

Integrating Darrang District's Performing Arts into the Tourism Economy: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract

The review paper examines how the performing arts of the Darrang district can be integrated into the tourism economy in Assam and what opportunities, challenges and sustainable ways can be achieved. These art forms are based on the traditions, including Ojapali, Khulia Bhaona, Bihu, Deodhani Nritya, Zikir and Nagara Naam, which reflect the cultural identity of Assam and have a high tourist potential. Historical origins, cultural preservation, infrastructural requirements, government policies, community engagement, marketing efforts, economic effects, commercialisation risks, and sustainable models are reviewed in the study. The case of Assam, such as the Bihu Guinness World Record attempt, Silpi Awards 2025, Padma recognitions and concert tourism plans, demonstrates the changing face of cultural tourism. Results indicate that, as much as commercialisation helps to increase visibility and livelihoods, it has a tendency to erode authenticity unless community-led preservation is applied. Eco-tourism circuits, tea garden experiential tourism, heritage performances and digital heritage projects are some sustainable models that can be used to integrate performing arts in tourism. The paper concludes that the performing arts in Darrang have the potential to flourish as a tourism resource provided there are measures that emphasise authenticity, balanced economic gains and sustainability, so that the cultural heritage of Assam can be further strengthened in the global tourism economy. This study is based on a qualitative review methodology using secondary data collected from books, research articles, government reports, policy documents, and credible media sources related to performing arts and tourism in Assam.

Keywords: Ojapali, Khulia Bhaona, Bihu, Deodhani Nritya, Zikir, Nagara Naam, Tourism economy, Cultural preservation, Commercialisation, Sustainability

Introduction

Darrang district of Assam is a living cultural environment, and the performing arts like Ojapali, Khulia Bhaona, Bihu, Deodhani Nritya, and Zikir are centuries of tradition and collective identity. The combination of these arts into the tourism sector has tremendous cultural safeguarding, economic empowerment, as well as international awareness. The new trends in Assam, such as the branding of festivals, policies of concert tourism, and promotion of heritage shows that more and more the performing arts are being considered as a tourism resource. The paper will examine historical background, cultural identity, infrastructure demands, policy advocacy, community involvement, marketing policies and sustainability issues, in an attempt to analyse the opportunities and disabilities in harmonising the performing arts of Darrang with tourism.

Historical Roots of Darrang's Performing Arts

The history of the performing arts of Darrang is closely connected with the overall process of cultural development in Assam, which is characterised by centuries of tradition, beliefs, and community life. Darrang district has long been a fertile source of folk expression, including Ojapali, a narrative singing and dancing form of expression which has a storytelling basis, frequently based on the Mahabharata or associated with local deities (Borah, 2023). Ojapali, which is considered to have originated in Darrang, is not just an act but also a ritual; that is, it is performed during religious festivals, community gatherings, and so it is one of the foundation blocks of Assamese cultural heritage.



Figure 1: Kulia Bhaona

(Source: 2016 IJRAR February 2016, Volume 3, Issue 1)

On the same note, Khulia Bhaona, the theatrical genre of Darrang district, where mythological tales are performed to music, dance and dialogue. These shows support ethical principles and religious doctrines and amuse people. Although celebrated all over Assam, folk dances such as the Bihu, especially in Darrang district, have local flavours with the agricultural rhythm coupled with the bonding of the community. They offered forums of general involvement, and the people living in the villages, regardless of their statuses, came together to do music, dance and drama. Darrang's performance art over the years came to represent Assamese strength, and oral traditions and local knowledge systems (Sarmah, 2024). What is historically important about them is how they stood between myth and reality, spirituality and means of livelihood to form a cultural spectrum that continues to outline the district in the Assam context of diverse artistic settings.

Cultural Identity and Heritage Preservation

The performing arts of Darrang are also considered living repositories of the Assamese heritage, and this cultural identity cannot be separated from the performing arts (Siliutina *et al.*, 2024). Traditions of the district like Ojapali and Khulia Bhaona are not just the shows but the reflections of the collective memory, passing the values, myths and social norms to the other generations. Singing, dancing, and dialogue blended into a single performance, Ojapali has kept oral narratives of epic tales such as the Mahabharata and Ramayana, and by so doing, has made sure that rural people, with a particularly Assamese taste, are in touch with pan-Indians mythology. Likewise, the Bhaona is still contributing to the neo-Vaishnavite philosophy as put forward by Sankardeva, of nonviolence, peace and harmony and of preserving linguistic and theatrical heritage.



