

Gender in National Identity Formation: The case of Assamese Subnationalism

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A rich body of scholarship exists on the Assamese identity question and the mass movements arising out of it. The gender aspect of this identity quest however has remained a curious omission in these scholarly debates. This omission is significant as women's large-scale participation in all the democratic protest movements was considered to be one of their most legitimising factors. This paper is an attempt to fill this gap, while steering clear of reducing it to an additive study. Drawing from the Foucauldian notion of power, it is argued that the process of consolidation of Assamese identity was simultaneously a process of disciplining and liberating women. Through an analysis of the writings of the late 19th and early 20th century Assamese nationalist writers, it is argued that there was a conscious effort to draw a distinct identity for Assamese women in these writings, which in turn was used to demonstrate the uniqueness of the Assamese *jati*, primarily juxtaposing them with the Bengalis. In such a context, how were women themselves situated in formulation of identity? Did they chart out their own course of journey or did they choose to follow the path already decided for them?

Keywords: subnationalism, Identity, *Jati*, Sati Jaymati, Lachit Barphukon

Introduction

In his essay "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question" (1989), Partha Chatterjee¹ showed that the reformist measures initiated by the nationalist reformers in colonial India involved disciplinary techniques through which women's spaces, activities, self-projections and their pedagogy were controlled. Drawing from the Foucauldian theory of power, he argued that the nationalists resolved the 'women's question' by creating a normative image that women themselves wanted to emulate, which was for all practical purposes an exhibit of the productive forces of modern power as against its repressive tendencies (Chatterjee 1989, 2019). Based on this theoretical framework, this paper seeks to explore the gendered underpinnings of Assamese subnationalism. It must be pointed out that this is one of the most

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complicated identity questions witnessed in India roots of which can be traced back to the colonial period. Feminist scholarships have already demonstrated that national 'imaginings' necessarily demand projection of women in certain ways to incorporate them into the nationalist project (Yuval-Davis 2008, Roy 2019). This projection, as we argue in the specific instance of Assamese subnationalism, has to exhibit difference with reference to the men and women of the 'other', often construed as the adversary. Looking at the late 19th century and early 20th century literature written in Assamese when the process of asserting its independence vis-à-vis Bengali was still undergoing, it is shown that the 'idea bearers of the society' (Sharma 2004) used women as signifiers of their societal virtues, often using a celebratory tone for their non-exposure to western modernity unlike women of 'other' communities. How were women themselves situated in such a formulation of identity? Did they chart out their own course of journey or did they choose to follow the path already decided for them? In attempting to answer these questions, this paper seeks to offer a women centric perspective of the Assamese identity question.

Now, this is a question that has witnessed so many complicated controversies that sceptics tend to ask if there is a thing called Assamese identity at all.² The contradictory opinion claims that Assamese identity though existent, need not be confined to Assamese speakers alone, but must be inclusive of all within the broader fold of 'Assamese culture'. The process of formation of a composite Assamese *jati*³ started during the latter part of the Ahom rule with King Suhummung (1497-1539) bringing the Kacharis, Chutiyas, and Bhuyans within the ambit of the Ahom kingdom, only to be consolidated further during multiple Mughal invasions. The 15th century Bhakti saint of Assam, Srimanta Sankardeva is hailed as the father of the Assamese nation for it was through the Vaishnava movement, he constructed the 'greater Assamese community' (Misra 2014: 163-67). Assamese nationalism as we know its various versions today, emerged only after Assam's annexation to British India. Till then, the term Assam (Asom) was restrictively used to denote certain parts of the Ahom kingdom. The designation of both the language and the people as Assamese was a colonial construct (Guha 1984: 54). According to Monirul Hussain (1993) the process of nationality formation in Assam was a late entrant in the Indian subcontinent. This delay was due to a number of factors such as its geographical location, minimal interaction with Medieval India, relatively late entry to colonial capitalism and consequent late political and economic interaction with the rest of India (p: 23). Following Amalendu Guha's (1984) classification of nationalist consciousness in the 19th century into the larger pan Indian and the regional-linguistic (p 45), it may be argued that post-colonial Assam appears to be a perfect case study of this dualism. The feeling of negligence by the central government is real and not without evidence, so is its desire to be included in the larger pan-Indian identity. The Assam Movement despite its long list of complaints against the Central Government had slogans such as 'to save India tomorrow, save Assam today' (Misra 2014: 71).

Amalendu Guha (1980) makes a distinction between 'Assamese' and 'Asamiya' people. According to him, the former term denotes the inhabitants of the state of Assam, whereas the latter specifically refers to those whose mother tongue is the

Assamese language- acquired or natural. Thus, the neo-Assamese East Bengal origin people and tribal groups who declare Assamese to be their mother tongue belong in the category of Asamiya. For Guha, Assamese nationalism is an example of 'little nationalism'-i.e. a 'spiritual sentiment' holding together a group of people with their distinct cultural identity that demands a greater degree of autonomy within a nation-state (Guha 1980: 1699). Sanjib Baruah's (1981) concept of Assamese subnationalism in his own words is 'not substantially different' from this concept (p 676).

