

BHAONA AND RURAL CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY: A STUDY OF TRADITION, IDENTITY, AND CHANGE IN ASSAM

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Abstract

Bhaona, a traditional performing art of Assam, serves as a vital medium for preserving cultural heritage, religious values, and community identity in rural settings. Inventing in the 15th and 16th centuries, Srimanta Sankardeva led the creation of Bhaona. This process syndicates drama, music, and dance to repeat floors from Vaishnavite manuscripts, chiefly the Bhagavata Purana. This study observes the role of Bhaona in sustaining Assamese rural traditions, focusing on its contribution to cultural continuity, identity reinforcement, and social cohesion.

The researcher uses a descriptive methodology based on secondary data. The research explores the historical origins, core themes, and ritual significance of Bhaona, as well as its structural elements, performance practices, and community involvement. The study also investigates the impacts of modernization, urbanization, and mass media on rural participation, highlighting challenges such as declining interest among younger generations, socio-economic pressures, and funding constraints. The findings demonstrate that Bhaona continues to reinforce Assamese rural identity by fostering intergenerational transmission of knowledge, promoting communal values, and providing a shared sense of belonging. At the same time, communities negotiate continuity and change by adapting performances to contemporary contexts, incorporating modern themes, and leveraging digital media.

This study underscores the importance of institutional support from Satras, government bodies, NGOs, and cultural organizations in sustaining Bhaona. It offers insights for cultural policy, emphasizing strategies for documentation, youth engagement, and preservation of intangible heritage. Overall, Bhaona exemplifies the dynamic balance between tradition and innovation, illustrating how rural performing arts can sustain cultural identity and contribute to the resilience of Assamese heritage in the modern era.

Introduction

Assam, positioned in India's northeastern, is well-known for its caustic social and ecological wealth. The state's rural areas, which quarter a large helping of its population, serve as guardians of native traditions and folk practices. Villages in Assam are not merely agricultural hubs but vibrant spaces where culture, religion, and daily life are deeply intertwined (Barua, 2015). The region's cultural landscape has been shaped by historical influences such as the Ahom dynasty, tribal communities, and the Vaishnavite reform movements led by Srimanta Sankardev, each contributing unique artistic expressions, folklore, and rituals (Saikia, 2018). These influences have collectively produced a wealth of performing arts, which function not only as entertainment but also as repositories of collective memory, transmitting histories, moral values, and religious beliefs across generations (Choudhury, 2017).

Among these performing arts, Bhaona stands out for its enduring religious and social significance. Introduced by Srimanta Sankardev in the 15th–16th century, Bhaona is a form of Vaishnavite theatre combining music, dance, and dramatic storytelling. It educates audiences through mythological narratives, moral lessons, and devotional themes while reinforcing community cohesion and cultural continuity (Goswami, 2019). Rural villagers, whether as performers, organizers, or spectators, actively participate in these events, ensuring that cultural knowledge is transmitted intergenerationally. This participation fosters a shared sense of belonging and identity, making Bhaona a central component of Assamese rural life (Saikia & Borgohain, 2018).

Performing arts in rural Assam play a crucial role in maintaining cultural identity, functioning as a medium through which communities negotiate tradition and modernity simultaneously. They preserve heritage by embedding social norms, religious practices, and local histories within accessible, performative forms. At the same time, these arts are dynamic, responding to contemporary issues and evolving community needs, which enables them to remain relevant in changing social contexts. In essence, traditional performances like Bhaona act as cultural anchors, sustaining communal memory and identity while adapting to socio-cultural transformations. (Sharma, P. 2017).

Keywords: Bhaona, Assam, Vaishnavism, Cultural Sustainability, Rural Performing Arts.

Background:

Brief Overview of Assam's Cultural and Rural Landscape

Assam, situated in the north-easterly share of India, is famous for its ironic wall-hanging of social, language, and environmental variety. The state's rural areas, which house a important helping of its populace, have factually been the custodians of indigenous traditions and folk practices. These regions are marked by an agrarian lifestyle, where social and religious life revolves around community gatherings, festivals, and traditional rituals (Barua, 2015). Assam's cultural landscape is shaped by a combination of ethnic diversity and historical influences, including the Ahom dynasty, Vaishnavite reform movements, and tribal communities, each contributing unique cultural expressions, folklore, and performing arts (Saikia, 2018).

