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REHANNA KHESHGI
St Olaf College

Crowning the Bihu Queen: Engendering a rural sensibility through reality television

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on reality television shows featuring solo female Bihu performance: the music and dance form associated with the Assamese New Year's festival. These shows cultivate a sense of 'reality' by incorporating scenes of finalists on location in their homes. Often depicting hardworking village girls conducting daily chores, these scenes narrate the journey from anonymity to celebrity stardom, highlighting the ability of contestants to embody certain idealized values associated with Assamese womanhood. While judges began embedding these values into Bihu stage competitions in the early 1980s, the scrutiny of individual contestants by celebrity judges has increased since the advent of reality TV Bihu shows in the early 2000s. The success female contestants are able to achieve depends, in part, on their ability to convincingly portray a 'rural' sensibility while maintaining an air of respectability, both as part of Bihu performance and during question-and-answer sessions. Drawing on the author's experience as a guest judge in two seasons of Bihu Rānī ('Bihu Queen'), as well as on interviews with judges, producers, hosts, contestants and session musicians, the article examines how female performers navigate neo-liberal models of competitive performance while maintaining values and beliefs associated with collective ritual performance.

KEYWORDS

music
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competition
rural
Assam

Competitive performance has become an important part of staging folkloric music and dance in South Asia since the 1990s and early 2000s (e.g. Chavda 2019; Dalzell 2017; Prévôt 2014; Schreffler 2014). The liberalization of the Indian economy in the early 1990s expanded television programming from the limited, state-run Doordarshan to hundreds of satellite television channels (Mankekar 1999; Kumar 2005). Film music reality shows like *Sa Re Ga Ma* premiered on Zee TV in 1995, paving the way for local versions of global reality television shows like *Indian Idol* to take root in the 2000s (Punathambekar 2010: 144). This article focuses on a reality television show that premiered in 2010 called *Bihu Rānī* ('Bihu Queen'), featuring solo female Bihu performance: the music and dance form associated with the Assamese New Year's festival. Produced in Guwahati, the metropolitan centre of the north-eastern Indian state of Assam (Figure 1), this show bases much of its content on the

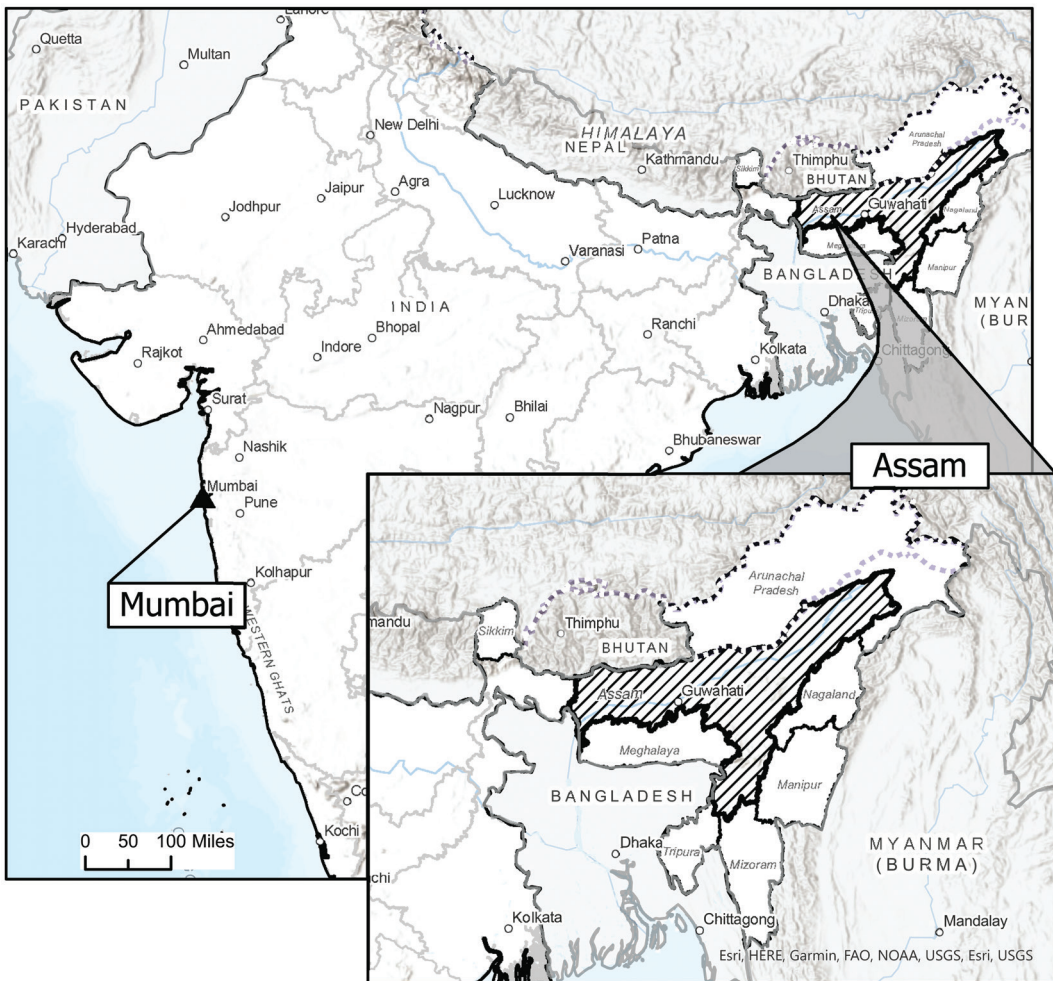


Figure 1: Map of India and surrounding countries with a magnified view of Assam and surrounding states of the northeast Indian region. Courtesy of Sara Dale at St Olaf College Geospatial and Data Services.

springtime *bihutoli* (open-air Bihu stage) competitions that date back to the early 1980s promoting folklorized¹ music and dance choreography.