Monirul Husain (1993) uses the term Assamese nationality to denote 'the historically evolved and distinct community of people commonly speaking Asamiya language, having a composite Asamiya culture, certain specific commonness in psychological make-up, living in a common geographic area and economic zone- the Brahmaputra valley. Asamiya nationality notably is a multi-caste, multi-racial, multi-religious and a multi-class community; and it too has its own small minority of exploiters to exploit the vast majority of Asamiya masses and other national minorities like various tribal groups in Assam valley'. The use of the term nationality in place of nation to describe the Assamese is interesting. According to Husain, it is not easy to demarcate the two, but Asamiya is a nationality mainly because it has not yet achieved its complete growth. Moreover, it is comparatively smaller than the major nations of the multi-national Indian state. It must be noted that the historical territory of the Asamiya nationality is much smaller than the geographical territory of the state of Assam (pp 22-23, 169).

It was Jyoti Prasad Aggarwala⁴ who attempted to portray an adequate picture of the Assamese *jati* formed out of intermingling of different people coming from other parts of India and indigenous population. For this reason, according to him, we must strive to expand the volume of this *jati* by assimilating other *jatis* arriving at Assam. He warned the Assamese people of serious consequences unless the migrants (tea garden workers, Mymensingias, Nepalis, Bengalis, Marwaris and others) were brought within the fold of the Assamese by familiarizing them with the language, culture and civilization (Jyotiprasad Rachanavali, p 462). Similar views on the composite identity of the Assamese *jati* are also present in Lakshminath Bezbarua's⁵ writings (Jyotiprasad Rachanavali 462). In his article titled 'Natunar Puja', Aggarwala opposed the intention to impose the dominant Assamese culture on the migrants and 'Assamese from the hills'. He argued that all these groups possessed their own unique mother tongues and culture, to ask them to leave these and accept Assamese culture would be inconsistent with the assimilative principles of Sankardeva. Both the Assamese and the migrants must be willing to leave some parts of their particular culture to form a new culture in the eastern part of India (Jyotiprasad Rachanavali p 469).

The brief overview of Assamese identity presented above does not directly allude to its gender dimension. As we discuss in subsequent sections, without this reference the complex identity question and some recent developments arising out of it will escape closer scrutiny. Through an inspection of chosen cultural icons in Assam and writings of iconic nationalist writers the gender dimension of identity is discussed below.

Masculine men, feminine women: Quest for national icons in the determination of identity

In the search of a distinctive identity for the Assamese people, historization of mythology became a significant step. The search of the ideal Assamese man and woman was entangled in this process, as was the sentiment of contributing to the progress of the jati through history writings. History was the site of colonialism's the most visible power and it was here the most assertive claim of distinctiveness was to be made (Sharma 2004:6). Two gendered figures from the past -Lachit Borphukon and Jaymati occupied important positions in Assam's retelling of its glorious past. In his *Asom Sangeet*, Lakshminath Bezbaroa mentions three strongest personalities born to asomi aai (mother Assam)- Shankardev who provided the land with the 'purest religion', Lachit gave strength to the arms, and sati Jaymati provided her valour in piety (Bezbaroa Granthavalee, 1988 vol 2, p 993).

Lachit Borphukon was the ideal to emulate for Assamese men. He provided the foundation for muscular Assamese nationalism as the commander of the Ahom force that had staved off the mighty Mughals in the historic battle of Saraighat (Sharma 2004), which as we are now aware came to be the most assertive reference for emphasising the power of Assamese regional nationalism. Prominent twentieth century historians of Assam hailed Borphukon as the Shivaji of Assam; comparison was drawn with the British national hero Horatio Nelson (Sharma 2004: 15). It was not a mere coincidence that a group with radical nationalistic tendencies called itself Lachit Sena, or a pamphlet titled *moi maidamor pora Lachite Koisu* written by Suresh Phukon played a significant role in popularising nationalist feelings before the Assam Movement. The Lachit Sena was a militant organization formed by radical Assamese youths in 1968. The sena made its presence felt by a series of attacks on primarily Marwari business houses in and around Guwahati (Misra 2014: 70). If we contrast the laments of nationalists such as Ambikagiri Raichoudhury at the loss of valour of the Assamese race (discussed below) for their inability to fight external invasion⁶ with the reverence reserved for Lachit, it becomes obvious that the lament is also for the loss of masculinity. In order to rescue the race, a brave, masculine figure like Lachit was indispensable. It may be noted here that Hemchandra Goswami in his presidential speech at the Assam Sahitya Sabha had characterised the Assamese national character as 'more masculine than feminine' (*Sabhapatir Abhibhasan*, vol V, p 141). In his formulation, different genres of literature appealed to different kinds of people. Novels proved to be a resounding success in Bengal as their national character preferred 'emotional' or 'feminine' writings. The Assamese on the other hand was grave in nature, which meant they were more inclined towards history, philosophy, religious ethics, politics, social ethics etc-in short 'masculine literature' - than novels and drama (*Asom Sahitya Sabhar Bhasanavali*, vol V, p 141).

