Research Article

Digital Mobilization in The Brahmaputra Valley: Evaluating Social Media As An Agent of Social Change, Cultural Identity, and Civic Activism in Contemporary Assam

Dr. Bulbuli Boruah

Principal, H.P.B. Girls' College (Autonomous) Golaghat, Assam, India.

Abstract

In Assam, political, cultural, and social activities traditionally merge with disaster response, and student movements are increasingly taking place on social media.Consequently, in Assam, older traditions of student mobilization, cultural assertion, community organization and disaster response are increasingly networked with other forms of social media. This paper is an analysis of the potential of social media to serve the purposes of social change, cultural identity construction and civic engagement in the Brahmaputra Valley. The study employs a qualitative secondary-data design that draws upon peer-reviewed scholarship, official telecommunications data, court and policy records, credible journalism and documented instances of digital mobilization from the period 2012–2026. The following areas are explored: political/civic mobilization, cultural and linguistic identity, and crisis-oriented community action. The analysis concludes that social media works best if it is used as connective infrastructure, instead of as an independent driver of change. Facebook, X/Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, vernacular digital media, and app-based coordination can reduce the cost of visibility, enable the quick formation of networks, spread emotionally resonant cultural symbols, and link online attention on the street, relief, fundraising, and public exposure. Benefits are less even at the same time. The lack of connectivity in rural areas, internet shutdowns, misinformation, communal polarization, fraudulent fundraising, platform dependency, and algorithmic simplification all may restrict or skew civic results. The 2019-2020 anti-Citizenship Amendment Act mobilization illustrates the hybridity of online communication, identity politics and offline protest and the 2026 Assam floods illustrate the ability of creators, volunteers and digital tools to coordinate aid, along with the need for verification. Through cultural cases of Bihu, Assamese language and vernacular screen culture, it is argued here that digital platforms can preserve, re-package, commercialise, and contest the identity at the same time. Based on this, the paper argues that social media in the Brahmaputra Valley should be viewed as a "contested civic infrastructure" that has democratic and cultural uses contingent upon access, trust, verification, and offline institutions.

Keywords: Assam, Brahmaputra Valley, digital activism, social media, cultural identity, civic engagement, anti-CAA, flood relief.

Introduction

The Brahmaputra Valley is not just a geographical space that passes through the state of Assam; it's a place that's full of language, ethnicity, migration, student politics, popular culture, vulnerability to the environment, and regional memory. Traditionally, public discourse in the valley has come and gone via student groups, literary societies, newspapers, public gatherings, cultural societies, radio, television and street protests. In the past decade and a half, these institutions haven't gone away, but they have evolved to act as social media and mobile internet partners. Digital communication hence does not supplant the older associations, but constitutes an additional dimension to the complex and multifaceted public sphere.

This is significant because there are two extremes of claims made about social media. One technologically optimistic perspective presents the platforms as 'tools for the people', a means of amplifying the voices of the marginalized and fostering greater engagement. Some of the most negative assessments see them primarily as instruments for misinformation and polarization, as well as for surveillance and brief engagement. Digital technologies, however, provide a more contingent interpretation of collective action, as evidenced by research. Networked media can lower coordination costs and allow for "personalized participation," but the impact will vary based on the capacity to translate attention to a platform into sustained action, media literacy, and political context, as well as organizational resources and media platform design (Bennett &Segerberg, 2012; Castells, 2015). Affective and symbolic communication is also important, as individuals often join politics not only by means of formal organizations, but by stories, images, music, jokes, memory and belonging as well (Papacharissi, 2016).

Assam offers a case study of relevance to this study. Deori and Behera (2014) pointed to the mobilization of youth through online activism in connection with protests in 2012 as an early instance of cyber activism in the State. In subsequent episodes, particularly during the protests regarding the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) in 2019–2020, the hashtags, posts, digital artwork, songs, videos, various online news and mobile communication were found to interact with mass gatherings and regional identity claims (Malakar& Ray, 2020; Sarma& Hazarika, 2020). It has also been found that Assamese identity is created and questioned in Cyberspace including through the nationalist discourse, vernacular culture and gendered representations (Sarmah&Nath, 2023). More recently, during the 2026 floods in Upper Assam, users, creatives, non-profits, diasporas, and new relief apps shared needs, mobilized resources, matched volunteers with impacted areas, and supplied documentation of gaps in relief (Kachua, 2026; Parashar, 2026).

There has also been a growth in the size of the communications infrastructure that lies beneath it. As of March 2025, the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) reports that Assam had a total of 20.33 million internet subscriptions, with 13.38 million of them being rural and 6.95 million being urban. The subscriber density was 43.66 per 100 rural population and 120.69 per 100 urban population -- the latter of which includes the fact that subscriber numbers do not equal the number of unique users and individuals can be subscribed to more than once. Both the extent of access and a significant rural–urban imbalance can be seen from these figures. Digital mobilization is therefore a process that can be evaluated in terms of what it can do, who can do it, what the context is of the process, and what its effect is.

In this paper, I tackle that issue qualitatively, by synthesizing the literature on the Brahmaputra Valley and the modern Assam. It looks at the social media in relation to three interrelated roles: as a mobilizing infrastructure for civic and political engagement, as a place to develop culture and language identity, and as a medium for community response in crisis. The main thesis is that social media is an important tool in social change in the context of Assam, but is not an independent agent. Platforms are most important to link users to organizations, communities, cultural repertoires, journalists, institutions and on-ground action. Solidarity can happen as fast as it can turn into hostility, rumour, fraud and exclusion.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the clear growth of digital participation in Assam, scholarly and popular debates around social media remain polarized between technological determinism and severe skepticism. On one end, techno-optimistic views frame digital platforms as democratizing tools that empower marginalized voices and foster grassroots engagement. On the other end, critical perspectives view social media primarily as vehicles for misinformation, social polarization, digital surveillance, and ephemeral clicktivism.