The transformation of competitive folkloric Bihu performance for reality television required a few key shifts in the relationship between contestants, judges and audiences. Bihu reality shows like *Bihu Rānī* cultivate a sense of 'reality' by incorporating scenes of finalists on location in their homes. Often depicting hardworking village girls conducting daily chores, these scenes narrate the journey from anonymity to celebrity stardom, highlighting the ability of contestants to embody certain idealized values associated with Assamese femininity. The success female contestants are able to achieve depends, in part, on their ability to convincingly portray a 'rural sensibility' while maintaining an air of respectability, both as part of folklorized Bihu music and dance performance and during question-and-answer sessions. The signs of respectable rurality that are embodied by solo female contestants include, for example, stylization of a core dance movement called *kokāl bhāngi* ('breaking the waist') that must be sufficiently exuberant but not vulgar; a sweet, 'innocent' vocal timbre evidenced by a slightly nasal quality centred high in the vocal range that masks any effort expended through dancing by maintaining a steady flow of breath; and a knowledge of Assamese folklore trivia, which may be solicited at random by judges. Although judges began embedding the values associated with a rural sensibility into Bihu stage competitions in the early 1980s, the visibility of performers among a broader television audience and the scrutiny of individual contestants by celebrity judges have increased greatly since the premier of *Bihu Rānī* in 2010.

The stakes of Bihu performance for Assamese women are connected to gendered debates about Assamese identity and 'tradition' that stem from the colonial construction of Assam as a frontier region at the margins of the Indian national imaginary. Stories about the Tantric power of the Kamakhya Temple located on the outskirts of Guwahati circulated in popular discourse during colonial rule, manifesting in rumours about the suspect moral character of Assamese women and influencing early Assamese intellectuals to look down upon erotic expressions of desire associated with the Bihu festival (e.g. Robinson 1841; Butler 1855; Barker 1881). Historian Bodhisattva Kar writes that colonial-era 'allusions to the erotic excess and magical prowess of Assamese women', who were referred to as 'voluptuous and sexually insatiable women of the perilous frontier', continue to play a role in the marginalization of Assam in the Indian imagination (2008: 288). The nation-building period leading up to and immediately following Independence in 1947 was accompanied by a search for common cultural practices and symbols to unite a diverse state fractured by conflict and violence, and Assam's state cultural associations sponsored rural Bihu troupes to stage performances in urban contexts (Goswami [1988] 2003). During this period, the 'new' Indian woman was recast through a nationalist ideology as both modern and modest, embodying continuity and authenticity of national tradition and defined against both the 'excesses of modernization associated with the Western and Westernized woman, and the backwardness associated with the peasant and lower-caste/class women in India' (Sinha 2007: 193). When Assam regional director of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR),² Sankar Prasad Kakoti Bora, claimed during a 2008 *Seminar on Folk Music* in Guwahati that, due to the younger generation's preference for popular media, 'our rich cultural heritage are [sic] likely to be jeopardized, which will entail loss of our identity', he was declaring a call to action that signalled 'gender- and caste-inflected sociomoral discourses encoded in the

1. See Khesghi (forthcoming 2023) for a discussion of the process of folklorization in the context of Bihu performance, by which I mean the transformation of participatory folk music and dance performance practices into staged folkloric presentational performances.
2. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations is a branch of the Ministry of External Affairs of the Government of India.

3. All Assamese quotes have been translated into English by the author. *Oxomiyā suwālī* means Assamese girl, and the adjective *ghor-dhorā* can be translated literally as home-holder in the sense of holding the home together, both physically with her domestic labour and emotionally by maintaining relationships in an intergenerational (joint family) living arrangement.
4. Excerpt from a special episode featuring finalist Bonti Hazarika during Season 2 of *Bihu Rānī* in 2011. English subtitles by the author. Broadcast filmed by Bonti Hazarika in 2011.

performances of the present' (Soneji 2012: 225). As I demonstrate through the examples presented below, young Assamese women bear the burden of overcoming the historical legacy of stigma against their performing bodies while portraying embodied knowledge of rural lifeways through music, dance and discourse that often proves to be an unattainable goal.

Drawing on my experience as a guest judge on the 2015 season of *Bihu Rānī*, as well as on interviews with judges, producers, hosts, contestants and session musicians, I argue that embodying a rural sensibility is central to the way female performers navigate this local, Assamese version of the global neo-liberal model of reality television performance, which rewards conformity instead of individual creativity and distinctiveness. I examine how aspects of social, economic and even caste mobility are bound up in negotiations of Assamese femininity in these reality television arenas. The association between Bihu performance and intercaste romantic liaisons that result in marriages by elopement means that caste mobility for young Assamese women, in particular, appears in Bihu reality shows at the borders of respectable femininity and pride in Assamese cultural heritage.