The story of Jaymati on the other hand although developed at the same time displays courage embedded in conventional femininity of the virtuous wife. It may be noted that it was only during the Non-cooperation Movement that Congress made much headway into the political scenario in Assam. With the formation of the Assam Unit of the All India Congress in 1920 mass movement and agitation spread among

the people. It was in this context that the revival of the story of Jaymati demands our attention.

From the second decade of the twentieth century, in certain parts of Assam Jaymati Utsav started to become a big annual festival (Mahanta 2008:0.3-0.4). The legend of Ahom princess Jaymati was popularised only a few years ago in an article published in an Assamese periodical. According to this legend, she was the wife of Gadapani, considered to be one of the most potent threats to Lora Roja's⁷ (boy king) reign. Her valour was centred around the fact that she refused to reveal the whereabouts of her absconding husband even in the face of terrible atrocities that continued for 14 days. The organizers of Jaymati utsav in Assam sought to awaken the spirit of nationalism and social responsibility among the Assamese women (Mahanta 2008:0.4). In the speeches delivered in the Utsav (Ghar Jeuti 2008: 473-75, 912-20) Jaymati's patience, sacrifice and devotion to her husband saw multiple reiteration. Jaymati's refusal to reveal her husband's whereabouts even at the face of unimaginable cruelty elevated her to the stature of a Gandhian 'satyagrahi' (Sharma 2004, Ghar-Jeuti 2008:916). Feminine virtues of suffering and devotion thus were considered superior to masculine strength, which Jaymati's husband possessed in plenty (Ghar jeuti 2008:916, 1139). Moreover, by refusing to surrender before the aggressive masculinity of the lora raja's forces, Jaymati's character reiterated the Gandhian order that femininity was superior to masculinity which in turn was superior to cowardice or failure of masculinity (Nandy 1983:53).

As Jayeeta Sharma (2004) argues, Jaymati as a 'satyagrahi' not only fitted into the Gandhian nationalist milieu of the early 20th century, she was also at the centre of an emerging literary trend of women writing in Assamese at that time (p 20). Ghar Jeuti published many such writings, and all of them would be focussed on Jaymati's exemplary story of sacrifice- both for her husband and for her 'des'. While there is room for debate about the literary virtues of these writings primarily by women and their better educated and famed male counterparts⁸, by writing and publishing they were turning into a new breed of 'political women' (Sarkar 2005) demanding their own space in nation building. Chandraprabha Saikiani the pioneer of the mahila samiti movement in Assam is probably the most radical example of such women (Sharma 2004: 23). Interestingly, the search for a rarefied Assamese regional identity was also closely intertwined with the larger pan-Indian context- Jaymati in this early genre of literary writings was a 'sati' and no longer a mere konwari or princess. It would have been baffling in a place that had no practice of widow burning if not for the then Indian nationalists concern with the 'chastity' of the inner space. In addition, for the early Assamese nationalists the image of the sati as the venerable, chaste Indian woman suffering for the sake of her family and community was worthy of emulation (Sharma 2004). As Susie Tharu shows in her essay "Tracing Savitri's Pedigree", it was the feminine 'goddess spirit' that now was burdened with saving the nation, a task that called for a sacrificial complex involving humility, passivity and suffering (Tharu 1989: 346). What Tanika Sarkar (1987) writes in the context of 19th century colonial Bengal appears true for Assam as well- independence as a precious jewel could be detached from the external, defeatist surroundings and at the same time could be

hidden in the core of the woman's body. Rather than surrendering, the sati destroys herself to protect the precious jewel of independence, a phenomenon widely celebrated by early patriotic writers in their literature (Sarkar 1987:2015). Given this it was hardly surprising that the tale of Jaymati was historicised and such was the power of Jaymati on the Assamese nationalist imagination that one revered writer writing in the 1980s exclaimed that if the story of torture of Jaymati was indeed without any base, we (the Assamese people) would have to lose 'Mahasati' Jaymati (Atul Chandra Hazarika, 'Juroni', Bezbaroa Granthavalee, vol 2, p 3-4).