Digital platforms do not operate as independent agents; their social impact is contingent upon underlying organizational capacities, user media literacy, platform design, and political context. Furthermore, engagement in Assam's public sphere relies heavily on affective and symbolic communication such as digital art, music, narratives, and shared memory where digital solidarity can rapidly devolve into hostility, rumors, fraud, or social exclusion. Given the stark rural–urban digital divide and the complex socio-political landscape of the Brahmaputra Valley, there is a critical need to evaluate social media not as an isolated force, but as an embedded infrastructure whose power depends on its integration with on-ground community action, cultural identity, and institutional mechanisms.

The Brahmaputra Valley as a Networked Public Sphere

The towns and districts of central and Upper Assam, as well as Guwahati, are all part of the Brahmaputra Valley, and are the major urban, educational, cultural and political hubs in Assam. The river is also a material force which influences agriculture, transportation, settlement, erosion, displacement, disaster risk, and collective memory. This ecological setting imbues civic communication with a unique flavor: public consciousness may shift from issues of identity and citizenship to matters of flood, embankment failure, displacement, infrastructure, or environmental protection. Digital platforms infuse all these spaces into the same attention economy: where a political speech can move through the same network as a Bihu performance, a video of flooding can show up in the same network as a fundraising call, and a protest poster can appear in the same network as a speech.

Assamese identity is not a one-dimensional and unchallengeable one at the cultural level. Terms like 'Assamese' or 'indigenous' might have varying meanings in different contexts and the state comprises various ethnicities,

language communities, tribes and religions. Historical discourses and narratives continue to be pivotal in political interpretation in Assam as revealed by the scholarship on media and memory (Deka, 2026). In digital media, this can be intensified as citizens can make claims to their identities on their own, without the mediation of others, and live. Often, these claims are made through short video, memes, music, vernacular humor, and symbolic images. The concept of 'vernacular publics' has also been discussed in recent scholarship on the Assamese screen culture as a possibility of platform-based circulation of shared humour, rural images and cultural recognitions (Baruah& Dutta, 2026).

The CAA protests brought out the political sensitivity when internet was blocked for a prolonged period of time in the state. The impact of the shutdown on social media and other aspects such as work, education, transport and communication was also reported at the time (Agarwala, 2019). In the case of BanashreeGogoi vs Union of India (2019), the Gauhati High Court had found the suspension of mobile internet is no longer justifiable, and had ordered restoration of the services. The episode illustrates a structural paradox: the importance of the digital platforms in structuring mobilization and public discourse has made it possible to restrict the latter while leaving the infrastructure on which it is based unsupervised.

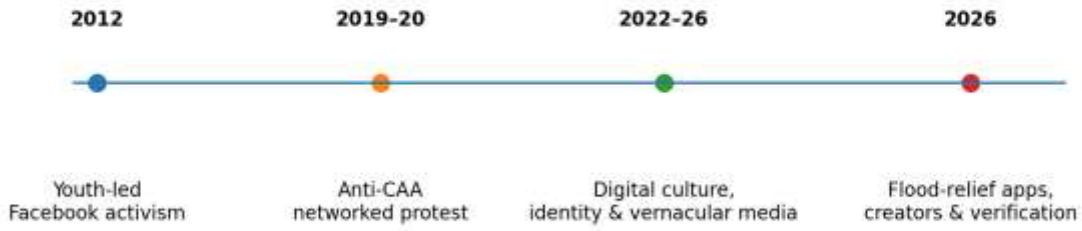


Figure **1**

Selected phases in the development of digital mobilization in Assam, 2012–2026.

Note. Timeline synthesizes cases discussed in the literature and contemporary reporting; it is analytical rather than exhaustive.

Review of Literature

Digital Mobilization and Connective Action

Bennett and Segerberg (2012) theory of connective action is especially helpful in understanding social media activism in Assam as it offers an explanation for the organization of digitally mediated participation without the need for a single centralized organization. People can join without having a uniform ideological identity: in reposting a slogan, sharing a video, joining a group, donating money, creating a meme or even showing up at a protest. This flexibility diminishes the barrier to entry, but can also make movements reliant on a fleeting interest and challenging to execute when the triggering issue goes out of the spotlight.

Castells (2015) also stresses that as a subject of social movements today, communication networks are the vectors through which spaces of autonomy are built outside of the institutional sphere. But, there is never complete autonomy. Platforms are privately controlled, views get distributed algorithmically and states still have regulatory powers over communications infrastructures. Expanding the idea of public, Papacharissi (2016) has demonstrated that networked political participation is organized through the medium of feeling as well as information. Symbols in Assam can be affective anchors, like the gamocha, the Assamese language, Bihu, regional songs, memories of the Assam Movement, flood imagery and symbols of land and belonging, which can move between the personal and public sphere and create a space for personal expression to become public identity.

Social Media Activism in Assam

Empirical work related to Assam is not of the anti-CAA period. Deori and Behera (2014) studied youth involvement in protests in 2012 and concluded that, networks on Facebook played a role in disseminating and coordinating protests on issues such as media ethics, women's safety and immigration. Their study is important, as it defines a shift from the internet being used as a tool for communication and entertainment to one of collective civic engagement. The authors also note that youth were the most visible actors in Assam's public sphere, anticipating further patterns where digitally connected youth, young professionals, artists and creators gained visibility as actors in the public sphere.