Figure 2: Ojapali

(Source: India Today NE)

In addition to these, Bihu dance and songs are cultural identities of Assamese celebrating fertility and harvest days and community happiness. Performances of Bihu in Darrang are regionalised and mirror the agricultural cycles and dialectic shifts of a given district; therefore, it maintains micro identities within the bigger Assamese context. Cultural tourism also finds its way in heritage conservation. Nevertheless, the contemporary issues, including urbanisation, migration, and commercialisation, endanger the authenticity of these traditions. To be preserved, institutional support is needed (e.g., documentation by cultural institutions, and teaching in schools, etc.) and must also be popularised through tourism programs. As an example, performing and promoting performing arts, cultural festivals keeps performers afloat as well as strengthens pride in the local heritage.

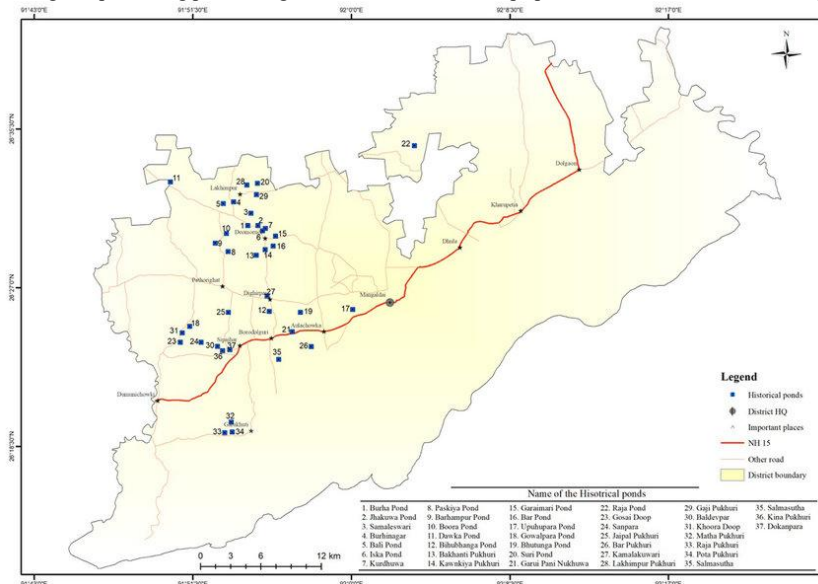


Figure 3: Identifications and mapping the historical ponds of Darrang district, Assam, (Source: Deka, Moni Kangkan Bordoloi, & Sarma, 2021)

(Source: Zarafshan Shiraz, 2024)

The involvement of communities is also crucial, since the older people will impart the knowledge to the young people through being apprenticed and acting in village dramas. Therefore, the performing arts of Darrang are a fundamental part of the cultural identity, so their conservation makes sure that the intangible heritage of Assam will remain vibrant despite the changes that have taken place in modern times (Bezborah, Gogoi & Sen, 2024).

Tourism Potential of Folk Music and Dance: The folk music and dance have great tourism potential in Assam and specifically Darrang district, because of the fact that the folk music and dance reflect the cultural vividness of the Assam region and provide a rare experience to the tourists. Contemporary folk traditions like Ojapali, which is a form of narrative singing and dancing based on Darrang, can be presented in cultural tourism circuits and attract audiences who are interested in learning about native storytelling (Borah, 2023). Likewise, Bihu dance and songs, which are observed on the occasion of Rongali Bihu, can already be considered as a symbol of Assamese identity, and may be marketed during seasonal festivals, which also draw domestic and foreign tourists.



Figure 4: Traditional Bagurumba dance of the Bodo tribes

(Source: Kaziranga national park Assam, 2018)

The Bhaona theatre shows, which were initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva, offer both spiritual and historical accounts that can be recreated by the cultural tourists who are interested in the recollections of the culture. One of the traditions that can be adapted to the homestay tourism is Husori, a singing group that performs songs during Bihu, providing the visitors with an experience of the village. The Deodhani dance, which is held in the temples and performed ritualistically, gives tourism an added mystical flavour by connecting spirituality and performance. Lastly, Zikir and Zari songs are the Assamese devotional and Sufi-oriented traditions that can be propagated during cultural festivals to present the Assamese syncretic tradition (Das & Bhattacharjee, 2024). All these examples help to understand that folk music and dance can be used to develop the tourism products that are authentic, diverse, and deeply embedded in the Assamese traditions and help to increase the visibility of Darrang to the cultural tourism economy (Lyngdoh, 2022).