The Mother Nation and Mother Language

What Jasodhara Bagchi (1990) mentions in the context of colonial Bengal rang true for post-colonial Assamese subnationalism- in order to subdue the masculinist overtures of 'India', it was necessary to summon the feminine strength embodied in the figure of the 'mother'. Ambikagiri Raichoudhury for instance refers Assam as 'Asom-Matri'- in the womb of whose live families of all species, river-rivulets, sea and lake, hills and valleys, agricultural fields, different classes of ethnic population, languages born from her land-all these ingredients are sufficient to reshape Assamese nationality (Rachanavali 1986:605). Moreover, the abstract concept of the 'nation' would be of little mobilizational value without the familial entity of the affectionate 'mother'- 'for no one can give up his life for a map'- who now could demand the ultimate sacrifice from her children, the nation and the family thus became intertwined (Bagchi 1990: WS70, Yuval-Davis 2008). Following the 'nationalist iconography' of imagining the nation as the mother- *deshmata*- Assamese subnationalism too feminized the land in form of the mother- *Asomi Aai*. The people in this imagery are not the nation themselves, rather filial ties accord them a subordinate status vis-à-vis the mother, who is the actual nation (Tanika Sarkar, 1987: 2011). When in one of his famous songs Bhupen Hazarika asks 'mother how can I worship thee?' and the answer to the question is 'by giving up life', the geographical territory of Assam assumes the form of the mother goddess whose children are obligated to make the supreme sacrifice for her sake (Baruah 1999: 88).

Following Ramaswamy (2003), we can argue that for the first generation of Assamese linguistic nationalists the Assamese language was as much of a mother figure as the geographical territory. Laksminath Bezbaroa appealed to his fellow Assamese to serve the mother tongue with utmost devotion so that for its welfare they would be willing to sacrifice every bit of strength in their mortal bodies. If 'we' (the Assamese people) thus performed our duties, the crown of development would soon shine on the head of mother Assam (Rachanavali, vol 2, p 1757). The 'Jatiya Sangeet' of Assam penned by Bezbaroa is a celebration of both the motherland that is Assam and her language. This song portrays Assam-the birthplace of the writer as *asomi aai* which is 'suala and suphala'-melodious and fertile. The description of a place as melodious indicates the confluence of language and territorial space. This overlapping of language and the mother figure is present in the motto of the Assam Sahitya Sabha- *siro senehi mur bhasha Janani*- my mother language-my eternal love (Baruah 1999: 72). As Sumathi Ramaswamy (2003) shows in her essay "The Goddess

and the Nation: Subterfuges of Antiquity, the Cunning of Modernity” the Tamil speaking community while imagining itself as an ‘autonomous, sovereign nation’ asserted that a disrespect to the mother tongue was akin to matricide, and rescuing the mother tongue was as much a duty of the people as protection of the land (p 554). From the above- mentioned instances, we can argue that a similar parallel can be drawn with Assamese linguistic nationalism. While Hindi formed the principal other for Tamil nationalists of the 1930s (Ramaswamy 2003: 554), for the Assamese the chief opponent was the Bengali language.⁹

Post-colonial Assam for many years was not focused on these ideals of masculinity and femininity embodied in the stories of Lachit and Jaymati respectively. Instead, the attention was on the heroes of more recent past- the freedom movement (Sharma 2004). As Assam’s discontentment with the central government policies grew and found expression in a series of mass movements for ‘developmental projects’¹⁰ it became imperative to project the picture of a dominant nationality. As Nira Yuval Davis points out “constructions of nationhood usually involve specific notions of both ‘manhood’ and ‘womanhood’” (Yuval Davis 2008: 13), Assamese subnationalism had to search for its own ideal man and woman in the process. Lachit Borphukon and his story of valour became the most potent signifier of this picture.¹¹ Jaymati who was until very recently the symbol of feminine virtue, a true satyagrahi, had little use in such a projection, as her model of passive resistance was seen as ineffective compared to a more aggressive, masculine resistance. More than a satyagrahi, she was now the symbol of what was wrong in centre-state relations, a passive and meek race accepting the unjust ‘stepmotherly’ treatments of the centre. It was in this context that the initial enthusiasm reserved for The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), an armed secessionist group formed in the late 1970s, and its advocacy for armed resistance need to be viewed. It will not be out of place to mention here that the evil stepmother was also a construct of the early nationalist writers in Assamese- Lakshminath Bzbarua’s collection of folk tales *Burhi Aair Sadhu* or *Grandmother’s Tales* had a number of stories where the cruel stepmother actively plotted against children, thus essentializing the mother/stepmother binary.

Borphukon on the other hand was the soldier that defeated external invasion. He was the legit hero of a community perpetually insecure about being numerically, linguistically and economically outnumbered by ‘outsiders’. In this ‘unthinking, sectarian patriotism’ of disgruntled Assamese youth (Sharma 2004:38) Lachit is the hero to emulate, to stave off the invading outsider. In this, the state is more than willing to offer active assistance-the best cadet at National Defence Academy in Pune is awarded a gold medal named after him, and recently the President of India inaugurated the yearlong celebration of the 400th birth anniversary of Lachit.¹² In her research Jayeeta Sharma (2004) has shown the role S.K.Sinha, former governor of Assam, played in recommencing Lachit’s memory. What is intriguing is the distinctly communal turn this aggrandisement is taking, not completely isolated from the communal twist apparent in the making of ‘Sati’ Jaymati. Following Yuval-Davis, the reclaiming of Lachit Borphukon in Assamese nationalist imaginary can be termed as a process of ‘cultural decolonization’ (2008: 88). As this process necessarily demands an overhaul of sexuality and gender relations, excessive masculine aggression

is often seen as willing renouncement of femininity, which is considered synonymous with weakness. The sense of loss of power that the subjugated man in a colony or in a peripheral region of a nation state is considered akin to emasculation or feminisation. The consequence of such a construct is the secondary position accorded to women within such collectivities (Yuval-Davis 2008: 88, 97).