The CAA led to a considerable literature in the area of regional identity and digital mobilization. During the Assam protest, Malakar and Ray (2020) took Twitter as a digital means for digital activism and used it as an alternative space for public discourse. Sarma and Hazarika (2020) found that the anti-CAA agitation in Assam was embedded in its political discourse of identity and that the regional issues could not be simply compartmentalized as the political debates around CAA in other parts of India. The CAA activated memories of linguistic and cultural vulnerability as also did Deka (2026) with the regional print media. Digital activism in Assam is not only about logistic mobilization, but also about the circulation of historical narratives and interpretations of collective identity when one reads this literature in conjunction with studies of social media.

Hazarika (2025) takes the discussion forward to digital activism in general, such as youth and queer activism, and Sarmah and Nath (2023) show how cyberspace may also repeat exclusionary or hyper-masculine versions of Assamese nationalism. These studies warn against seeing digital visibility as a "Progressive" phenomenon. Social media platforms can increase participation and simultaneously reinforce hierarchies, stereotypes and antagonistic definition of identity boundaries.

The students will study the relationship between digital media and cultural identity

Cultural identity is created via repetition, remixing, performance and circulation in social media. Based on studies conducted in North East India, it can be inferred that digital media also offer opportunities for cultural visibility while also raising concerns about cultural homogenization and commercialization (Hazarika et al., 2024). Bihu in Assam is a clear illustration. Urbanization and electronic media have influenced Bihu, making it more than just an agrarian community culture now, as pointed out by Das (2022), it has become a public performance and identity for all in broader society. Bihu dance can be promoted through social media by increasing representation and access, as proposed by Sonowal and Choudhury (2024). Similarly, Dutta and Patar (2026) explain how Magh Bihu, a festival, is being "cultural reconfigured" by the confluence of technological change and digital media.

These changes are not merely "preservation. As a cultural practice turns to content, it gets adjusted to platform formats, such as short videos which attract attention for the vividness of their performance, algorithms which are based on recognizability and repetition, and creator economies that favour the visual distinctiveness of symbols. Can contribute to the maintenance of language and intergenerational visibility, particularly for diaspora audiences, but can also "disritualize" performances or disagriculturalize or decommunityize them. Baruah and Dutta's (2026) study on vernacular Assamese screen culture shows how platform circulation can generate an intimate public space of humour and rurality and how vernacular culture can become an entertainment commodity.

Aims to improve digital civic engagement and disaster response.

Disaster communication is another measure of the civic value of social media: it is a test for how much information reaches individuals who can take some sort of action on it. According to the field accounts, social media was a major source of information regarding the affected localities and relief needs during the 2026 Assam Floods. The posts and videos facilitated volunteers' identification of sites and mobilization of relief efforts, but created uneven attention, with highly visible villages receiving repeated attention while less visible villages could fall through the cracks (Kachua 2026). Here, it implies that the geography of the platform economy can influence that of humanitarianism.

Social media influencers, student bodies, non-profits, diaspora networks, and community organisations, as well as their ability to raise and distribute funds were also reported (Choudhury, 2026). To match requests and volunteers with needs, technology-based programs like the Axom Relief App were implemented. Meanwhile, an open-source investigation by India Today revealed that in the same flood period, many suspicious Instagram fundraising accounts emerged (Saha, 2026). Social media, in short, simultaneously broadens civic capacity and civic risk.

Research Gap

In Assam, there is existing scholarship that has been available about youth cyber activism, anti-CAA mobilization, identity discourse, cultural digitization, and the emerging practice of disaster-relief. These strands are usually taught individually, however. The concept of political protest, cultural identity, and humanitarian civic action as aspects of a shared digital public sphere is less explored in the Brahmaputra Valley. This paper aims to fill that gap by examining the mechanisms that reappear in each of these areas: visibility, affect, network formation, coordination, translation to offline action, verification and institutional response.

Research Objectives and Questions

1. To evaluate how social media facilitates the transition from issue visibility to collective action in contemporary Assam.
2. To examine how digital platforms contribute to the production, preservation, commercialization, and contestation of Assamese cultural identity.
3. To assess the role of social media and digital tools in civic action during crises, especially flood relief and community coordination.
4. To identify structural constraints including digital inequality, shutdowns, misinformation, fraud, polarization, and platform dependence that condition the social impact of digital mobilization.

The study asks four corresponding questions: How does social media alter the organization and visibility of civic action in the Brahmaputra Valley? In what ways does platform culture reshape Assamese identity and vernacular expression? Under what conditions does online communication translate into effective offline participation? What risks and inequalities limit social media's capacity to function as an inclusive civic infrastructure?

Methodology

The study uses a qualitative secondary-data design combining literature synthesis with comparative case analysis. The temporal frame is 2012–2026, beginning with the early youth cyber-activism documented by Deori and Behera (2014) and extending to the digitally mediated flood response of 2026. This period captures the shift from Facebook-centered mobilization to a multi-platform environment involving X/Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, creator networks, online news, and app-based civic tools.

Sources were selected purposively from five categories: (a) peer-reviewed and scholarly research on digital activism, identity, and Assamese media; (b) official telecommunications data from TRAI; (c) judicial and institutional records concerning internet access and disaster management; (d) credible journalistic accounts used to reconstruct time-sensitive events; and (e) documented digital-relief initiatives. Political claims were treated descriptively and triangulated wherever possible. The analysis does not infer the motives of political actors or treat platform engagement as equivalent to public opinion.

Three case clusters were compared. The first covers civic and political mobilization, especially 2012 youth activism and the 2019–2020 anti-CAA protests. The second covers cultural identity, including Bihu, Assamese-language digital content, vernacular screen culture, and online nationalism. The third covers crisis activism through the 2026 floods, including fundraising, relief coordination, and verification problems. Each cluster was coded conceptually across six dimensions: visibility, network formation, affective/symbolic communication, coordination, offline translation, and risk/governance.