Infrastructure and Venue Development Needs

Infrastructure and venue development are important in the integration of performing arts into the tourism economy in the Darrang district (Lyngdoh, 2022). The development of special cultural complexes where Ojapali and Bhaona are exhibited would have professional rooms that would attract tourists throughout the year. In the countryside, open-air amphitheatres can host performances of the Bihu program and Husori, which is a combination of natural surroundings and immersion into the culture. Zikir and Zari concerts can be held in community halls with the modern system of sound and lighting to provide the visitors with quality experiences. Courtyards of the temples, especially those associated with the Deodhani, are open to development as heritage spaces with appropriate seating and exhibitory facilities. The premises of Satra can be renovated to accommodate Dhemali and Bhaona shows with the same amount of authenticity, but with bigger audiences.

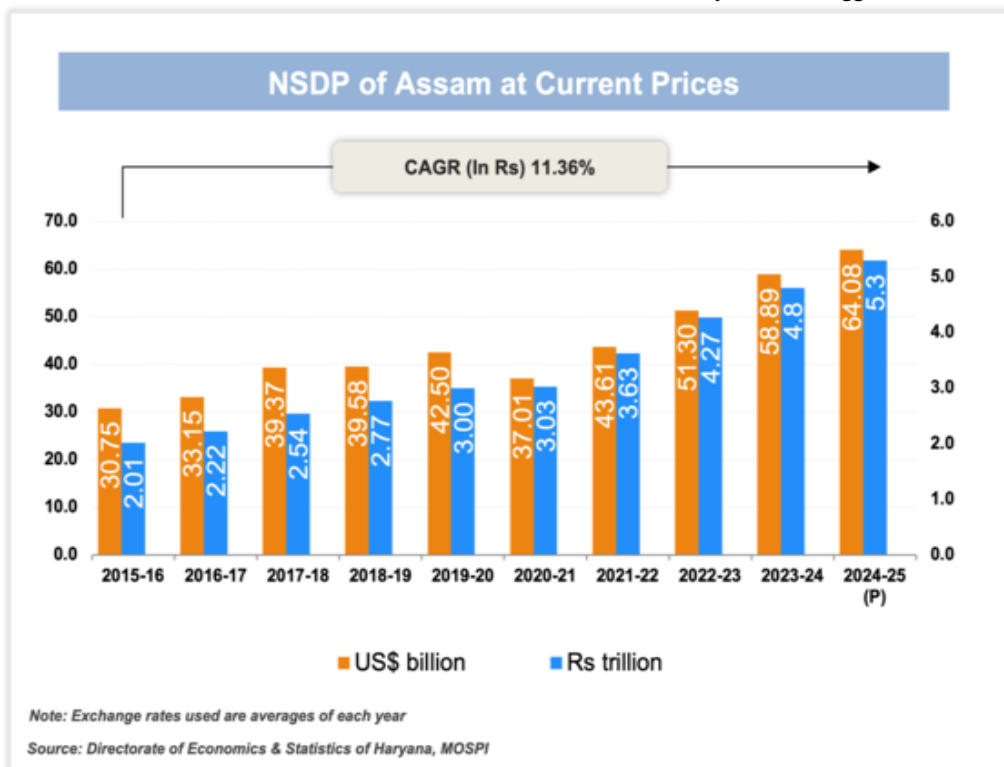


Figure 5: Assam State Economic Growth

(Source: IBEF, 2025)

The ground of the tourism festivals can be designed along the lines of Assam Rongali Bihu, which involves the incorporation of various art forms into a single cultural festival held on an annual basis (Singha & Singha, 2024). Lastly, the training and rehearsal of local artists will help in the continuity of traditions whilst equipping the performers for professional tours in the tourism industry. These seven examples of infrastructures indicate the necessity of a middle way solution, modern facilities which can bring more entertainment to the visitors without interrupting the authenticity of performing arts in Assam (Harpale Dattatraya & Harane Smita, 2024). Through investing in such venues, Darrang will be able to convert its cultural heritage into sustainable tourism resources that will be of benefit to the communities as well as the regional economy.