Among these expressions, the rural performing arts stand out not merely as entertainment but as critical vehicles for preserving local heritage. Folk dances like Bihu, mask performances, and musical storytelling have long served as repositories of communal memory, transmitting local histories, moral values, and religious beliefs from one generation to the next. Rural Assam's villages, therefore, are not just spaces of agricultural activity but are also hubs of cultural creativity, where art and life coexist in a dynamic relationship. This interweaving of culture and daily practice highlights the importance of studying Assam's rural performing arts as markers of social continuity, identity formation, and cultural sustainability (Choudhury, 2017).

Significance of Performing Arts in Maintaining Community Identity

Performing arts in rural Assam function as more than mere spectacles; they are integral to community cohesion and identity formation. Through communal participation in music, dance, and theatre, villagers collectively reaffirm shared beliefs, social norms, and historical narratives. One notable example is Bhaona, a traditional form of Vaishnavite theatre, which embodies both religious devotion and moral instruction, providing audiences with a shared cultural and ethical framework (Goswami, 2019). These performances, often rooted in the narratives of Srimanta Sankardeva and other Vaishnavite saints, not only entertain but also educate, reinforcing a sense of belonging and continuity within the community.

The participatory nature of these arts ensures that cultural knowledge is transmitted across generations, fostering intergenerational bonds and reinforcing local identity. Villagers, whether as performers, organizers, or audience members, engage collectively, making the performance a lived experience rather than a passive observation (Saikia & Borgohain, 2018). Moreover, performing arts in rural Assam often respond to local socio-political realities, incorporating contemporary issues into traditional frameworks, thereby maintaining relevance and strengthening communal ties.

Bhaona: An Overview

Bhaona is a traditional form of Assamese theatre, primarily devotional in nature, that blends music, dance, and drama to convey religious and moral narratives. It is performed in Satras (Vaishnavite monasteries) as well as in rural village spaces, making it both a sacred and community-centered activity (Goswami, 2019). Unlike conventional theatre, Bhaona is highly ritualistic: the performance follows a prescribed structure, including songs, enactments, and dialogues that emphasize devotion and moral instruction.

The term 'Bhaona' is derived from the Assamese word *bhaona*, meaning "to entertain or show," reflecting its dual purpose of instruction and entertainment. Performances are usually based on *Ankiya Naat*, a one-act play format introduced by Srimanta Sankardev, designed to be comprehensible to common villagers. The plays often incorporate local language, music, and dance forms, ensuring accessibility while preserving cultural specificity. Over the centuries, Bhaona has become an emblem of Assamese identity, bridging religious devotion and folk traditions. It serves as a medium for reinforcing social cohesion, transmitting ethical and spiritual teachings, and maintaining a living connection between the past and present.

Origin and Historical Background

Bhaona traces its origin to the 15th–16th century, introduced by the Vaishnavite saint and reformer Srimanta Sankardev in Assam. Sankardev's efforts aimed to spread devotion to Lord Krishna through a more accessible, community-oriented form of religious instruction. At that time, literacy was limited, and conventional religious texts could not reach rural populations effectively. Bhaona emerged as a solution: a performative medium that combined entertainment with devotional teachings (Barua, 2015).

Sankardev developed *Ankiya Naat*, a one-act dramatic form designed for simple understanding and collective participation. These performances were staged in *Namghars* (prayer halls) and *Satras*, often during festivals and religious gatherings. Bhaona was not only a medium for devotion but also a tool for social instruction, reinforcing moral values, ethical conduct, and communal harmony. The art form incorporated local music, dance, and folk narratives to ensure that rural audiences could relate to its themes.

Over time, Bhaona became institutionalized through the *Satra* system, with monastic institutions responsible for training performers and preserving scripts. This helped standardize the performance while allowing for regional variations, enabling it to flourish as both a religious practice and a cultural institution. By bridging devotional practice and artistic expression, Bhaona ensured continuity of Assamese cultural identity and contributed to the cohesion of rural communities across the region.