In the normative nationalistic understanding, women's emancipation was considered relevant, but not indispensable. We shall see later that the leadership of the Assam Movement gave foremost priority to the foreign infiltration issue and thought all other issues concerning civil society including women's issues must be taken up later (Mahanta 1988). That the middle-class Assamese had strong views on what the ideal woman should be like was firmly established by their appropriation of the myth of Jaymati. As we are aware, the regeneration of a 'national golden age' by investing in collective memories and transforming oral tradition into written ones occupies a significant space in formulation of nationalist ideologies (Yuval-Davis 2008:14). The tale of Jaymati must be read keeping this context in mind. Even though this myth proved to be less than congenial to the masculinist assertion of the Assamese middle class soon after independence, the ideal mother/wife continued to inform the image of the normative Assamese woman. For instance, we can take the example of an editorial titled 'Mukta Tirota' or Liberated Women published in an Assamese weekly on December 17, 1975. This editorial accepted that women must be liberated from the shackles of male domination, but not at the cost of their essential femininity, which was solely defined in terms of love and motherhood. If, according to this editorial, women became so obsessed with equality one day they might achieve it, but would end up losing men completely from their lives. Women should desire equality and freedom, but must not lose 'mental balance' in the process (Sabhapandit 2010: 682).

Women as signifier of 'difference'

The formation of Assamese national identity, as is the case with any nationality, was embedded in gender. A detailed discussion on the depiction of the migrant as a predatory male out to destroy the Assamese woman's 'modesty' follows in a later section. Even before that, torchbearers of Assamese literature sought to emphasise the uniqueness of Assamese identity through an emphatic proclamation of Assamese women's distinctive characteristics. For instance, in a three-part satire titled 'Stree Swadhinata' Lakshminath Bezbaroa lamented the erosion of those unique qualities that separated Assamese women from others, specifically Bengali women. It must be mentioned that Bezbaruah was not an anti-reformer. In part three of the above-mentioned satire, he strongly favours widow remarriage by invoking the language of rights and liberty (Bezbaroa Granthavalee, vol II, 1988, pp 1467-68). At the same time, in part two, he reprimands Assamese women for forgetting their own language and culture. Writing in the name of Kripabor Barbaroa, Bezbaroa sarcastically tells Assamese women that he does not have a problem that Assamese women have started wearing saree in place of *mekhela sador*, that they have traded the important tradition of Assamese women weaving for knitting of woollen socks and frocks, that in place

of traditional Assamese snacks they now prefer readymade sweets. These changes must be accepted as women now know how to read and write. In this satire, the conflict among the first generation reformers with regard to 'what kind of' and 'to what extent' women must be given freedom (Sangari and Vaid 1989, Sarkar and Sarkar vol 1&2, 2007) is palpable. Here, through his characteristic humour Bezbaroa reminds Assamese women about their real tasks and responsibilities. Similar anxiety about national identity and women's 'rightful place' in that identity is visible in Ambikagiri Raichoudhury's essay 'Stree Shiksha'. It may be mentioned here that for Bezbaroa, the point of reference to project the Assamese woman's uniqueness was the Bengali woman. For him, the most beloved expression of this would be the weaving of the 'gamusa' with floral patterns. As Bezbaroa was one of the most significant fighters in the struggle for ensuring the independent identity of the Assamese language from Bengali, he expresses his displeasure in the usage of Bengali infused Assamese by Assamese women. This satire of Bezbaroa can be read as an expression of nationalism not only through language, which has remained at the centre of Assamese nationalism, but also through women's bodies- through their attire, the kind of food they prepare and 'right' kinds of work they perform (Bezbaroa Granthavalee, vol II, 1988: 1464). Jyoti Prasad Agarwala too believed the essence of Assamese culture lay in women's attire, work ethics, efficiency and aestheticism (Racanavali, 'asomiya riha-mekhela prithivir dhuniya saj-poshakor lekhote pore', 1986:918-20). According to him, Assamese women showed their expertise in all spheres of life such as weaving, managing the household, caring for children, farming, religious activities during Jaymati's time. In order to give shape to a new civilizational culture in Assam and India Assamese women must strive for the same excellence and more that they had earlier (Racanavali:919-20). It would not be irrelevant to note that Aggarwala was instrumental in ensuring substantial participation of Assamese women in the freedom movement. His song- *Our young boys can lay down lives for the nation, young girls also do not lag behind*- was an inspiration for many. Along with training women in horse riding, he also took the responsibility of convincing family members to ensure participation of women from religious, orthodox families (Tamuli and Gogoi 2010: 46).

