's style of folk fusion, and the politics behind Bihu pageantry, Papon's appeal was enhanced by my presence as a narrative counterpart that drew audiences in and also gave him a break from singing three hours straight every night. As video recordings of our live shows in districts across the state were broadcast repeatedly over local satellite television networks, news channels pursued me for interviews, and Bihu reality competitions

invited me to appear as a guest judge. While this increased visibility afforded me access to a variety of new spaces and contexts, it also amplified the vigilance of others over my comportment in ways I had not anticipated. As a recognized female Bihu performer, I found that my actions were interpreted and narrated by others in ways that did not always align with my intentions. Although my circumstances are very different as a foreign, white researcher, the experience of intense scrutiny regarding my dress and comportment during the Bihu tour impacted my perspective on how the young women I spent time with in Dhemaji struggle to occupy an idealized femininity.

A few nights after I performed with Papon and East India Company at Guwahati's famous Chandmari Field, another singer and youth icon, Zublee Baruah, took the stage, making a bold move by wearing a North Indian-style *kurtā churidār* outfit woven from Assamese *mugā* silk and incorporating designs from Tiwā and Kārbi tribal communities, embodying a vision of Assamese cultural unity through fashion. The Chandmari Bihu organizing committee humiliated Zublee by interrupting her performance and forcing her to leave the stage, because she was not wearing the traditional Assamese *mekhelā sādor*.[21] During the following evening's broadcast, a newscaster from *Pratidin Time* asked why Zublee would intentionally hurt Assamese sentiments, especially considering the fact that a foreigner has come and shown respect for Assamese culture by dressing properly.[22] In fact, as Zublee mentioned in a televised interview, it is common practice for female artists to wear mekhelā sādor during the first five days of Bihu, but after the ritual period has passed, there is no good reason to force female artists to wear this particular dress. Following the firm advice of Papon's manager, as well as my own feelings of anxiety about the extreme visibility I had recently acquired, I wore mekhelā sādor for every one of the twenty shows on our tour.

Although Sima, Priyanka, and Dulumoni's mothers may not have been allowed to perform Bihu during their gābhoru years, this generational shift has already facilitated increased social and economic opportunities for these young women, and it remains to be seen what the future holds for their performing careers. The middle-class reformers of Khagen Mahanta's generation pioneered a path to shape Bihu into a respectable performing art for people of all castes and classes, in a sense paving the way for Kāsi Jun to pursue Bihu competitively. And Papon carries on his parents' legacy in dynamic new ways, which are beloved by some and criticized by others. But as Papon says in one of his *Hometown Heroes* episodes, "[Bihu] should be documented, but at the same time you should have fun with it the way you want. It's about the essence. It's about the core, the truth." The plurality of platforms and contexts that Bihu now occupies ensures that

generational frictions will thrive, as tensions between people invested in diverse manifestations of tradition contribute to narratives of change that fuel innovation. ❧

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. The Assamese language includes an important voiceless velar fricative that sounds similar to the "ch" sound in the German "acht" and Scottish "loch." I represent this sound in transliteration with the letter "x."

2. Some would argue that the first "public" Bihu performance happened at the behest of *Āhum* (Ahom) King Rudra Singha in the early 1700s, when he invited Bihu teams to compete in the courtyard of the Rong-ghor Palace in *Xiboxāgor* (Sibsagar).

3. There are continuing debates regarding this topic, and while Prafulladutta Goswami (2003) suggests that the first public Bihu celebration happened in the 1930s, I here reference historian Ankur Tamuli Phukan's quote in the *Sentinel News Assam* article "Latasil Bihu not the oldest stage function in Assam" from April 13, 2014 regarding the 1950s as the first framing of Bihu as "entertainment" in anticipation of his pending published work. Radha Gobinda Baruah (1900-1977) is often identified as the man behind one of the first urban staged Bihu events in Guwahati in the early 1950s.

4. Visit https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pw3b9YnlfqU and listen to audio from the 45rpm vinyl record featuring "*No junti ulāle*" and other Bihu songs performed by Khagen and Archana Mahanta in 1974.

5. Visit https://youtu.be/6Wl5qEwiym8 and see footage from Khagen and Archana Mahanta's April 2009 performance at Latasil Bihutoli in Guwahati, Assam, filmed by the author.