Because the paper relies on publicly available secondary sources and does not collect personal data or interact with human participants, no human-subject intervention was undertaken. The method is interpretive rather than causal. It can identify recurring mechanisms and documented outcomes, but it cannot establish that social media alone caused a protest, changed a policy, preserved a tradition, or improved disaster response.

Table 1 Analytical framework used to evaluate digital mobilization

Dimension	Operational meaning in this study	Illustrative evidence
Visibility	Capacity to make an issue, identity claim, or local need observable beyond its immediate setting	Hashtags, viral posts, videos, creator amplification, online news

Network formation	Creation of temporary or durable publics around shared concerns	Groups, follower networks, student communities, diaspora links
Affective communication	Use of emotion, memory, symbols, music, humor, and identity markers	Gamocha, Bihu, protest art, vernacular humor, flood imagery
Coordination	Use of digital media to organize time, place, logistics, donations, or verification	Event calls, messaging groups, relief apps, volunteer matching
Offline translation	Movement from online attention into physical or institutional action	Street protest, cultural events, aid distribution, petitions, legal action
Risk/governance	Constraints affecting reliability, inclusion, and freedom of participation	Shutdowns, scams, misinformation, harassment, polarization, digital divide

Results and Discussion

Digital Access Expands the Potential Public, but Unevenly

Digital mobilization depends first on connectivity. TRAI's 2024–2025 performance report records 20.33 million internet subscriptions in Assam at the end of March 2025. Of these, 13.38 million were rural and 6.95 million urban subscriptions. Although the absolute number of rural subscriptions is larger because Assam's rural population is larger, the subscriber density tells a different story: 43.66 subscriptions per 100 rural residents compared with 120.69 per 100 urban residents (TRAI, 2025). The contrast indicates a pronounced inequality in the intensity of access and the likelihood of stable multi-device connectivity.

This gap matters for representation. A social-media feed can create the impression of a statewide conversation even when participation is disproportionately urban, young, educated, or better connected. The visibility of Guwahati-based activism, university networks, journalists, and professional creators may therefore exceed that of remote riverine, char, tribal, or flood-prone communities. Digital mobilization can widen the public sphere while still reproducing geographic and socioeconomic inequalities within it.

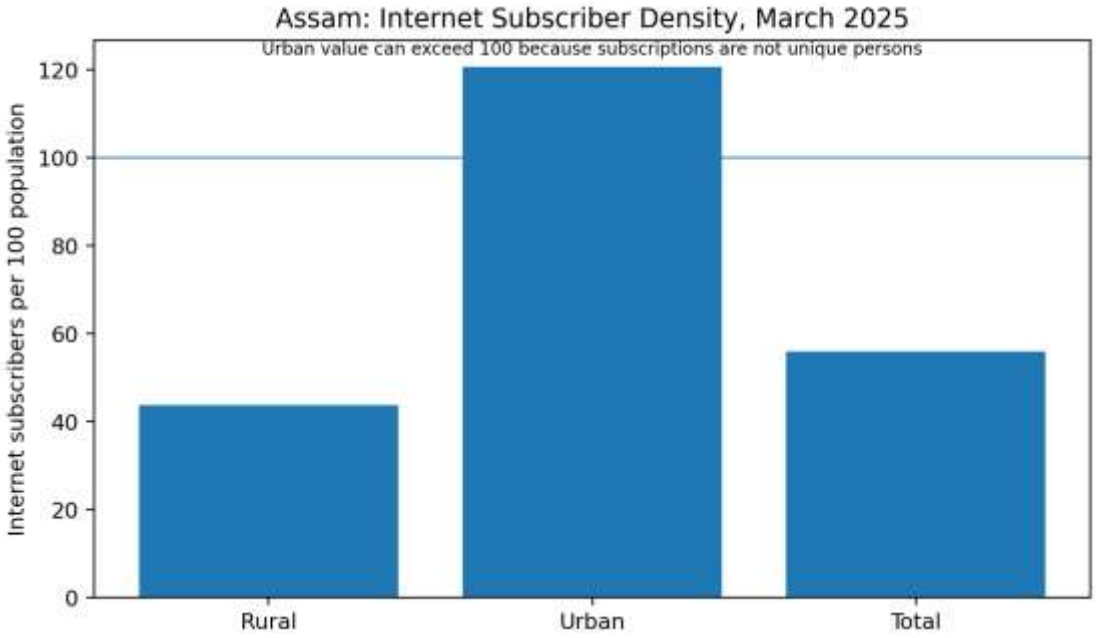


Figure 2 Assam internet subscriber density by settlement type, March 2025.

Note. Source: Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (2025). Subscription density is not identical to the percentage of unique people online; multiple subscriptions can produce values above 100.

From Publicity to Protest: Social Media as Mobilizing Infrastructure

The early 2012 cases documented by Deori and Behera (2014) show the basic mechanism of digital mobilization: an issue first circulates within online youth networks, acquires a shared vocabulary and audience, and then supports a physical demonstration. This does not mean that Facebook created the underlying grievances. Rather, it altered the speed and cost of publicization, allowing loosely connected users to coordinate without relying entirely on formal organizations or mainstream media.

The anti-CAA mobilization of 2019–2020 expanded this logic. Assam's protest politics already had deep organizational histories, including student bodies, literary associations, artists, and civil society. Social media layered connective action over these institutions. Posts could publicize gathering points, videos could document crowds and police response, artists could circulate songs and protest art, and users could frame the movement for audiences outside the state. Malakar and Ray (2020) identify Twitter as an alternative space for competing discourse around the CAA, while Sarma and Hazarika (2020) emphasize that the Assam protests were grounded in region-specific identity concerns. The digital sphere therefore worked both as an organizing infrastructure and as a site where the meaning of the protest was negotiated.