PERFORMING IDEALIZED ASSAMESE FEMININITY

Bonti isn't just a Bihu dancer. She weaves at the loom, grinds rice with the *ḍhekī*, and makes *piṭhā* sweets. These skills are present in Bonti – a complete *Oxomiyā ghor-dhorā suwālī*.³

(*Bihu Rānī* Finalist Special Episode' 2011)

This quote from the 2011 season of the *Bihu Rānī* reality television show demonstrates how Assamese cultural anxieties surrounding gendered performance play out in the public sphere and how young women continue to serve as a primary site on which these debates take place. As this quote demonstrates, the loom, handmade *piṭhā* sweets cooked over a woodfire and the *ḍhekī* leg-powered wooden pestle (Figure 2) have been taken up as symbols of Assamese cultural heritage – production technologies that are rapidly disappearing from the skill sets of young women, especially those born and brought up in Assam's urban and urbanizing areas. But the narration of Bonti Hazarika's accomplishments during this *Bihu Rānī* episode is a voiced-over video footage of her performing these tasks, confirming that Bonti is a 'complete *Oxomiyā ghor-dhorā suwālī*' – someone who embodies ideal qualities (*gun*) associated with Assamese womanhood (see Ksheshgi 2011).⁴

The incorporation of these scenes depicting Bonti performing activities associated with domestic labour connects this reality television arena to historical debates about the role of women in supporting Assamese nationalism. For example, during the struggle for India's Independence, weaving one's own cloth became a nationalist practice, promoted by Mahatma Gandhi as a way women could participate in the Non-Cooperation Movement by politicizing the domestic sphere (Srinivasan 2012: xi). Researcher Meeta Deka describes how elite Assamese women started schools for spinning yarn and spread the notion of the loom as a symbol of nationalism, which is prized to this day as a symbol of Assamese womanhood (Deka 2013: 125).

Praise for Bonti's domestic skills indicates that talent in music and dance is not the only criterion for success as a *Bihu Rānī* contestant. Along with demonstrating skills in performance, solo female competitors must embody



Figure 2: Laboinya Das sings Bihu songs while sifting rice flour ground by the *dhēki*. Santipur village near Silapathar, Assam. 13 April 2011. Photo by the author.

5. See Weidman (2012) for a discussion of the pedagogical dimensions of this process, and Kheshgi (forthcoming 2023) for an example of the pedagogical methods used to teach folkloric Bihu music and dance in an urban Assamese NGO.
6. ‘*Kebun* [orchards] simultaneously represent a nostalgia for traditional *kampung* [village] rural life and the emergence of a new rural sensibility that is no longer embedded in the social, economic and cultural relations of *kampung* society’ (Thompson 2020: 149).

what I call a ‘rural sensibility’, regardless of whether or not they were born and brought up in a rural village community. Bihu performance emerged from village rituals that accompany the ushering in of the New Year in mid-April, the beginning of spring planting season and the cosmological embodiment of fertility connecting changes in the natural world with human desire. In the context of folkloric Bihu performance, a rural sensibility is comprised of both bodily comportment on stage and embodied knowledge of practices associated with a romanticized version of Assamese village life. It is an aesthetic sensibility that connects embodied performance of music and dance with the contestant’s everyday comportment beyond the stage in ways that are related to gender, class and caste.⁵ Similar to what Eric Thompson notes in the Malaysian context, this sensibility marks rurality as an important aspect of Assamese identity, especially for those whose everyday experiences are removed from village life.⁶

EMBODYING A RURAL SENSIBILITY THROUGH MUSIC AND DANCE PERFORMANCE

Bihutoli competitions normally last from early evening until early morning, spanning around twelve hours during which contestants must wait to find out the results. Judges observe the timed routines of one contestant after another as water, tea, *tāmūl* betel nuts and *pān* leaves are brought to them to eat in order to pass the time and stay awake during the long night. The spectators begin to dwindle around 3 a.m. and by the end, around 7 a.m.,

7. See Kheshgi (forthcoming 2023) for a detailed explanation of these dance techniques and accompanying video footage demonstrations.

participants and their families make up the majority of the audience. In April 2009, I was present for the duration of an all-night *bihutoli* competition in Margherita, a small town near India's border with Myanmar. Seated next to Bihu judge Anil Saikia, who had agreed to escort me as his guest to the event, I was able to distil some of the basic performance elements required of the contestants.

The performance elements required for a twenty-minute solo routine at a *bihutoli* competition include dancing particular movement sequences, singing specific Bihu song styles and playing instruments that typically accompany Bihu song, like the *tokā* bamboo clapper, the *xutulī* clay flute and the *gogonā* bamboo mouth harp. A solo female contestant is expected to enter the stage dancing, pause for singing and instrument-playing interludes and continue dancing, all while maintaining a stable vocal pitch, demonstrating proper breath control and masking an intense physical effort required to execute these routines. Her solo performance is accompanied by a group of male performers who sing and play the *dhul* drum, *tāl* cymbals and the *pepā* double-reed buffalo horn. The iconic Bihu dance movement called *kokāl bhāngi* involves three actions that align with the three beats of the basic Bihu rhythm, which is vocalized through a drumming language called *sapor* or *seu* in two overarching six-beat phrases:

ghen – ta – ki – di – ghen – (rest), tak – ta – ki – di – ghen – (rest)
 1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 3

The performer contracts the abdomen on beat one and releases on beat two, pausing to hold the position on beat three. The feet also follow this pattern as the performer presses one foot onto the ground on beat one, the other foot on beat two and pauses on beat three. The feet move in an almost shuffle-like style (right left pause, right left pause) hardly leaving the ground, and the knees bend only enough to accommodate the movement of the feet.⁷ A common criticism of dancers who have not internalized the conventions of this stylized folkloric Bihu dance technique is that they bounce up and down on beat one and two, bending the knees as they break their waists. The well-trained dancer appears to be floating across the stage, as the movement of her legs and feet is concealed by the skirt-like *mekhelā* she wears, drawing attention instead to her upper body. Bihu dance movements are carefully scrutinized in competitive performance arenas – in both *bihutoli* and reality television contexts.