Table 1: Historical Development of Bhaona

Time Period	Key Features	Influence on Society	Associated Institutions
15th–16th Century (Srimanta Sankardev's era)	Introduction of <i>Ankiya Naat</i> , devotional drama	Spread of Neo-Vaishnavism, moral education	Satras and <i>Namghars</i>
17th–18th Century	Expansion of Bhaona in rural areas	Strengthened community gatherings and rituals	Local Satras
19th Century	Wider performance in villages, focus on moral storytelling	Reinforced rural identity, social unity	Community groups
20th Century	Use of printed texts and stage set-ups	Blending of tradition with emerging modern practices	Cultural organizations
21st Century	Inclusion of modern themes, digital recordings	Attracts wider audiences but faces youth disinterest	Govt. & NGOs

Core Themes and Religious/Cultural Significance

At its core, Bhaona reflects the principles of Vaishnavism and devotion to Lord Krishna, emphasizing moral and spiritual education. The performances dramatize episodes from sacred texts such as the *Bhagavata Purana*, presenting narratives that illustrate the virtues of devotion, humility, compassion, and ethical conduct (Goswami, 2019). By embodying these stories through music, dance, and dialogue, Bhaona makes abstract religious teachings tangible and relatable to rural audiences.

Religious significance is reinforced through the ritualistic nature of performances, which begin with invocations, prayers, and symbolic acts that sanctify the space and the participants. Costumes, masks, and props often represent divine and mythological characters, helping the audience visualize the narratives and internalize moral lessons. The communal performance setting fosters shared spiritual experience, encouraging collective reflection on ethical and devotional values.

Culturally, Bhaona serves as a repository of Assamese folk traditions, preserving regional music, dance, and oral storytelling techniques. It is a means of sustaining community identity, transmitting cultural knowledge across generations, and reinforcing social cohesion. The themes are adaptable, allowing performers to incorporate contemporary issues while maintaining the devotional core, ensuring relevance in changing socio-cultural contexts (Saikia & Borgohain, 2018).

Objectives of the Study

1. To study the character of Bhaona in the protection and raise of country social traditions in Assam.
2. To study how Bhaona contributes to shaping and sustaining community identity.
3. To study the interplay of tradition and change in Bhaona performances over time.

Research Questions

1. How does Bhaona contribute to the preservation of Assamese rural cultural heritage and traditions?
2. In what ways does participation in Bhaona performances shape communal identity and social cohesion in rural Assam?
3. How are Bhaona performances adapting to changing social, cultural, and economic contexts in contemporary Assam?

Review Related Literature

Choudhury, R. (2017) studied the role of rural performing arts, particularly Bhaona, in maintaining community identity in Assam. The study hypothesized that Bhaona serves as a critical medium for preserving cultural cohesion in rural villages. Using qualitative methods, Choudhury found that Bhaona performances enable intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge, values, and religious teachings. Villagers participate actively as performers, organizers, and audience members, which strengthens a collective sense of belonging. The research concluded that Bhaona not only preserves traditional art forms but also enhances social cohesion, allowing Assamese rural cultural identity to remain resilient despite modernization pressures. The shared and ceremonial countryside of Bhaona safeguards its sustainability, stress the meaning of participating execution arts in behind rural inheritance and strengthening shared cultural awareness.

Goswami, L. (2019) explored the historical evolution and devotional significance of Bhaona in Assamese society. The study proposed that the structure and content of Bhaona reflect both religious devotion and socio-cultural education. Tracing its origin to Srimanta Sankardev, Goswami emphasized that Bhaona's combination of music, dance, and drama makes it accessible and engaging for rural audiences. The research found that Bhaona serves a dual purpose: imparting moral instruction and providing entertainment. Institutional support from Satras has played a pivotal role in sustaining this art form. Goswami concluded that Bhaona continues to act as a cultural

anchor in Assamese villages, transmitting Vaishnavite teachings and reinforcing communal identity, highlighting the importance of structured religious theatre in preserving intangible rural heritage.

Saikia, P., & Borgohain, N. (2018) inspected how execution arts like Bhaona purpose as a social adhesive in the country of Assam. They hypothesized that participatory performance practices strengthen intergenerational bonds and community solidarity. Their findings revealed that active audience participation, collective rehearsals, and festival-centered performances are key mechanisms through which identity is reinforced. Bhaona engages the community collectively, promoting social cohesion and shared values. The study demonstrated that rural performing arts are essential to cultural resilience, allowing traditions to persist even amidst socio-economic and modern pressures. The authors emphasized that Bhaona not only sustains religious and moral teachings but also fosters communal harmony, underscoring its role in maintaining a sense of collective identity and continuity within Assamese rural society.