A critical feature of the Assam case is the link between online and offline repertoires. Cultural performance became part of protest communication: songs, poetry, traditional attire, and regional symbols helped articulate political claims. This pattern is consistent with research on anti-CAA art and social media nationally, which finds that digital circulation increased the visibility and reuse of creative protest forms (see also the broader discussion in Papacharissi, 2016). In Assam, the relationship between cultural identity and activism is particularly dense because language and cultural memory have long been embedded in regional political movements.

The internet shutdown during the protests further demonstrates that digital media had become infrastructurally significant. The suspension constrained social-media communication but also disrupted app-based livelihoods, transport, education, and everyday information flows (Agarwala, 2019). The Gauhati High Court's interim direction to restore mobile internet in Banashree Gogoi v. Union of India (2019) underscores that networked communication cannot be analytically separated from broader questions of public life. Digital activism depends on the same infrastructure used for commerce, learning, navigation, and family communication.

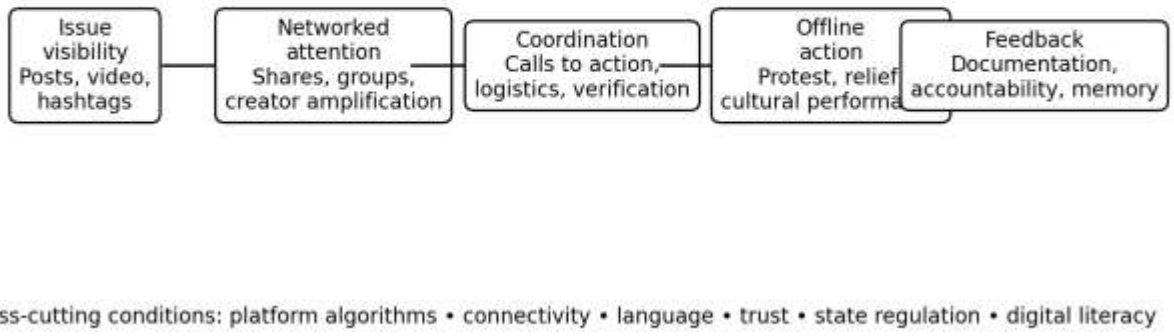


Figure 3 Analytical model of how digital visibility can translate into civic action.

Note. The model synthesizes mechanisms described by Bennett and Segerberg (2012), Castells (2015), Papacharissi (2016), and Assam-specific case literature.

Cultural Identity: Preservation, Performance, and Platformization

Social media's cultural role in Assam cannot be reduced to 'promotion.' Platforms participate in the production of culture by rewarding particular formats, aesthetics, and rhythms of circulation. Bihu performances that once

occurred primarily in village courtyards, community fields, and seasonal gatherings are now routinely encountered as stage videos, short-form clips, music releases, tutorials, reaction content, tourism promotion, and diaspora celebrations. Das (2022) situates this change within broader urbanization and mass-media transformation, while Sonowal and Choudhury (2024) emphasize social media's role in widening the audience for Bihu dance.

The cultural benefit is substantial. Digital archives and repeated circulation make songs, dress, instruments, dance forms, language, and ritual vocabulary visible to young people who may be geographically distant from Assam. Diaspora users can participate in festivals symbolically and socially, while creators can build audiences for Assamese-language entertainment. The 2026 study by Baruah and Dutta on vernacular screen culture demonstrates how platform circulation can create a public around recognizable Assamese humor, village imagery, and everyday speech. Such circulation can normalize the use of Assamese in digital spaces that might otherwise be dominated by Hindi or English.

Yet platformization also introduces selective pressures. Short-form video rewards immediacy and visual recognizability, potentially compressing complex cultural practices into easily consumable symbols. Dutta and Patar (2026) describe the reconfiguration of Magh Bihu under the combined influence of technology and media, while Hazarika et al. (2024) raise broader concerns about cultural homogenization in North East India. The issue is therefore not whether digital media preserve or destroy culture; rather, they reorganize what becomes visible, monetizable, imitable, and memorable.

Identity politics adds another layer. Sarmah and Nath (2023) show that cyberspace can reproduce a form of Assamese nationalistic masculinity, revealing how online identity-making may create both solidarity and exclusion. Deka (2026) demonstrates that public narratives in Assam continue to be shaped by memories of linguistic vulnerability and historical grievance. When such narratives move through social media, they may become more personalized and emotionally resonant, but also more vulnerable to decontextualization. This makes digital cultural literacy—understanding the history and plurality behind symbols—important to an inclusive digital public sphere.

Photographic Reference Plate



Anti-CAA protest, Guwahati (2019)
Scan/click source reference
CC BY-SA 4.0, Ankur Jyoti Dewri / Wikimedia Commons



Bihu dance, Assam (2017)
Scan/click source reference
CC0, Diganta Talukdar / Wikimedia Commons



Flood-relief field account, Upper Assam (2026)
Scan/click source reference
IDR field story by Bruno Kachua

Figure 4 Photographic source references used to contextualize protest, cultural performance, and flood-relief mobilization.

Note. The QR panels link to the original online photographs/source pages. They are provided instead of reproducing copyrighted web photographs inside the manuscript; the first two sources are openly licensed on Wikimedia Commons.

Civic Activism in Disaster: The 2026 Floods

The 2026 floods in the state of Upper Assam is the best contemporary illustration of digital mobilization for meeting immediate material needs. Videos of flooded settlements spread like wildfire on social media, making it easier for volunteers and organisations to find out where to go, how to donate and get the public to pay attention. Kachua (2026) writes about the methods by which relief teams were able to find communities using information from social media, the Axom Relief App, and telephoning to verify. An important constraint of the account was that attention would be paid to existing online visibility, while communities with lower connectivity and/or media penetration might be disregarded.