It just so happens that Bonti Hazarika was a contestant in the spring 2009 *bihutoli* competition I watched in Margherita, the town where her boyfriend lived with his family. At around 7 a.m., when the competition ended, the judges completed their drowsy deliberations and announced Bonti as the winner. Bonti's victory at this *bihutoli* stage competition in Margherita afforded her visibility, which helped her odds of being selected to participate in the second season of *Bihu Rānī* in 2011. Young female contestants who participate in large, well-established *bihutoli* stage competitions as well as reality television shows like *Bihu Rānī* have the potential to access social and economic mobility, but this potential is framed within narrowly defined conventions of femininity. In both contexts, the winner may gain a large sum of money or a new car in addition to the name recognition that is critical for securing employment as a dance workshop leader or heroine in Assamese television serials and films.

MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF BIHU AND FEMININITY

The media platform provided by reality television is important for amplifying the connection between rural sensibility and local constructions of femininity, and it draws from a wider context of media portrayals of Bihu. The early 2000s saw an emergence of Bihu-themed feature-length serial films, soundtracks and music videos that depict the pressures of family life, work and young love – almost always in a village setting – that idealize certain aspects of femininity. These newly reimagined media portrayals of the rural sensibility associated with Bihu demonstrate the process of multiple audiences coming into being, including people in villages who identify with the struggles and joys represented on screen, urban migrants longing nostalgically for village life and also those born and brought up in urban Guwahati who have only experienced village life through mediatized depictions. Scholars have argued that media address – whether in the form of broadcast media, film or audio recordings – constitutes its own audience by depicting, addressing and defining it in ways that are classed, gendered and otherwise politically marked (Mankekar 1999; Hardy 2010). Similar to the Egyptian serials analysed by Lila Abu-Lughod, Bihu-themed serial films are characterized by an ‘unapologetic moralism’ as well as the ‘quality of emotionality, with affect located in ordinary life’ (2005: 113).

Cultural competitions provide one arena where television, cinema and ‘live’ performance come together and complicate each other. Scholars have only recently begun gathering fieldwork data on the popular reality TV-style dancing and singing competitions in South Asia (Rudisill 2009; Punathambekar 2010; Chakravorty 2017). In contrast to other nationally broadcast reality singing and dancing shows based out of India’s entertainment hub Mumbai, *Bihu Rānī* and similar Bihu-themed competitive shows produced in Assam have adapted the reality television format to serve regional interests and address local audiences.⁸ Assamese constructions of feminine youth, in particular, bear what Ritty Lukose calls the ‘burden of locality’ in the context of ‘liberalizing India’ (2009: 14). *Bihutolī* stage competitions, the face-to-face performances on which Bihu competitions are based, established a local method for judging the extent to which contestants embody a rural sensibility, both as part of Bihu music and dance performances and during the question-and-answer sessions that follow.

TRANSITIONING BIHU FROM STAGE TO TELEVISION STUDIO

Hosted on the 24-hour satellite news network DY365, *Bihu Rānī* draws on some aspects of national reality TV singing and dancing shows such as *Indian Idol* and *Dance India Dance*, incorporating a host, a panel of celebrity judges and mobile voting. But *Bihu Rānī* incorporates Assamese themes, discourses, representational codes and aesthetic conventions, focusing on one specific Assamese folk performance genre in contrast to the eclectic mix of genres included in most national competitive shows. When comparing the *bihutolī* competition with the local adaptation of the reality television format, the distinctions that emerge generate friction with scholarly analyses of reality shows in the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, for example, which position reality television shows as prime contexts for examining the operation of governmentality under neo-liberalism (Kraidy and Sender 2010: 5). While *Bihu Rānī* is aligned with other shows in its promotion of self-consciousness, self-monitoring and adjustment, which are hallmarks of

8. See Kraidy and Sender (2010) for a variety of examples exploring the local adaptations of global reality television models.

9. See Kraidy and Sender (2010) for a discussion of Foucault's governmentality in relation to neo-liberalism as applied to reality television in the global context (2010: 5).
10. TRPs are considered to be a standard unit of measurement of media delivery. 'TRPs are calculated as the product of 2 measures, the percentage of a target population potentially exposed to advertisements (reach) and the average number of times advertisements may have been seen (frequency) over a time period' (Duke et al. 2019: 646).

governmentality,⁹ the overarching rubric of choice and freedom typically associated with reality television shows is replaced with an overwhelming expectation of conformity. For example, franchise shows that have become established in multiple countries around the world, such as *The Voice* and *So You Think You Can Dance*, reward contestants for individual creativity and distinctiveness. In contrast, *Bihu Rānī* competitors are not rewarded for uniqueness, innovation or individual deviation from the norm, which situates them at odds with interpretations of the neo-liberal order as a theatre in which 'ordinary people compete, under televised surveillance, to be selected by popular vote as the most "real"' (Couldry 2008: 2). If most reality television shows interpret 'real' to mean authentic to one's individual expression or sense of self, *Bihu Rānī* departs from this global trend by rewarding contestants who conform to an idealized version of Assamese womanhood, demonstrated through music and dance performance and also in response to questions that elicit evidence of everyday comportment and embodied knowledge.