Government Policies and Institutional Support

The government policies and institutional encouragement have a decisive role in the incorporation of the performing arts of Darrang into the tourism economy of Assam. Recently, the state has rolled out the Concert Tourism Policy 2025 that will make Assam a major destination for live music and cultural festivals (Debbarma, 2024). With global artist Post Malone visiting Guwahati through this policy, it shows how institutional support can boost local cultures by building state-of-the-art facilities with high-level sound and lighting. Equally, the Silpi Awards 2025, including such performers as Anima Choudhury and Mukul Rabha, underscore how the government acknowledges folk performers, and thus it will make sure its presence in tourism circuits. The Padma Awards 2025 were an award recognising the cultural pioneers of Assamese culture, which strengthened the national-level support of preserving heritage. To maintain the theatrical legacy of Sankardeva, the Department of Cultural Affairs still supports Bhaona festivals in satras so that the theatrical legacy of the latter can be shown to tourists (Topiwala, 2024). Bihu festivals have also been advocated by the Assam Tourism Department as flagship events and have been incorporated into state tourism campaigns. Moreover, Khon puja has been preserved and sponsored with grants to renovate the temples to maintain the native way of doing things. Lastly, projects such as the Tea Tourism circuits, where the cultural performances are incorporated on the tea estates, demonstrate the way in which performing arts can be institutionalised through the larger tourism policies. These seven examples show that government policies such as awards to infrastructure are at the heart of the sustenance of the performing arts of Darrang and the connection of the same to the tourism economy of Assam (De & Borah, 2023).

Community Participation and Local Empowerment

The sense of community involvement makes performing arts genuine, besides empowering the local stakeholders within the tourism economy of Assam. In Darrang, people still perform Ojapali at festivals with the help of the community, and oral traditions are preserved. Youth-led Bihu Husori groups can also be found travelling door-to-door during Rongali Bihu and give the tourists immersive experiences that bind communities together. It has been found that women's self-help groups have started organising Zikir and Zari performances, which connect the culture to livelihood. The Deodhani dance performed in temple yards has been community-based, and the villagers used to volunteer to conduct and explain rituals to the visitors. The recent inclusion of other artists, such as Mukul Rabha, into the sphere of recognition, such as the Silpi Award 2025, demonstrates how the local performers get empowered at the national level. Equally, in Assam, Padma awardees in 2025 who are being awarded because of their contributions to the culture can encourage artists at the grassroots to keep the traditions alive. Bhaona is still performed in Darrang district with the local people performing and directing it, and organising logistics to maintain the legacy of Sankardeva (Bora, 2024). Lastly, the digital platforms, including YouTube and Facebook, have assisted the rural performers in being able to share their folk dances and songs internationally, providing them with new sources of income and exposure. These instances show that community involvement, such as grassroots festivals to online empowerment, grounds the performing arts on lived experiences, and it is through this that tourism gains will be distributed evenly without compromising the cultural identity of Assam.

Marketing and Branding Strategies for Tourism

Positioning the performing arts in the tourism economy of Assam revolves around marketing and branding of Darrang. Awesome Assam is the flagship project by the state, which has helped in demonstrating the cultural richness of Assam to the world, with the Bihu dance and folk music appearing in the advertisement films. The international artist Post Malone visit organised by Concert Tourism Policy 2025 proves that global branding may be used to highlight the local culture and the international show. Branding tools such as the Silpi Awards 2025 are to give artists, such as Anima Choudhury and Mukul Rabha, official recognition and make them a part of state tourism discourse. The Padma Awards 2025 of Assamese cultural icons is another way of enhancing the national identity of Assam and indirectly labelling the performing arts as heritage assets (Manjunatha *et al.*, 2025). Digital branding, as demonstrated by the social media campaigns of Assam Tourism on Instagram and YouTube, has given the opportunity to showcase the Ojapali and Bhaona performances, which are attractive to younger audiences. As a holistic nature and cultural experience, the Tea Tourism circuits, which incorporate cultural performances in tea estates, position Assam. Lastly, festival branding products such as Rongali Bihu celebrations in Guwahati and Darrang have been promoted as tourism products, and these festivals have attracted visitors who come to the regions across India (Mahanta, 2023). These seven illustrations show how Assam marketing strategies blend the traditional heritage with the contemporary branding that will see the performing arts having a presence in both the local and global tourism markets.