There is a need for this correction of the concept that “visibility” means “need.” Social media can be used effectively to identify emergency cases, but it doesn't function on systematic vulnerability assessment. It may be that a dramatic video will garner more donations than another village that is not quite as visible, but has the same or greater need. Kachua's field experience thus suggests using a hybrid approach in which digital signals are not interpreted as an exhaustive picture of the disaster's impact but rather a "lead" to be confirmed by the local networks and field teams.

In parallel, the flood response shows civic actors' expansion. Choudhury (2026) noted that in addition to government agencies, influencers, non-profits, student groups and community groups were also on the ground to do relief. Parashar (2026) reported technology-based relief platforms for bridging the gap between those affected, volunteers, NGOs and donors. Similarly, Assam Foundation's 2026 drive also involved social media and e-mail communications to solicit donations and cover procurement and distribution. These cases illustrate that digital civic action is becoming more and more organizational – it's no longer just about raising awareness but it's also about fundraising, logistics, documentation and donor communication, all of which can be facilitated by an action that is digital.

The environment was also conducive to abuse. India Today's OSINT review of the fundraising efforts on Instagram revealed several signs of suspicious behaviour amongst several newly created Instagram accounts raising funds for the flood relief efforts (Saha, 2026). It does not undermine the importance of digital fundraising, but rather emphasizes that it will need to be followed by institutional verification undertaken at a speedy pace. All of these trust signals become civic infrastructure.Registration information, clear lists of beneficiaries, transaction records, public updates, organization history and field verification all become civic infrastructure.

In the hybrid mobilization scenario, online attention seems to be the most lasting when it's anchored offline.

The commonality in all cases is that effective digital mobilization is hybrid. Street demonstrations were aided by online networks in 2012. Anti-CAA posts, hashtags and videos engaged with students, artists, public events, legal challenges and physical protests. Platform circulation was linked to performers, festivals, community institutions, markets and diaspora institutions during Bihu and other cultural practices. Online appeals were helpful during the 2026 floods when they led to verified volunteers, vehicles, relief materials, field teams, and local contacts.

Hence, the term ‘social media as an agent of social change' must be used with caution. Platforms don't usually work alone; they typically coordinate and execute the work of others. They change the communication landscape in which people interact. They enable discovery, cut back on some of the costs of coordination, allow for personal participation, allow for documentation to be persistent, and bring geographically dispersed publics together. Yet durable results involve still requiring organisations, trusted intermediaries, local knowledge, legal institutions, cultural knowledge and material resources.

The Assam experience therefore aligns with connective-action theory but also reveals the limits of purely networked analysis. Regional history matters. A hashtag about language, citizenship, flood relief, or cultural pride carries meanings shaped by local memory. Likewise, a creator with millions of views may be less useful in a remote relief setting than a locally trusted volunteer with accurate village-level information. Social media changes the scale and speed of communication, but not the basic importance of trust and context.

Table 2 Comparative cases of digital mobilization in Assam

Case	Primary platforms / tools	Dominant function	Offline translation	Key limitation
Youth activism, 2012	Facebook and online youth networks	Publicity and organization	Street demonstrations and civic participation	Urban/youth concentration; episodic engagement
Anti-CAA mobilization, 2019–2020	Facebook, X/Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube, online news	Mobilization, framing, documentation, cultural expression	Mass rallies, cultural protest, legal challenges	Internet shutdown, polarization, competing narratives
Bihu and vernacular culture, 2022–2026	YouTube, Instagram,	Cultural visibility, language use,	Festival participation,	Commercialization, simplification,

	Facebook, streaming platforms	diaspora participation	creator economy, screen culture	algorithmic incentives
Assam floods, 2026	Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, relief apps, digital payments	Needs discovery, fundraising, volunteer coordination	Relief distribution, verification, rehabilitation support	Fraud risk, uneven visibility, digital exclusion

Risks, Constraints, and Democratic Tensions

The first one is unequal access. The figures of TRAI indicate that there is a huge variation in subscription density between rural and urban areas. Access also differs on basis of device ownership, gender, affordability, network, language, disability and digital skills. It is not to be equated with the total population but rather a digitally visible public. This is especially critical in an area where flooding and erosion may be a problem, and populations are located some distance from established networks.

In addition, information quality is the second constraint. Fast circulation gives credit to the sense of urgency and verification is slow. The examples of flood fund scams in 2026 shows how people can take advantage of the kindness of citizens. The same structures might hold true for political rumors, fabricated photos, community assertions or inaccurate history. Media literacy, then, is not an ancillary ability, but a determinant factor in how people participate digitally, as either informed civic participation or reactive amplification (Hira, 2026).

The third is polarization. Online identity formation can help the sense of solidarity, but it can also help to focus “us” and “them” distinctions. Sarmah and Nath demonstrate the possibility of cyberspace as a site of producing exclusionary nationalist masculinities (2023). The current Assamese discourse on Upper Assam has also highlighted the issue of “polarizing narratives” which are being driven by “influencers.” Engaging content, which can be emotionally divisive, can be overrepresented as a result of platform algorithms rewarding engagement. A correct analytical conclusion is not that social media invariably polarizes Assam but that, in the context of social and political conditions, where such narratives are salient, the incentive structure of social media can be used to increase the salience of identity conflict.

The fourth constraint is "infrastructural control. In the case of the internet shutdown that took place in 2019, it was shown that online participation can be quickly curtailed at the network level. The Internet Society measurements and reports and a later order from the Gauhati High Court (BanashreeGogoi v. Union of India, 2019) noted a multi-day disruption in association with the CAA protests and ordered for its restoration when the continued suspension was not justifiable given the circumstances. Networked civic life is thus both strengthened and weakened by connectivity.