Bihu Rānī and its offshoot for younger contestants – *Bihu Kuwari* ('Bihu Princess') – incorporate elements from the decades-long tradition of *bihutolī* stage competitions in Assam. While many conventions associated with music and dance carry over from the stage to the screen, there are a few key elements that distinguish Bihu reality television shows from *bihutolī* competitions. The incorporation of serialized episodes that create suspense from week to week instead of one competition that lasts the whole night, audience voting via mobile phone as opposed to a passive spectator audience and the addition of a host or master of ceremonies who speaks directly to the audience mean that Bihu competitions created for reality television are more focused on audience engagement than those hosted at large and small *bihutolīs* in urban and rural areas across the state. These elements are drawn from other reality television models and indicate the focus of the reality television platform on entertainment and economic motivations, which is driven by Target Rating Points (TRPs).¹⁰ Even though they may include the same dance movements and song categories, the fact that *Bihu Rānī* makes use of multiple camera angles, close-up shots and replays of performance footage means that audiences can see and hear the contestants' performances more clearly as they watch from the comfort of their own homes than if they were seated in the audience section of the *bihutolī* tent. These innovations have also created the conditions under which competitive Bihu performances are subject to new levels of visibility and scrutiny.

INTRODUCING THE HOST AND EXPANDING THE AUDIENCE'S ROLE

Zublee Baruah was featured as the host of *Bihu Rānī* during its first season in 2010. A pop icon in Assam, Zublee is known for her singing voice and acting roles in Assamese serials and films, as well as her stage performances during the Bihu season. Zublee often graces the stage with her iconic 'keytar' (a synthesizer strapped to the body like a guitar) during concerts in Assam as well as other parts of India and in Assamese diaspora communities across the world. As host for *Bihu Rānī*, Zublee draws a large viewing audience because of her celebrity status. She facilitates transitions between scenes, apologizing to the audience for having to take a break for advertisements and welcoming them back afterwards. She updates the audience on the status of the competition, what the stakes are and what to expect for the duration of the current episode. She also speaks with contestants, asking them if they are frightened

or nervous, extending the microphone to amplify their responses and requesting the judges' verdicts after each performance.

While Zublee's activities are typical of hosts on reality television shows more broadly, they mark a distinction from *bihutoli* competitions, where the audience is not addressed directly. Seated behind the panel of judges in the open-air tent propped up by bamboo posts, the audience members are treated as spectators who are not directly involved with the process playing out on the stage in front of them. Normally a member of the organizing committee simply calls out the name of each contestant and rings a loud buzzer at the end of the time limit for each routine, but this is purely functional and not aesthetically oriented in contrast to the role of the host on *Bihu Rānī*. Zublee's role is to connect with the audience as they watch in their homes and to draw them into the competition so they feel emotionally invested and willing to pay for mobile voting to support a favourite contestant.

CONFESSIONAL TALK FORMATS: CREATING CHARACTER INTIMACY

As *Bihu Rānī* contestants are eliminated episode by episode, viewers get to know the young women through their answers to the judges' questions and through more in-depth coverage of the finalists. One of the most effective ways to help audiences move from thinking of the contestants as generic types to knowing them as specific individuals is through the introduction of confessional talk formats (Turner 2004). This refers to talk shows featuring everyday people who speak about their personal lives on broadcast television, which in *Bihu Rānī* provides a background context for the competitive routines. While many reality television shows feature interviews with contestants and their families, the moment when a *Bihu Rānī* contestant looks into the camera and speaks directly to the audience is an opportunity for her to perform the contours of her rural sensibility, mentioning aspects of her upbringing, training and proximity to the embodied knowledge of rural life that is a valued component of Assamese femininity. This is perhaps the most striking aspect of *Bihu Rānī* that departs from conventional *bihutoli* practice.

When Bonti Hazarika reached the final stage on the second season of *Bihu Rānī* in 2011, the television crew visited each of the five finalists at home and incorporated candid interview excerpts with the young women about their lives and dreams as part of a special episode dedicated to each finalist. The quote praising Bonti's domestic skills at the beginning of this article was taken from Bonti's special episode, which was partially filmed on location at Bonti's home in the town of Jorhat. In an extended interview, Bonti discusses how she first began dancing Bihu, narrates challenges and successes encountered during her performing career and provides a critical commentary on her own performance as a *Bihu Rānī* contestant. Interview excerpts are interspersed with clips of her competitive performances drawn from previous episodes. During the following excerpt, Bonti looks directly into the camera and speaks to the television audience in Assamese with animated facial expressions as if telling a close friend secrets about her life:

A small story comes to mind now that I'd like to share with you. When I went to dance Bihu, I already had the proper Bihu dress, but one thing was missing: my *muṭhi-khāru* (bracelets). At that time, it was difficult to get them – they were very expensive. What happened was, when I went to dance in stage programs, my mother would ask the mother of

another dancer to let me wear her *muṭhi-khāru* during my performance. Whenever we went to dance Bihu, my mother always used to accompany me in a rickshaw. All the other dancers used to go in cars. So I asked my mother, 'Ma, why do we always travel in a rickshaw? All the other girls go so nicely in cars. Why can't we also go in a car?' Ma told me, 'We are not rich people. We do with what we have. You are a good dancer'. So whatever Ma told me, it entered my mind, and I still remember it today. We struggled a lot, and we have overcome many obstacles.

(*'Bihu Rānī* Finalist Special Episode' 2011)

The incorporation of the confessional talk format contributes to the connection the audience feels with the *Bihu Rānī* contestants. The element of self-promotion in these candid clips helps to transform the competitor from an ordinary person into a beloved celebrity during the course of the season.