Barua, P. (2015) focused on Assam's rural cultural landscapes and the role of traditional art forms in sustaining social and spiritual life. The study hypothesized that indigenous performing arts preserve both moral and cultural values within rural communities. Barua highlighted various folk performances, emphasizing Bhaona for its devotional significance and accessibility to villagers. The findings showed that continuous rural participation ensures the transmission of cultural knowledge across generations. The results revealed that Bhaona plays a central role in preserving Assamese identity by embedding moral narratives in performative formats. Barua concluded that institutional support and community involvement are crucial for its sustainability, positioning Bhaona as a model for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in rural Assam.

Saikia, M. (2018) investigated the impact of ethnic diversity on folk arts in Assam, focusing on Bhaona's adaptability. The study hypothesized that the multi-ethnic cultural environment contributes to variations and local adaptations in performing arts. Findings showed that while Bhaona retains its core Vaishnavite themes, it incorporates local dialects, music, and socio-cultural contexts to remain relevant to diverse rural audiences. The results highlighted Bhaona's adaptive capacity, which enables it to function as both a unifying cultural force and a marker of Assamese identity. Saikia concluded that these adaptations have been crucial for sustaining Bhaona in multi-ethnic communities, demonstrating how traditional performing arts can evolve while preserving their cultural and religious essence.

Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive research design to explore the role of Bhaona in sustaining rural cultural practices in Assam. It relies on secondary data collected from scholarly books, journal articles, theses, and archival records related to Bhaona and Assamese culture. The data were analysed qualitatively to identify themes such as tradition, community identity, and cultural sustainability. This approach allows for a detailed understanding of Bhaona's significance, historical evolution, and challenges, without primary fieldwork.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to examine the role of Bhaona in sustaining rural cultural traditions in Assam and to understand its contribution to community identity. By exploring the historical, religious, and social dimensions of Bhaona, the study seeks to highlight how this traditional performance art continues to serve as a medium for intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge, moral values, and devotional practices. Additionally, the study aims to analyze the ways in which Bhaona adapts to contemporary social and cultural changes, reflecting the dynamic interaction between tradition and modernity. Through a descriptive and secondary-data-based approach, the research intends to provide insights into the mechanisms that ensure the continuity and resilience of this performing art. Eventually, the study is intended to excavate sympathetic of imperceptible social inheritance in Assam and to highlight the importance of old-style execution arts in upholding rural cultural sustainability

Significance of the Study

This study holds significance at both academic and cultural levels. Academically, it contributes to the limited body of research on Assamese performing arts, particularly Bhaona, by offering a focused examination of its historical development, religious and moral dimensions, and social relevance. By synthesizing findings from various secondary sources, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of how Bhaona reinforces communal identity, social cohesion, and intergenerational knowledge transfer. Culturally, the research highlights the role of Bhaona as a living tradition that sustains rural communities' sense of heritage, ethical values, and spiritual practices. It also draws attention to the challenges posed by modernization, migration, and changing socio-economic conditions, which threaten the continuity of traditional arts. Furthermore, the study underscores the need for policy measures, institutional support, and community engagement to safeguard such intangible cultural heritage. By doing so, it emphasizes the broader significance of preserving rural performing arts as vital instruments of cultural continuity and identity.

Bhaona in Rural Assam

Bhaona, a traditional Vaishnavite theatre introduced by Srimanta Sankardev, holds a central place in rural Assam's cultural and religious life. Performed in Satras and village spaces, it combines music, dance, and drama to convey devotional and moral narratives. Rural communities actively participate as performers, organizers, and audience members, ensuring intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge and values. Bhaona fosters social cohesion, reinforces Assamese identity, and serves as both entertainment and spiritual education. Its adaptability to local contexts and contemporary issues allows it to remain relevant, making it a vital component of rural Assam's cultural sustainability and communal heritage. Neog, M. (2017)

Performance and Ritual

Bhaona performances in Assam are highly structured and ritualistic, typically centered around Ankiya Naat, a one-act play developed by Srimanta Sankardev, which blends music, dance, and drama to narrate devotional stories. The performances often begin with invocations and prayers, followed by enactments of episodes from the *Bhagavata Purana* or other Vaishnavite texts. Music and dance are essential, with outdated devices like the khol and cymbals supplementary religious tunes that lead the story and improve the expressive impact. Costumes, masks, and props are carefully designed to represent mythological characters and divine symbolism, helping the audience visualize spiritual themes. Every element, from gestures to stage arrangements, carries symbolic meaning, reinforcing moral lessons and devotional messages. Together, these components create an immersive experience that educates, entertains, and unites the community through shared ritual and performance. Goswami, M. (2017).