Economic Impact on Local Livelihoods

The economic contribution of tourism to the livelihood of the local people in Assam, including Darrang, is also evident, because the performing arts produce income, jobs, and empowerment. Bihu festivals give Husori groups seasonal incomes as they are given contributions by households and tourists. Government-sponsored cultural festivals help Ojapali performers to be financially sustainable. Bhaana troupes in satras are also the source of revenue as they attract tourists who buy tickets and make donations.

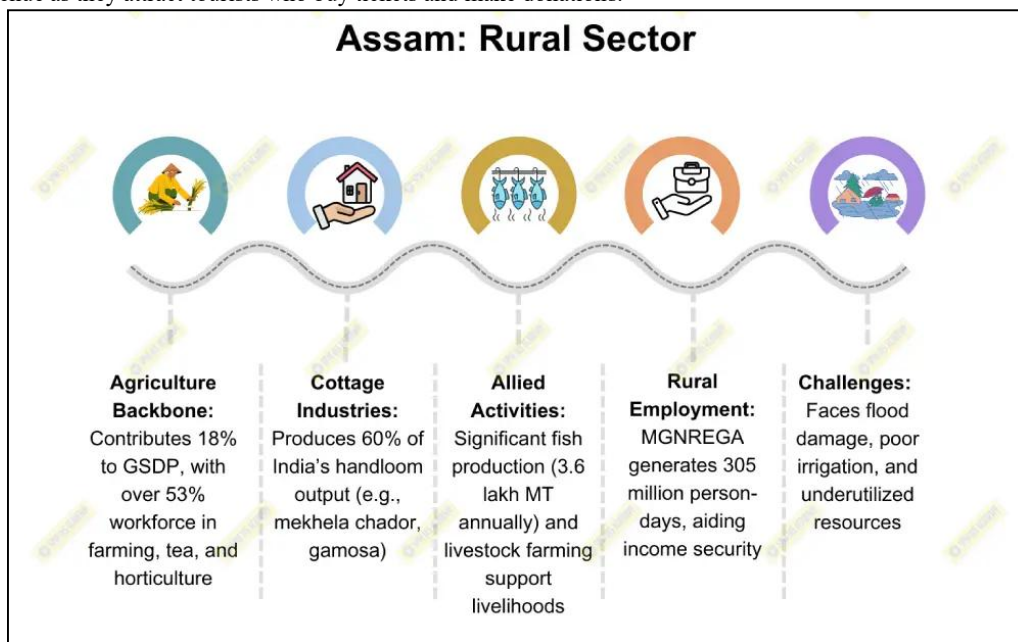


Figure 6: Rural sectors of Assam

(Source: Spmiasacademy, 2025)

Tourism circuits in tea estates hire local artists to do folk dances so that the rural communities have a variety of income (Hazarika *et al.*, 2024). Cultural shows associated with eco-tourism in the parks of Kaziranga and Manas have provided employment to the local people in the two parks, where conservation is combined with livelihood. An example of the development of infrastructure, including cultural performances that improve local economies, is the Kaipholangso Waterfall project in Karbi Anglong. Lastly, online media such as YouTube and Facebook allow rural artists to earn money from performances all over the world, establishing new sources of income (Kraus *et al.*, 2022). These seven cases prove that performing arts are not only perpetuated by tourism, but also that livelihoods are diversified, migration pressures are minimised, and communities are empowered economically. The incorporation of cultural heritage in tourism means that both the local economies would flourish and the traditions would not lose their colour.

Challenges of Commercialisation and Authenticity

Performing arts commercialisation in Assam, such as in the Darrang district, has its benefits and threats, especially in terms of preserving authenticity. The Bihu dance controversy of 2023, in which Guinness World Record attempts in Guwahati led to discussions of the erosion of local variations in favour of mass commercialisation, is an example of how mass commercialisation can override local differences (Young,

2022). On the same note, performances of the Ojapali, which were very ritualistic, are currently performed in commercial festivals, and they are becoming commercialised; therefore, they may lose their spirituality. Bhaona theatre, which was initially played in satras, is not easy to reproduce in ticketed urban performance, where dramatic coverage of spectacle rather than the devotionism of Sankardeva is frequently emphasised.