CASTE MOBILITY THROUGH ELOPEMENT AS CULTURAL HERITAGE

After narrating the economic hardships that made participating in Bihu competitions difficult, Bonti hinted at her family's caste position by saying,

I knew that I had to become an even better dancer to show the society that a good dancer can come from a family like ours. I have worked very hard, and here I am today. This is why I have come so far.

(*'Bihu Rānī* Finalist Special Episode' 2011)

While the phrase 'a family like ours' can refer to different aspects of identity, I focus on Bonti's caste position because it connects to broader discourses of caste mobility in the context of the Bihu festival. The topic of caste mobility was addressed directly in Bonti Hazarika's special episode through her description of a dramatic interpretation of Assamese femininity that she was asked to perform as part of the show. After one of Bonti's competitive routines, one of the show's judges for the season, Madhurima Choudhury, who was one of the first performers to win a *bihutoli* competition in the early 1980s, asked Bonti to demonstrate her talent for acting by performing a short improvised solo skit related to the Bihu festival. She outlined the scene as follows in Assamese:

Bonti, you have fallen in love with a boy from a different *jāti* [caste, ethnic group, or community]. He is not your *jāti*, he is *ojāti* [low-caste or out-caste]. Your family will never agree to this match, so you must elope. You'll run away at night, because you can't run away during the day. Right? In the middle of the night, secretly, you'll run away from your village. Now you have to show us. Go to your man, your young lover. Your parents are sleeping. Take some small snacks for your journey, and leave from your home closing the door behind you.

(*'Bihu Rānī* Finalist Special Episode' 2011)

Bonti does a beautiful job of depicting the scene without any props, as a background track featuring crickets chirping and dogs barking augments the dramatic effect. She continues for a full two minutes, and host Zubleee snores loudly into the microphone for comic effect, but Bonti remains steadfastly focused on her goal of leaving the house without waking her parents. At the

end of this clip, which was inserted as a flashback into the special episode, Bonti's interview continues, and she describes how anxious she was during those moments.

I could have done much better, but I was so scared during that time! What should I do? There was nothing, no dialogue! I had to create it all on my own. I tried to do whatever I could. I really enjoyed it. I just thought of my own parents, bowed to the ground doing *xewā* [asking for blessings] as I would in real life, I just thought of them.

(‘Bihu Rānī Finalist Special Episode’ 2011)

This moment might have struck Bonti as an ironic twist since, as she told me later during our conversations, her own love story played out in a similar way, but the lovers' roles were reversed. Bonti comes from a family classified by the Indian government as OBC, or one of the ‘Other Backward Classes’, which was added as an affirmative action category in the 1980s to recognize educationally or socially disadvantaged castes. Her ‘love marriage’ to her husband, whose family belongs to the higher Kalita caste, created a fair amount of controversy, and she experienced difficulties finding acceptance as a daughter-in-law in her husband's joint family. Issues relating to caste and gender, which are still central to Bihu-related narratives and lived experiences, find expression in competitive arenas during moments like these where the eloping young woman takes centre-stage. Because the contestant is being judged not only on her artistic performance but also on her embodiment of Assamese values, the question-and-answer session often becomes a test of the young woman's knowledge that seeks evidence from her everyday life experience.

QUESTION-AND-ANSWER SESSIONS AS TEST OF EMBODIED KNOWLEDGE

In addition to singing, dancing and playing the instruments used to accompany the Bihu song mentioned earlier, *Bihu Rānī* contestants are required to answer questions posed by the judges. I have witnessed contestants being judged on their knowledge of Bihu festival history, the meaning of song lyrics and even the names of important vegetables, leaves and roots that are consumed during festival rituals. Since many judges who appear on Bihu reality television shows also adjudicate some of the larger, urban *bihutolī* stage competitions, the criteria they use to evaluate performances and the questions they ask contestants sometimes overlap in both contexts. At the conclusion of Bonti's 2009 *bihutolī* routine in Margherita, one of the judges asked her during the question-and-answer session: ‘Why is the *nāsoni* [female Bihu dancer] required to dance without lifting up her feet?’ Unable to elicit an answer, the judge informed her, and everyone else present, that Bihu is related to Assamese ‘low culture’, using the English words, and then explained that the weight of the dancer's feet stepping on the earth makes cultivation (*hosyo*) possible. If she lifts up her legs while dancing, that weight would not fall on the earth. This focus on the connection between specific Bihu dance movements and themes of agricultural cultivation and fertility is prevalent in Bihu song lyrics, so the fact that they are highlighted in these question-and-answer sessions with judges is not necessarily a surprise. But it is significant that these competitions home in on particular values associated with an idealized Assamese femininity, which is amplified on the *Bihu Rānī* media platform.

During the 2015 season of *Bihu Rānī*, I was invited to participate in two episodes as a guest judge, and I had the opportunity to see what happens offstage and how the episodes are filmed. In conversation with the three other judges – Smritirekha Saikia, Nilakanta Borah and Seema Kakoty – I learnt that the questions they asked were not chosen beforehand, but were spontaneously improvised during the course of the show (Figure 3). These questions were not limited to knowledge about the names of specific dance movements or the meaning behind particular Bihu song lyrics. Similar to *bihutoli* question sessions, the judges on *Bihu Rānī* also test the contestants on their general knowledge of historical and contemporary practices associated with Bihu and Assamese rural culture. Sometimes the answers end up sounding obscure, like the question Bonti answered about why the dancer's feet must stay close to the ground, and sometimes they turn out to be embarrassingly obvious, like the question Nilakanta requested me to ask contestant Sumi Boruah about the *gogonā* bamboo mouth harp as part of my judging responsibilities.