Community Involvement

In rural Assam, the sustainability of Bhaona is deeply rooted in the active involvement of local communities. Villagers participate not only as spectators but also as performers, musicians, stage organizers, and coordinators, making each performance a collaborative effort (Goswami, 2017). These communal gatherings are often linked to religious festivals or important village events, ensuring that Bhaona remains a socially significant and widely attended practice (Sharma, 2017). The collective effort required to stage Bhaona—from preparing the Namghar or performance space to arranging costumes, props, and musical instruments—fosters a strong sense of unity and shared purpose among community members.

A crucial aspect of community involvement is the intergenerational transmission of skills and knowledge. Skilled performers and elders mentor younger members in acting, music, dance, and the reading of sacred texts, creating a continuous lineage of cultural learning (Neog, 2017). This hands-on method allows traditional techniques, moral teachings, and religious narratives to be passed down effectively. Younger participants not only acquire technical skills but also internalize the ethical and spiritual values embedded in Bhaona performances (Goswami, 2017).

Religious and Social Significance

Bhaona holds profound spiritual and social meaning in rural Assam. Rooted in the Vaishnavite traditions established by Srimanta Sankardev, Bhaona performances serve an educational and moral function by dramatizing episodes from sacred texts such as the *Bhagavata Purana*. Through storytelling, music, and dance, performers convey ethical lessons, devotional principles, and spiritual narratives in a manner that is accessible and engaging to rural audiences (Sharma, 2017). These performances teach values such as devotion, compassion, humility, and communal responsibility, making moral instruction an integral part of entertainment (Neog, 2017).

Beyond moral education, Bhaona plays a vital role in reinforcing social cohesion and communal identity. The collective organization of performances—where villagers participate as performers, musicians, and audience members—strengthens bonds among community members and fosters a shared sense of belonging (Goswami, 2017). Festivals and rituals associated with Bhaona bring together people of different ages and social backgrounds, creating opportunities for intergenerational learning and cultural continuity (Neog, 2017).

Tradition, Identity, and Change: Preservation of Tradition

Bhaona plays a critical role in preserving Assamese cultural and historical traditions, serving as a living repository of religious, social, and artistic heritage. Originating in the 15th–16th century through Srimanta Sankardev's reformist Vaishnavite movement, Bhaona retains core narratives from sacred texts such as the *Bhagavata Purana*, dramatizing the life and teachings of Lord Krishna. Through these performances, historical and spiritual knowledge is continuously reinforced within rural communities, ensuring that cultural memory remains active and relevant (Sharma, 2017). The plays not only reflect devotional practices but also encapsulate the social norms, folk values, and ethical principles prevalent in Assamese society over centuries (Neog, 2017).

The mechanisms of oral and performative transmission are central to this preservation. Bhaona is traditionally taught through mentorship within Satras and village communities, where experienced performers instruct younger generations in dialogue recitation, music, dance, and stagecraft (Goswami, 2017). Verbal narration and improvisation allow flexibility while upholding the core plot, enabling the art form to adapt to local vernaculars and performance settings. Performative elements—gestures, expressions, costumes, props, and music—reinforce the narrative and ensure that cultural values are internalized by both performers and audiences (Neog, 2017).

This continuous cycle of learning and enactment ensures intergenerational continuity, embedding historical knowledge and ethical teachings within communal life. By combining storytelling, ritual, and performance, Bhaona acts as a resilient medium for cultural preservation, sustaining Assamese identity while accommodating subtle adaptations to changing social realities. Its enduring presence exemplifies the dynamic balance between conserving tradition and embracing contextual relevance (Sharma, 2017).