6. The *rihā mekhelā* is an Assamese dress traditionally worn by women only after the onset of menstruation. The long, narrow *rihā* cloth is wrapped around the upper body of the *gābhoru* woman, as an additional layer on top of the *sādor* cloth covering her torso and left shoulder.

7. Visit https://youtu.be/mkVQMsqk_WY and see footage from Kāsi Jun Bihu Troupe's performance at a Bihu competition in Khona Mukh, Dhemaji, Assam, filmed by the author on April 21, 2014.

8. There are different Bihu repertories associated with childhood (especially regarding pre-menstrual girls), with adolescence (ḍekā-gābhoru bihu), and with married life (for example *buwārī* "daughter-in-law" bihu).

9. Listen to this verse "*Bengenā nāmere guti noposābā, pirālit ni dibā oi ṭhāi. Gābhoru nāmere jonomu nolobā, loke bone korāi khāi,*" which is the opening stanza of Khagen and Archana Mahanta's 1974 record at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pw3b9YnlfqU.

10. Coke Studio is a popular television series sponsored by the Coca-Cola Company and produced by MTV India, modelled on the show of the same name originally produced in Pakistan. See Najia Mukhtar (2015) on how effectively the Coca-Cola Company has convinced audiences in South Asia that Coke Studio is "about the music," downplaying interests in increasing profits for its corporate sponsor by taking advantage of increasingly youthful consumer markets.

11. Some of Papon's most popular Hindi songs include "*Kyon*," composed by Pritam, which Papon recorded for the Hindi film *Barfi* (2012), "*Moh Moh ke Dhaage*," composed by Anu Malik, which Papon recorded for the Hindi film *Dum Laga Ke Haisha* (2015), and songs from his debut Hindi album *The Story So Far* released by Times Music in 2012 which won a Global Indian Music Academy (GIMA) award in the Best Pop Album category that year.

12. See, for example, "Voices of Protest" *The Telegraph, Calcutta*, April 19, 2013. Baruah, Pranjal. "Ulfa(I) 'bans' Hindi songs in Bihu events" *Times of India*. Dec 23, 2015. And "Bihu caught in 'dress code', 'Hindi ban' diktats by ultras." *Deccan Herald*. April 3, 2016.

13. The young man addresses the young woman as "*nobou*" (normally "sister-in-law," but in this case possibly indicative of the future bride of his elder brother).

14. The *gāmusā* is a symbol of love and respect, traditionally woven by a woman and presented to an elder, a guest, or a loved one, especially during Bihu, but also in Hindu religious contexts. The gāmusā can also become a vehicle for communicating romantic desire when an unmarried woman presents it to an unmarried man, a context also narrated in Bihu song texts.

15. *Serekī* is a large bamboo spool used to store thread for weaving.

16. *Sirā* is flat rice created from parched half-boiled paddy often consumed as a breakfast or snack dish.

17. *Ḍhěkī* is a wooden foot-operated lever used to grind rice into flour.

18 Access a recording of our April 25, 2015 performance at Beltola Bihu Stage in Guwahati at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NqiVPH7U-ys. "*O nobou*" begins around 01:30:00.

19. Episode 1: Where it All Began. *Red Bull Hometown Heroes*. October 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eGsY_OxTCgY

20. Episode 2: Becoming the Prodigal Son. *Red Bull Hometown Heroes*. October 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ykKDdHxfFR8

21. The *mekhelā sādor*, a dress that looks similar to the North Indian *sārī*, but actually comprises two pieces – the floor-length skirt (*mekhelā*), and the wide shawl that covers the upper body and drapes over the left shoulder (*sādor*) – plays an important role in grounding public discourses about modernity, nationalism, gender, and the body in women's lived experiences. As historian Yasmin Saikia explains, the postcolonial identity movement in Assam led people to mobilize material cultural artifacts in service of negotiating identity in the public sphere, and to believe that "being Assamese was a shared, intimate, personal 'thing' that belonged to the people of Assam and differentiated them from their neighbours, the Bengalis, and by extension from Indians" (2004: 62). One example is the emergence of the handwoven mekhelā sādor, which replaced the sārī as the dress of upper- and middle-class Assamese married women.

22. See for example: "Assam Singer Faces Indian 'Attire' Discrimination, Not Allowed To Perform." *News World India*, April 21, 2015, and "The Shredding of Assamese Culture: *salwar kameez*-clad Zublee barred from stage" *Telegraph Calcutta*, April 18, 2015.

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