In the first women's magazine in the Assamese language *Ghar-Jeuti* (1927-1931) too, the difference of Assamese women and women in other parts of the country was emphasised. For instance, drawing from ancient texts and Ahom history, it was insisted that there never was purdah system in Assam (Ghar Jeuti 2008:597). There were strong denouncements of attempts from certain sections of the urban educated class that sought to restrict Assamese women's mobility by preventing them from attending public meetings, performances or fishing (Ghar Jeuti 2008: 597-98) restraints that appeared similar to the internalization of Victorian morality by nineteenth century reformers in their attempts to declare traditional erotic performative arts such as nautch (Kumar 1993:36).

According to De Mel (2001) there are certain specific ways in which nationalism becomes a gendered concept-a) by producing carefully curated normative ideals about sexuality and gender, it creates a division of labour in which the male is the

author and subject of the nation, whereas the female becomes the nation. Such a division warrants that the woman along with being the reproducer and transmitter of cultural values of the nation, also is in need of protection by the male subject (sons). To fulfil her duties as reproducer and cultural protector, the woman's sexuality must be strictly monitored for ensuring the purity of the nation. Anyone transgressing the boundaries of respectability as defined in patriarchal connotations, must be subverted. Masculine strength, aggression and virility in turn are virtues for protecting the feminised nation, failure to do so means emasculation (p 3).

b) While looking for specific national identity, position of women becomes an important parameter of uniqueness. As was the case with colonised elites during the freedom struggle, women's emancipation became integral to modernise their societies and claim equality with the colonial masters, the originators of Assamese subnationalism too were keen on modernising the women. As we note in Jyoti Prasad Aggarwala's efforts to bring women even from orthodox families in to the public or in Ambikagiri's insistence on similar martial trainings to both men and women, these were efforts to defy the gender norms of an older society. Aggarwala's famous play *Labhita* (1947) offers glimpses of Assamese women's participation in the freedom struggle, drifting apart from the Gandhian non-violence and moving closer to Subhash Chandra Bose's *Azad Hind Fauj*. When *Labhita* gets involved in a quarrel with a police officer and threatens to shoot at him with his own pistol, she also makes the announcement that she is not a follower of the Gandhian path (Rachanavali 197). There is also a discreet reference to women's ability- a rustic woman when mocked at for her involvement in the political struggle, replies that for so long she worked in the muddy village fields, now is the time to run the government. As the *des* (country), land, rivers, hills, the sky everything belongs to the people, the government will also be run by the people (Rachanavali 196). It may be argued that this nameless fictional character in Aggarwala's play gave voice to many of her successors who participated in various protest movements of the state, culminating in the Assam Movement and the rise of ULFA. In post-colonial Assam, the women in various protest movements in Assam, most importantly in the Assam Movement courageously defied societal norms, women cadres of ULFA received similar physical and martial training. Such visibility however also brings the related risk of 'harassment', what Sunder Rajan (1999) terms as the production of anomie within modernity. The unfortunate remarks about women participants in the Assam Movement by a senior bureaucrat of the state (Barthakur and Goswami 1990:221) can be taken as an example of such anomie. Nationalist modernity, as De Mel shows in the context of Sri Lanka, tends to reinvent tradition for its own purpose (2001: 7). Modernising aspects of other cultures are viewed with suspicion for the fear that they would undermine the indigenous. This leads to restrictions on women's modernity, they now need to modernise in such a way that would benefit the emerging nation (De Mel 2001). Such scepticism about modernity was apparent in the early Assamese nationalist writers' views on women's education, which we elaborate in a later section. Bezbaroa's lamentations on Assamese women imbibing 'Bengali' values and culture arose from apprehensions about a non-indigenous modernity accepted in another culture.

c) Nationalism by definition tends to be a unified existence, thereby a homo-

genising force. Women are projected as the embodiment of community identity (De Mel 2001: 9, Kumar 1993, Aretxaga 1998), which in turn results in restrictions on their mobility and freedom. At the same time, it is pertinent to ask if a woman attempts to transgress the limitations imposed by nationalism and seeks to side with the 'excluded other', how would the nationalist forces react to her transgression? During the Assam Movement, such 'lapses' on the part of women had serious consequences. One celebrated Assamese writer who was working as a journalist with a weekly at that time shared her experience after what the supporters of the movement thought to be a betrayal of the cause on her part.¹³ Similarly, the imposition of the mekhela sador as the unofficial dress code for 'nationalist' women during the Assam Movement (Dutta 2012) and before that the medium of instruction movement (Deka 2021: 351) and the humiliation reserved for the 'transgressor' can be taken as an example of such forced homogenisation.