The Deodhani dance, which has been attributed to rituals in the temples, has been widely criticised when it is applied outside the sacred setting as a form of tourism, and this has posed a challenge to the misrepresentation of culture. Within the tradition of syncretism, zikir and zari songs are beginning to be commercialised via digital networks, with remix culture occasionally defeating their devotional quality. Cultural shows in tea estates are very popular among tourists, but in most cases, they simplify the folk dances to fit within the time limits, making them less authentic (Qin, Abidin, & Li, 2025). Lastly, globalisation has brought about fusion Bihu concerts, a mixture of Assamese folk and Bollywood or EDM that, though attractive to youngsters, may lose its purists. These seven cases point to the conflict between commercialisation as a result of tourism and the maintenance of authenticity. The most recent arguments in Assam cultural discussion and media highlight that there is a necessity to have balanced policies that would safeguard intangible heritage whilst letting the performers gain financially.

Sustainable Models for Cultural Tourism Integration

The sustainable cultural tourism models in Assam underline community-based approaches in which there is a balance in livelihood, conservation and authenticity (Chaudhury, Sarkar, & Pattnaik, 2023). The Assam eco-tourism trails (2025) have combined the cultural performances with nature-based tourism, whereby visitors will be able to see folk dances performed in rural areas, as well as benefiting the local communities. Experience tourism, Tea Garden experiential tourism, where tourists get to interact with workers and watch Ojapali or Bihu shows, has been marketed as a sustainable livelihood model.

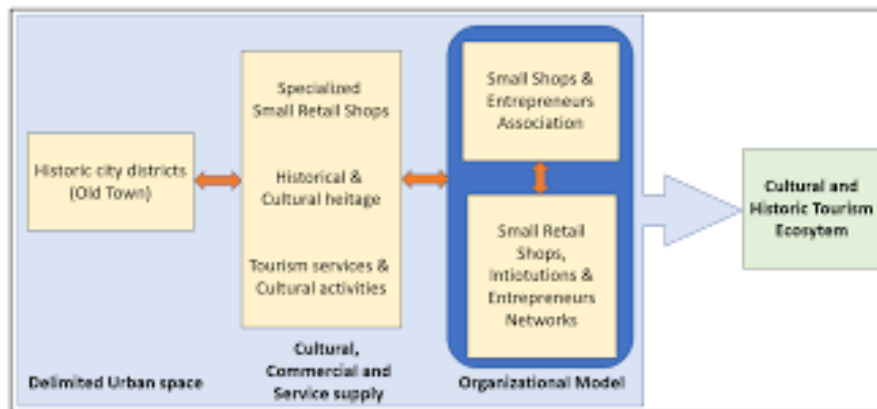


Figure 7: A general model of governance for a cultural and historic tourism ecosystem
 (Source: Henche *et al.*, 2020)

Bhaona is still performed in Satras in Majuli and Darrang as heritage tourism, with authenticity and generating income for monks and villagers. In Kaziranga, community homestays provide Husori and Zikir performances, as well as a combination of nature (wildlife) and cultural tourism. Assam Hidden Tourism Destinations Research (2025) showed that there are minor cultural centres in Assam that are less popular, which need to be promoted as decentralised tourism to decrease the stress on the city. In tea gardens, preservation projects of digital heritage have established archives of performances, which makes continuity, at the same time providing tourists with curations. Lastly, the cultural festivals funded by the government, such as Rongali Bihu, organised in Guwahati and Darrang, are being reformed on the basis of sustainability by providing environmentally friendly venues and reasonable pay to the artistes. These seven instances demonstrate how Assam is shifting towards sustainable cultural tourism patterns that safeguard authenticity, communities and broaden tourism products (Bezborah, 2024). By integrating performing arts within the eco-tourism and heritage circuits, Darrang can make sure that commercialisation of the cultural identity will not deprive them of their cultural identity but make it become stronger.

Conclusion

The incorporation of performing arts in the tourism economy of Assam needs to be done in a balanced way to protect the authenticity of the same, but allow commercialisation. Bihu festivals, Ojapali shows, Bhaona, cultural shows at villages, among others, are only examples of both livelihood generation prospects and cultural erosion opportunities. The community homestays, eco-tourism circuits, and digital heritage conservation are models that provide avenues to ensure that sustainability is secured in the long run. Policies of the government, institutional support and involvement of the grassroots are also vital as they determine this integration. Finally, the performing arts of Darrang could be expanded as a tourism resource when the policy is focused on the preservation of culture, the equal distribution of economic gains, and the sustainable development of the population of the next generations.

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