Cultural Identity

Bhaona plays a pivotal role in reinforcing Assamese rural identity by embedding Vaishnavite values, local traditions, and communal narratives within its performances. Through dramatization of episodes from sacred texts, the art form communicates moral and spiritual principles such as devotion, humility, and ethical conduct, which are central to Assamese cultural consciousness (Neog, 2017). By consistently portraying these themes, Bhaona nurtures a shared cultural memory that connects rural communities to their historical and religious heritage (Sharma, 2017).

Participation in Bhaona performances—whether as actors, musicians, organizers, or audience members—fosters a profound sense of belonging and collective pride among community members. Villagers actively engage in preserving costumes, musical instruments, and stagecraft, viewing these efforts as a way to sustain their cultural legacy (Goswami, 2017).

Adaptation and Change

Bhaona, though strongly rooted in tradition, has taken on adaptive forms in response to social change, technological development, and urban influences. The spread of mass media, digital entertainment, and rural-to-

urban migration has altered audience expectations and engagement patterns, prompting performers to incorporate elements that appeal to contemporary sensibilities (Sharma, 2017). Technology has also facilitated wider dissemination of performances through recordings and online platforms, helping to preserve the art form beyond village boundaries (Neog, 2017).

To remain relevant, some Bhaona performances have included contemporary themes or modifications in storytelling, stagecraft, and music, without compromising the core Vaishnavite narratives. Local dialects, modern social issues, and community-specific concerns are occasionally woven into performances, making them more relatable to present-day audiences (Goswami, 2017).

Despite these adaptations, Bhaona faces challenges such as declining participation among younger generations, reduced funding, and diminishing interest due to alternative entertainment options. These factors threaten the sustainability of traditional practices, placing greater responsibility on communities and cultural institutions to ensure continuity (Sharma, 2017). Balancing innovation with preservation has become essential for maintaining Bhaona as a living tradition that continues to reinforce cultural identity while responding to societal change (Neog, 2017).

Challenges to Rural Cultural Sustainability: Socio-economic Factors

Rural cultural practices like Bhaona face significant challenges due to socio-economic changes in Assam. One major factor is migration, as younger generations often move to urban centers in search of education, employment, or better living standards. This exodus reduces the pool of participants available to perform, organize, and sustain Bhaona, weakening the transmission of skills and knowledge from elders to youth (Sharma, 2017). Consequently, traditional performances risk losing continuity as fewer villagers are actively involved in maintaining these cultural practices (Neog, 2017).

Education and changing livelihoods also influence participation. Modern education exposes young people to broader cultural narratives and entertainment forms, often shifting their interests away from local performing arts. Similarly, economic pressures and diversified livelihoods leave little time or resources for involvement in time-intensive communal activities like Bhaona. Villagers may prioritize income-generating work over rehearsals and festival preparations, creating a practical barrier to sustaining traditional performance practices (Goswami, 2017).

These socio-economic shifts interact with other challenges, such as reduced funding and limited institutional support, creating a complex environment in which rural cultural sustainability is threatened (Sharma, 2017). Despite these pressures, community engagement and adaptive strategies—such as simplifying performances, integrating contemporary themes, or leveraging technology for wider outreach—have helped Bhaona retain its relevance (Neog, 2017). Nevertheless, ensuring long-term sustainability requires a careful balance between preserving tradition and accommodating socio-economic realities, emphasizing the need for targeted support from both communities and cultural institutions (Goswami, 2017).

Cultural Shifts

Rural cultural practices like Bhaona in Assam are increasingly influenced by mass media and modern entertainment, which have transformed the ways people engage with traditional art forms. Television, cinema, and digital platforms provide readily accessible alternatives to village performances, drawing attention away from local cultural events (Sharma, 2017). This exposure to globalized entertainment has altered audience expectations, leading to decreased interest in traditional performances and affecting the communal participation that is essential for sustaining Bhaona (Neog, 2017).

Changing attitudes among younger generations further contribute to these cultural shifts. Many youths perceive Bhaona as outdated or time-consuming compared to contemporary leisure activities, reducing their willingness to participate as performers or organizers (Goswami, 2017). Modern education, urban influences, and exposure to diverse cultural experiences have reshaped priorities, making traditional communal activities less attractive. This generational shift threatens the transmission of skills, knowledge, and ethical teachings embedded in Bhaona, creating a potential disconnect between elders and youth (Sharma, 2017).