It would not be out of place to mention here that in the face of tussle between predominant 'national issues' and women's interests or concerns of other smaller nationalities, the tendency among women's organizations in Assam is to support the former. In 1948, the Assam Pradesh Mahila Samiti was in support of a government decision to implement Assamese as the state language in Assam. Tribal women delegates like Bonniely Khongmen opposed the resolution arguing against imposition of anyone's language on others. Khingmen's opposition was paid little heed to as most of the members voted in favour of the resolution (Medhi 2016: 34). It is also significant that the Assam Sahitya Sabha had enthusiastically supported the formation of the Assam Mahila Samiti in 1927. Here too the emphasis was on community identity, as a samiti among Assamese women was thought to be necessary to counter Bengali women's unity (Medhi 2016: 22). The working of different women's groups in the state in both pre-colonial and post-colonial periods reveal their association with upper caste, middle class ideology. Organizations like Mula Gabharu Santha and Jagrata Mahila Parishad were constituent components of the Assam Gana Sangram Parishad that led the Assam Movement (Nath 2015, Chowdhury 2021), but they never condemned the violent tendencies within the movement or expressed solidarity to the journalist mentioned above when she was unceremoniously dismissed from her job.

A gendered reading of Ambikagiri Raychoudhuri

Ambikagiri Raichoudhuri was one of the most prominent proponents of Assamese subnationalism (Baruah 1999: 81). His writings on the foreigners' issue and land were important theoretical source for agitationists in the Assam Movement. Though he never really propagated a separate state of Assam, partial readings of some of his writings meant ULFA would accept him as their theoretical guiding light. In this section, we attempt to offer a gendered critique of his writings on challenges emanating from immigration.

Any comprehensive discussion of the Assamese identity question demands special attention to Ambikagiri Raichoudhuri's writings. As a former chief minister of the state prophesied, there would be a time when his ideas 'will be inseparable from the

goals of the Assamese nationality' (Baruah 1999: 86). His writings on the foreigners' issue and land proved to be important theoretical sources for the Assam Movement. It is also important to go back to the writings of Raichoudhury for he was among the first Assamese intellectuals who foresaw the issues that the Assam agitation of 1979-85 would highlight three decades later (Sharma 1986: 11). A widely popular strategy of the agitation was to ensure self-reliance of Assamese people in every aspect of life. As the average Assamese was invisible in most of the professions necessary to sustain life, the foreigner (*bahiragata*) could come and establish himself. Thus, urging the people to proudly do all kinds of work, including menial work was an important aspect of the anti-foreigner agitation (Bora 2020: 418). Raichoudhury initiated similar self-reliance measures in the 1930s with the 'Mayabini Chemical Works' (Sharma 1986). This factory was short lived, as would the self-reliance initiatives of the Assam Movement be later. Through the Assam Sanrakshini Sabha and Assam Jatiya Mahasabha, Raichoudhury listed out the urgent problems plaguing Assam. High on his list was the continuous flow of migration from East Bengal, pressure on land, conflict between Assamese and *pomuas* (The East Bengali immigrant), increasing dominance of the Bengali language over Assamese. He blamed the Assamese for his lacklustre attitude towards these impending threats. According to him, it was their insufficient love for the motherland and lack of unity within themselves that compounded the problem. Even though the political leaders of the time, especially the Congress leadership, had paid little attention to Raichoudhury's warnings and he was scorned as the leader of the anti-Bengali Movement, the issues he raised proved to be the cataclysm that eventually spiralled into the Assam Movement (Sharma 1986). He was not a separatist, but at the same time he wanted the unique Assamese identity to be safeguarded, primacy of Assamese language and Asomiya in Assam, preference to the 'son of the soil' in matters of employment and other economic opportunities and prevention of undocumented migration. For him, there was no disparity between Indian mahajatiyata and Assamese jatiyata in the wider sense (Sharma 1986: 13, 17).

In order to protect Assam from the atrocities of 'outsiders' (in this context, where he advocates the formation of Asom Atmaraksha Bahini/ Self-protection Force of Assam, the outsiders were British Imperialism and the Muslim league) it was imperative to form a protection force. In this protection force both men and women of all communities were welcome to join. One of the most important objectives of this bahini was to protect girls' and women's 'honour' (*izzat-abur*), along with wealth, property, land and religion from the attack of Muslim League (Ambikagiri Rachanavali 1986: 543-545). In Raichoudhury's formulation, the 'outsider'/immigrant was always imagined as a masculine body. In one of his articles titled 'Asomot Arajokota' (Anarchy in Assam), Raichoudhury argued that due to large scale migration of 'lower class' people from Mymensingh and other places of Bengal to Goalpara, Kamrup, Darang, Nagaon districts of Assam, sufferings of locals specially 'innocent women' had multiplied. Wherever such settlements of lower-class people were taking place, Assamese women's mobility was being increasingly curtailed, now they found it increasingly difficult to move around, either alone or even in a group of two to four. The moment such 'degenerate' people saw women, they would try to harass them in