The fifth constraint is that of platform dependence. Major social-media companies are not run by Assamese users and therefore, the rankings, moderation policies, monetization policies, data practices and product changes are not under their control. When algorithms change or accounts are limited, cultural/civic organizations that depend on a specific platform may lose reach if their content isn't optimized.Cultural/civic organizations that are critical to a single platform may lose reach if they are not optimizing content when platforms change algorithms or accounts are limited. Diversified and localised archives, the maintenance of archives by institutions alongside commercial archives, and the use of institutional websites all contribute to the development of long term public digital culture.

Table 3 Opportunities and constraints in social-media-enabled civic action

Potential contribution	Mechanism	Corresponding risk	Mitigating practice
Faster civic awareness	Real-time posting and sharing	Rumor and decontextualized content	Source verification and correction workflows
Lower mobilization costs	Personal networks and messaging groups	Short-lived or fragmented engagement	Link online calls to accountable organizations
Cultural visibility	Video, vernacular content, digital archives	Commercial simplification and stereotyping	Context-rich documentation and community participation

Disaster fundraising	Creator reach and digital payments	Fraud and duplication of relief	Transparent accounts, registration checks, field verification
Public accountability	Citizen documentation and searchable records	Harassment, doxxing, surveillance concerns	Ethical documentation and privacy safeguards
Broader participation	Mobile access and multilingual content	Rural and socioeconomic digital divide	Offline channels and inclusive connectivity

Evaluation: To What Extent Is Social Media an Agent of Social Change?

There is evidence that supports a qualified assessment. The term 'agency' is understood to mean the power to transform communication, visibility, association and coordination, and social media is an agent of social change in Assam. It has transformed the ability to publish, the speed at which a local event can become regional, the way cultural performances can reach widely scattered audiences, the way volunteers find needs, and the way citizens document public events. These are substantial shifts in the structure of civic life.

But social media isn't a force for social change all on its own. Protests in 2012 would rely on young people's groups and street involvement; the fight against CAA would rely on the presence of established organizations, artists, local histories, and physical gatherings; communities and performers outside the platform would be the basis for a culture of identity; and, verified logistics and field capacity would be the basis for flood relief. Digital communication is thus best understood as an infrastructure and catalyst for communication, rather than a communication itself, that functions as a component of social institutions.

This interpretation is also good for explaining the positive and negative evidence. Those same network characteristics that enable civic solidarity can be used to foster unsolicited claims of hostility to identity. The same emotions which spur on flood contributions can also be utilized to facilitate scams. The same capability of preserving Bihu in online can convert the complex traditions into simpler visual brands. Vulnerability during an Internet shutdown can result from the same reliance on mobile networks that allows for quick mobilization. Four elements—accessible social media, trusted intermediaries, verification mechanisms, and robust off-line institutions—therefore condition the impact of social media.

Ecological and cultural context is the fifth factor which is more specific for the Brahmaputra Valley. Riverine vulnerability renders crisis communication predictable, rather than rare, and a rich past of linguistic and regional politics makes for cultural symbolism that often has political connotations. Digital Platforms integrate these contexts into a single attention environment. A flood appeal can leverage on Assamese culture to evoke solidarity, a protest can be performed through music and traditional wearing and a cultural video can be a statement on regional recognition. The digital public sphere of Assam is thus extremely inter-domain, encompassing civic, cultural, political, and humanitarian communication.

Implications for Civic Institutions, Cultural Organizations, and Researchers

The results of the study indicate that the use of social media as an isolated communication tool should be avoided in the targeted institutions of Assam. Civic organisations can achieve better results if online communication is linked to known coordinators, accountability records, information in local languages and physical points of contact. In disaster situations, publicly available verification methods can be helpful in separating out real from opportunist appeals. Relief mapping should also include communities that have low digital visibility, not just because of social media visibility, but because of their low visibility.

The other challenge is for cultural organizations: they can preserve and share language, music, dance, oral history, and local knowledge, and maintain context by means of digital media. Long-form repositories, subtitles, credits, historical information, and connections to community institutions can complement short-form viral content. This is not just an approach to promote digital circulation, but also as a cultural documentation.

The Assam case is a reminder to researchers of the necessity to do some fieldwork alongside platform analysis. Neither hashtag counts nor engagement metrics can tell us who is not participating, what are the reasons why certain hashtags are effective, how online participation is reflected in the offline world, or how online disconnection affects participation. Mixed methods along the lines of social-network analysis, interviews, digital ethnography, and district-level comparisons in the Brahmaputra Valley would be useful for future research.

Limitations

The limitation of this study is that it only used secondary sources. Literature is not balanced in terms of documentation, with more being available for Guwahati and platforms for major controversy than for smaller towns and rural communities. The study also does not directly examine the data contained on platforms, and thus cannot quantify the volume or reach or demographic characteristics of specific campaigns. These news reports on the flooding in 2026 offer timely evidence but are no replacement for a systematic assessment of relief outcomes.
There is also a lot of internal diversity when it comes to the term 'Brahmaputra Valley'. It must be noted that the patterns seen in Guwahati, Sivasagar, Dibrugarh, Nagaon, Lakhimpur, Majuli and Charaideo cannot be taken to indicate all the communities. Lastly, social media sites are constantly evolving. Mechanisms listed here are not intended to represent attributes of a specific platform but are anticipated to be enduring patterns of networked communication, given that features, algorithms, moderation systems and user preferences are subject to change.