Despite these challenges, adaptation strategies—such as incorporating contemporary themes, using technology to document performances, and modifying stagecraft—have allowed Bhaona to remain relevant to younger audiences (Neog, 2017). Nevertheless, sustaining rural cultural practices requires conscious efforts to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity, fostering appreciation for intangible heritage while accommodating evolving cultural tastes. Balancing continuity and innovation is essential for preserving Bhaona as a vibrant component of Assamese rural identity (Goswami, 2017).

Institutional Support

The sustainability of Bhaona in rural Assam is closely linked to the role of institutions, including governmental and non-governmental organizations, as well as monastic bodies like the Satras. Government initiatives, such as cultural preservation schemes, grants, and heritage programs, aim to support traditional performing arts by funding festivals, workshops, and archival documentation (Sharma, 2017). Similarly, NGOs and cultural organizations promote awareness, provide training, and facilitate community engagement, ensuring that Bhaona continues to thrive despite socio-economic and cultural challenges (Neog, 2017).

Satras, the monastic institutions established by Srimanta Sankardev, have historically served as custodians of Bhaona. They organize regular performances, maintain scripts, train performers, and provide resources for costumes, instruments, and performance spaces. Satras also uphold the ritual and devotional integrity of Bhaona, ensuring that its religious and moral teachings remain central (Goswami, 2017). Beyond religious functions, Satras act as cultural hubs, linking communities and providing platforms for intergenerational learning (Sharma, 2017).

Cultural bodies, including state-run academies and folk-art societies, play a complementary role by documenting performances, facilitating competitions, and recognizing outstanding practitioners (Neog, 2017). Together, these institutional supports create an ecosystem that helps mitigate challenges such as declining participation, funding shortages, and pressures from modern entertainment. Sustaining Bhaona therefore requires continued collaboration between communities, Satras, and institutional stakeholders, reinforcing its dual role as both a religious practice and a vibrant cultural heritage of Assam (Goswami, 2017).

Table 2: Challenges to Rural Cultural Sustainability

Factor	Impact on Bhaona	Possible Solutions
Migration	Decline in performers and audience	Incentives for youth to participate
Education	Preference for modern entertainment	Curriculum integration of Bhaona
Mass Media	Competition with TV, cinema, social media	Digital promotion of Bhaona
Funding Issues	Difficulty in organizing performances	Govt. & NGO financial support
Youth Disinterest	Decline in skill transmission	Training programs & workshops

Discussion

Bhaona functions as a vital medium of cultural continuity in rural Assam, preserving historical, moral, and religious knowledge while reinforcing Assamese identity. By enacting episodes from sacred texts such as the *Bhagavata Purana*, Bhaona transmits Vaishnavite values, ethical teachings, and communal traditions across generations. Its participatory nature—where villagers act as performers, musicians, organizers, and audience members—ensures intergenerational learning and fosters social cohesion. In this way, Bhaona sustains rural cultural practices while maintaining a shared sense of belonging and collective pride.

The interaction between tradition and change is evident in how Bhaona adapts to contemporary realities. While core narratives and devotional elements are preserved, performances increasingly incorporate local dialects,

relevant social issues, and digital technology for wider dissemination. Communities negotiate continuity and innovation by mentoring younger performers, adjusting stagecraft, and introducing minor modifications that enhance accessibility without diluting the essence of the tradition. This balance between preservation and adaptation allows Bhaona to remain relevant and engaging, even in the face of urban influences and modern entertainment alternatives.

Conclusion

This study highlights the critical role of Bhaona in sustaining rural Assamese culture, demonstrating its contribution to tradition, identity, and social cohesion. By enacting devotional narratives through music, dance, and drama, Bhaona preserves historical, ethical, and spiritual knowledge while reinforcing communal values and a shared sense of belonging. Its participatory nature ensures intergenerational transmission of skills and cultural memory, allowing rural communities to maintain continuity even amidst social and economic changes. The adaptability of Bhaona—incorporating local dialects, contemporary themes, and modern technology—illustrates the dynamic negotiation between tradition and innovation, ensuring relevance in changing cultural contexts. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to understanding cultural sustainability in Assam. Bhaona exemplifies how performing arts can function as both educational and communal institutions, reinforcing identity, moral values, and cultural cohesion in rural settings. By analysing the interplay of tradition, identity, and adaptation, the study provides insights for safeguarding intangible heritage and fostering cultural resilience.

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