I adjusted my microphone and asked Nilakanta a question in Assamese: 'Why does the *nāsoni* wear the *gogonā* in her hair?' As if to bolster the question's authority, Nilakanta repeated my words, and then Sumi replied: 'So that the *khupā* [bun] doesn't come loose'. It sounded like a fine answer to me, and having no counter-answer in mind, I looked to Nilakanta for the final judgement. He spoke into his own microphone:

I will say this is not the correct answer to the question. Why? If you remove the *gogonā*, does the *khupā* come loose? No, actually, there is no other place to keep the *gogonā* apart from the *khupā*. Is there? You can't



Figure 3: Smritirekha Saikia, Rehanna Ksheshgi and Seema Kakoty preparing to judge an episode of *Bihu Rānī* at the DY365 studios in Guwahati. 31 March 2015.

go around holding the *gogonā* in your hand, can you? You must dance, isn't it true?

(‘Bihu Rānī’ 2015)

Upon hearing this response, I almost laughed out loud at what appeared to me to be a random question with an even more arbitrary answer.

The gendered power dynamics of the situation struck me as significant, as the older male judge corrected the young female performer in a tone that made it seem as if she lacked the common sense required to understand her own body. Heather Hendershot highlights the illusion of meritocracy in reality television talent shows, asserting that the judge ‘functions like a boss doing an “annual review”, assessing an employee’s strengths and weaknesses and deciding whether to grant a worker a promotion or to show him or her the door’ (2004: 246). The power judges wield to put contestants in their place leads me to believe that *Bihu Rānī*’s question-and-answer sessions constitute deliberate pedagogical narratives of humiliation. In the context of *American Idol*, narratives of humiliation are mainly centred on failed audition attempts that are framed as part of the show in order to authenticate the legitimacy of the process whereby idols are chosen (Stahl 2013: 52). In *Bihu Rānī*, however, these narratives function to make an example of young women who fail to live up to an idealized standard of embodied knowledge grounded in rural Assamese lifeways.

Although question-and-answer sessions appear in some of the larger, more established *bihutolī* competitions, they are more of an afterthought in those arenas, while they function as a core part of Bihu reality television shows like *Bihu Rānī*. The centring of verbal exchange between contestants and judges serves as a staging of the cultural anxiety that permeates the relatively new reality television performance context by reifying respectable feminine rurality. The show is filmed in an urban television studio’s giant warehouse that is designed to look like the stage of an open-air *bihutolī* tent, the latter of which is typically designed to look like a village scene with trees arching into the performance space. There is a distinct pressure to portray a sense of ‘reality’, but not by replicating the *bihutolī* environment, although many of the performance elements are drawn from *bihutolī* practices. *Bihu Rānī* is clearly something different. For example, the *bihutolī* competition normally features a series of contestants performing twenty-minute routines one after another from evening until morning. In order to prolong the competition over one television season, the routines that would normally be performed during one long night at the *bihutolī* are split into segments and serialized for weekly broadcasts. Different aspects of performance are spread out across multiple episodes in order to create a dramatic arc, which is amplified by the theme music that incorporates the iconic Bihu minor third into the show’s sonic branding strategy. Much effort is expended to make episodes seem like they were filmed on different days. When I appeared as a guest judge on the 2015 season of *Bihu Rānī*, I was asked to bring two different outfits so I could change during the brief lunch break since the two episodes we filmed that day were to be aired a week apart.

‘THINK OF YOUR GARDEN’: URBAN CONTESTANTS PERFORMING RURAL KNOWLEDGE

The questions asked by judges often probe into the lived experiences of contestants for evidence of cultural knowledge, which is an important aspect of the rural sensibility I draw attention to in this article. For example, judge

Smritirekha Saikia's question for contestant Yashmin Dihingia involved a lengthy prelude:

On the first day of Bihu, we eat 100 different types of *xāk* [leafy vegetables], isn't it true? This is our *poromporā* [tradition]. Your mother, elder sister, grandmother, if they are living, they surely have told you. In every home, one hundred types of *xāk* are used, which are eaten in every home. You won't have to name all one hundred varieties. Just tell us the name of ten types of *xāk*.

(‘Bihu Rānī’ 2015)

Yashmin, visibly flustered and confused, replied with the names of *lāu* (‘gourds’) instead of *xāk*: ‘*Kerelā lāu* [bitter gourd], *rongā lāu* [pumpkin], *jāti lāu* [bottle gourd]’. With a smirk, Smritirekha responded: ‘It looks like not even one type of *xāk* was named here’. The other two judges chimed in: ‘The things you’ve named do not fall into the category of *xāk*! What are these? These are *pāsoli* [non-leafy vegetables]. She asked for *xāk*’. Smritirekha clarified, ‘I am asking about *xāk*. Think about the garden behind your house and you’ll remember’. Judge Nilakanta Borah, known for being antagonistic, reinforced Yashmin’s mistake, saying: ‘Didn’t you understand what she was asking? She’s talking about *xāk*’. Yashmin replied meekly: ‘Yes, I know’. Smritirekha continued her questioning: ‘Do you eat *xāk* at home or not? You’ll find the answer if you think of your garden at home’. Yashmin again attempted to answer, listing five types of *xāk*: ‘*Lāi xāk* [mustard], *khutorā* [green amaranth], *jilmil* [white goosefoot], *mula* [radish], *māimuni* [pennywort]’. After a pause, Yashmin continued: ‘*Lofā* [Chinese mallow], *pāleng* [spinach]’. Smritirekha interjected: ‘It’s coming along. Just a few more and you’ll be done’. Yashmin added: ‘*Khutorā*’. Nilakanta noticed: ‘You said *khutorā* twice’. Smritirekha said: ‘Is there no *dhekiyā* [fiddle head fern] in your garden? Just think of your garden, then you’ll remember everything’. Yashmin continued: ‘*Dhekiyā, kosu* [taro]’. Smritirekha concluded:

Ok that was ten, wasn’t it? Fine. You’re beginning to remember. You should know this, don’t you think so? Your own food that you eat? People are forgetting our traditional foods, isn’t it true? This is why it is good to remember the names of *xāk* and *pāsoli*, you up and coming next generation. Fine, it’s done. Thank you.