Conclusion

Digital mobilization has become an intrinsic part of the public life of Assam today. In all three modes of political protest, cultural expression, and disaster response, social media offers a connective layer that makes issues visible, networks coalesce, emotions and symbols flow, and collective action is coordinated. From youth Facebook activism 2012 to anti-CAA mobilization across multiple platforms, and app-assisted flood relief in 2026, one can decipher an expansion in the range of digital civic practice.
There is no strong evidence for technological celebration or technological determinism. The benefits of social media are uneven and reversible, and it can expand participation, maintain and reimagine cultural identity, and cultivate quick civic responses. Some communities are left behind, some algorithms simplify, some outrageful calls gain traction, some identity discourses are polarizing, and internet shutdowns can paralyze networked civic life.
Social media in the Brahmaputra Valley is therefore more aptly considered as a contested civic infrastructure. Its potential to create social change is more about the quality of the networks created through its platforms than about the platforms themselves. Civic capacity can be meaningfully enhanced through digital communication where it is associated with credible institutions, culturally sensitive engagement, verifiable and transparent communication, accessible and equal participation, and offline follow-up action. In the absence of such supports, the visibility may be symbolic or distorted. The central transformation is not from offline to online public sphere, it's that they've become one.

References

1. Agarwala, T. (2019, December 21). Taken offline for nine days, Assam realises internet is much more than social media. The Indian Express.
2. Assam Foundation of North America. (2026). Flood relief 2026: Assam. https://www.assamfoundation.net/flood-relief
3. Assam State Disaster Management Authority. (2026). Assam flood report. Government of Assam. https://asdma.assam.gov.in/information-services/assam-flood-report
4. Banashree Gogoi v. Union of India & Ors., Gauhati High Court (2019, December 19).
5. Baruah, J. J., & Dutta, P. (2026). Negotiating Assamese identity: Vernacular humour and the village in contemporary Assamese screen culture—A case study of Bidurbhai. Studies in South Asian Film & Media, 18(1), 3–18. https://doi.org/10.1386/safm_00113_1
6. Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2012). The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics. Information, Communication & Society, 15(5), 739–768. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.670661
7. Castells, M. (2015). Networks of outrage and hope: Social movements in the Internet age (2nd ed.). Polity.
8. Choudhury, R. (2026, July 29). How social influencers, non-profits are helping Assam flood relief efforts. NDTV.
9. Das, N. C. (2022). Urbanization of folklore and folklife: A case study of Assamese festival Bihu. International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Research, 8(6), 31–33.
10. Deka, M. (2026). Writing against history/memory: The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), language, and regional print media in Assam. South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal, 35–36, 194–217. https://doi.org/10.4000/161rm

11. Deori, M., & Behera, S. K. (2014). Youth activism through social media in Assam: An exploratory study. Dev Sanskriti Interdisciplinary International Journal, 4, 8–17. https://doi.org/10.36018/dsiij.v4i0.40
12. Dutta, M., & Patar, D. (2026). From paddy fields to pixels: Modern science, technology, and the cultural reconfiguration of Magh Bihu in Assam. Zenodo. https://zenodo.org/records/21991268
13. Fatima, I., & Jogdand, Y. (2025). Dalit activists promote social change differently: Challenges and opportunities of digital activism and social change in Indian society. Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology, 35(2), e70079. https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.70079
14. Hazarika, A., Bora, B., & Nath, M. (2024). The impact of digital media on the cultural identity of North East India. International Journal of Novel Research and Development, 9(9), c102–c107.
15. Hazarika, P. (2025). Social media and activism in Assam: Catalyzing change through digital platform. TIJER—International Research Journal, 12(8), a695–a703.
16. Hira, K. K. (2026). Civic engagement: Examining the role of media literacy in digital activism. Swami Vivekananda University Press, 85–96.
17. Internet Society. (2019). Internet suspended in Assam, India. Internet Society Pulse. https://pulse.internetsociety.org/en/shutdowns/internet-suspended-in-assam-india-12-december-2019/
18. Kachua, B. (2026). The flood beyond our screens: How social media shaped flood relief in Assam. India Development Review.
19. Malakar, K., & Ray, M. P. (2020). Use of Twitter as a tool for digital activism: A study on the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2020 in reference to Assam. Paideuma Journal, 13(8).
20. Papacharissi, Z. (2016). Affective publics and structures of storytelling: Sentiment, events and mediality. Information, Communication & Society, 19(3), 307–324. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1109697
21. Parashar, U. (2026, August 8). Tech to the rescue: New apps aid relief, rehabilitation of Assam's flood-affected. Hindustan Times.
22. Saha, B. (2026, July 30). Relief or scam? Suspicious Assam aid appeals flood social media. India Today.
23. Sarma, C. K., & Hazarika, O. B. (2020). Anti-CAA protests and state response in Assam: Identity issues challenge Hindutva-based politics. Economic and Political Weekly, 55(14).
24. Sarmah, P., & Nath, D. P. (2023). Oti axamiyagiri: Assamese nationalistic masculine identity, United Liberation Front of Asom and cyberspace. Ethnicities, 23(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/14687968221078350
25. Sonowal, J., & Choudhury, D. (2024). Role of social media in promoting folk dance: A review study with reference to Bihu dance of Assam. EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research, 10(2).
26. Telecom Regulatory Authority of India. (2025). The Indian telecom services performance indicators, 2024–25: Yearly performance indicators. Government of India. https://trai.gov.in/sites/default/files/2025-07/YIR_08072025.pdf

Figure Source Notes

Anti-CAA protest, Guwahati: Ankur Jyoti Dewri, 13 December 2019, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.
Bihu dance of Assam: Diganta Talukdar, 11 April 2017, Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0.
Flood-relief photographic context: Bruno Kachua, 2026, India Development Review field story, 'The flood beyond our screens.'