(‘Bihu Rānī’ 2015)

The simple fact of assuming that Yashmin’s home has a garden – something almost impossible to find in urban Guwahati – marks access to this tangible resource as an improbable prerequisite for cultural knowledge. That Yashmin’s eating habits became part of the competition should not come as a surprise, because the female Bihu performer is expected to be the embodiment of Assamese womanhood, from her daily comportment to her life choices. This mode of address that borders on public shaming can be found in reality television shows across the world – Simon Cowell’s *The X Factor*, *Britain’s Got Talent* and *American Idol* being one of the more famous exponents. But in Assam, the roots of public hand-wringing about cultural loss run deep, fed by political movements for cultural and political autonomy during and after the colonial rule. Why is it so important that young women know the names of leafy vegetables, the names of six rivers featured in Bihu songs and the name

of the teeth on the *kāsi* scythe used to harvest rice, for example? This information is not taught in school and has no place in textbooks – especially not those created by the central government – where the history and culture of Northeast India is underrepresented if included at all.

While flustering contestants over seemingly minute and randomly selected details of Bihu-related trivia may have an entertainment value, I believe a deeper purpose of these interactions is to add fuel to the ongoing public debate about cultural loss in the Assamese media. Young women are singled out as falling short of expectations for gendered knowledge and skills as they gain visibility and socio-economic mobility. The pedagogical function of these question-and-answer sessions serves to educate the audiences about Assamese folk culture, albeit in a haphazard and dramatized way, which means, in a sense, testing the success of a folklorization project by responding to the question of whether Bihu is being transmitted to the younger generation.

CONCLUSION

Examining the experiences of contestants reveals a powerful irony at the core of *Bihu Rānī* and the *bihutolī* competitions on which the show is based: an ideal contestant does not exist. Performers like Yashmin Dihingia who were born and brought up in Assam's urban centre Guwahati, where reality television shows are filmed, are at a disadvantage due to their lack of proximity to the embodied knowledge transmitted during ritual performances associated with the Bihu festival in rural areas. Yet, contestants from rural areas, whose lived experiences would be regarded as an asset in this competitive context, face significant economic and other hurdles to gaining entry into these competitions. Although Bonti is from the semi-urban town of Jorhat, the women of her household still maintained practices associated with village life, such as grinding rice into flour with the *ḍhekī*. She was trained in the cultivation of a rural sensibility from a young age as part of her Bihu performance lessons and has subsequently gone on to train another generation of young women in Bihu performance practice. The layers of 'reality' portrayed through *Bihu Rānī* frame the unattainable ideal of Assamese femininity by picturing finalists being engaged in domestic labour, by incorporating confessional scenes of their personal struggles and by dramatizing moments when they sometimes burst into tears after a negative response from the judge. The 'realness' that is rewarded is not based on whether a contestant actually grew up in a rural community in order to benefit from the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge. Instead judges and, by extension, audiences, in a messy and haphazard way, seek to ascertain the extent to which contestants are able to cultivate and perform a rural sensibility through music, dance and discourse that may or may not have emerged from the actual experiences with rural lifeways.

As female contestants are questioned on stage, they are expected to be able to frame their embodied cultural knowledge in verbal terms recognizable to a wider audience, performing a critical role in the negotiation of local authority in a politically and culturally marginalized region of India. Knowledge of local culture is highly prized in this climate of fear fuelled by globalization and so-called westernization, especially in the field of cultural production. The close association of respectable femininity with sacrifice, nourishment and prosperity linked to the fertility of earth brings into relief the metonymical

force of 'Mother India' in shaping the expectations for young women during these encounters (Ramaswamy 2010). Frequent televised debates and public protests relating to the preservation of Assamese culture are highly gendered. Reality television shows like *Bihu Rānī* participate in this discourse while providing young women the potential for considerable visibility and access to social, economic and even caste mobility. At the same time, by drawing on the global neo-liberal models of reality television performance as well as the local *bihutoli* conventions that individuate performers in some ways and reward conformity in other ways, Bihu reality television shows ultimately continue the perpetuation of idealized constructions of Assamese femininity.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Rehanna Kheshgi is an ethnomusicologist whose research focuses on gender, sexuality and the body at the intersections of popular, folk and sacred music

and dance performance in India. She teaches at St Olaf College in Minnesota and is currently working on a book that explores contemporary performances of gender and sexuality through Bihu, the springtime Assamese New Year's festival. Ksheshgi's research has been recognized with support from the American Institute of Indian Studies, the American Association for University Women, the Fulbright Programme (2017–18 Fulbright-Nehru postdoctoral scholar) and the Institute of Sacred Music at Yale University (2016–17 fellow).

Contact: St Olaf College, 1520 St. Olaf Avenue, Northfield, MN 55057, USA.
E-mail: ksheshgi@stolaf.edu

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4294-6569>

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