every way possible- just to satisfy their own primitive desires. It was not surprising that there had been cases registered about such behaviour in four courts of the above mentioned four districts. In his opinion, the civilized British rule had helped the Assamese forget about the nightmare of the earlier Burmese invasion. Assamese women had no problem in roaming about alone under the British rule. But with the invasion of Assam by these ‘animals’, all peace enjoyed by the Assamese people was lost. In order to counter this, masculinisation of the Assamese *jati* was needed, which sadly was on the wane. The anxiety over emasculation is palpable in Raichoudhury’s writing, as he laments that today’s Assamese was no longer the descendent of the virile, heroic Assamese race of yesteryears, they do not have the hot blood and ‘birjya’ (semen) of their ancestors. This is the reason they cannot protest even when ‘their women’ are openly humiliated (Ambikagiri Rachanavali 1986: 913).

As protective measures, Raichoudhury suggested two ways: The people of Assam must remind the government of its responsibility towards them. A total ban on future migration from Mymensingh and other districts of East Bengal was required. Those who arrived earlier and settled in Assam, and now indulge in such criminal activities, a specific provision of criminal law should be there just to punish them. These were, in Raichoudhury’s opinion, ‘much feared criminals’ of Bengal and even that government had specific legal provisions to punish them. It was to specifically protect the interest of Assamese people that a province called Assam was created. Government must take steps to entertain this heartfelt request of the Assamese people, or else it will have to be prepared for bigger consequences. Secondly, Assamese people could take the collective step of forming a company and register all fallow land under this company. Most of the migrants started cultivation in such fallow land before settling in there. In order to protect ‘innocent, helpless Assamese women’ and to protect the interest of the Assamese people, the government would agree to such a provision. Otherwise, the honour of the Assamese Hindu would be desecrated. The Hindu easily sacrificed his life for protecting the honour of the inner sphere, to protect the honour of women is an essential talisman of the Hindu religion and millions of Hindus have sacrificed their lives for this essence of Hinduism. If the Assamese Hindu fails in this duty, his fault would be forever recorded in history (Ambikagiri Rachanavali 1986: 913-15).

The gendered construction of the ‘migrant’ and the ‘native’ is obvious in Raichoudhury’s articulation. In a curious manner, religion and gender intersect in this argument- all Assamese were imagined as Hindus, whereas all Bengali migrants were Muslims and men. The portrayal of this imminent danger to the honour of innocent Assamese women by ‘these animals’ or ‘much feared criminals’ of Bengal; and the imploration to Assamese (Hindu) men to protect the honour of ‘their’ women is reflective of what Tanika Sarkar (2002) terms as anxiety over emasculation, which can be overcome only with violent reactions, which thus become source and evidence of manliness (Sarkar 2002: 2875). The intent in all probability is reminiscent of the lynching of Black men by White vigilante justice groups to protect white womanhood (D’Cruze and Rao 2004: 497), or the identity politics propounded by Hindu nationalists that bring together ‘masculinity, nationalism, sexuality and violence’ (Anand 2007).

A brief overview of Ambikagiri's views on women's education is necessary here to illustrate the Foucauldian notion of power that influenced women's position in the Assamese national identity question. According to him, complete equality between Assamese women and Assamese men was essential in physical and martial training, but not in the sphere of education. He wanted to know whether 'our sisters' should be given the kind of education that was imparted to women in other parts of the world or in neighbouring Bengal. This however does not imply that Raichoudhury was not a supporter of women's education or liberty. For him, a nation's (*Jati*) progress was conditional on the progress of its women. As we all were dependent on the love, kindness and guardianship of women since the time of our birth, women made our lives liveable as mothers, sisters and wives, they must be given complete education. However, the question was what kind of education should be imparted to women (Rachanavali 1986: 880). As men and women were different by birth, Raichoudhury argued, they must not be put in the same platform. Women were more sentimental in nature, which however did not imply that they were inferior to the intellectual. Sentiment made people simple, trusting and happy, but intellect made people sceptics. Ultimately, men and women displayed different mental tendencies and their nature also developed differently. Women's strength lay in making the world happier, whereas men were meant to 'work'. The present system of education forced women to join the workforce, thereby forcing them to forget their real work and objectives. Women found real happiness in kindness, love and self-sacrifice, in divine servitude. If servitude was born out of love, it was the biggest happiness. Indian women, especially Hindu women could accept such slavery. Their loving and noble heart cried for others. This was their natural attribute, it would be more harmful than beneficial to the society, to the national ideal to ask them to change their nature. Women's education was important, but at present it was moving in a completely different direction (Raichoudhury Rachanavalee 1986: 880-881).

It will not be wrong to argue that when Raichoudhury advocated a different system of education for Assamese women ('our sisters') from the one being imparted in Bengal or other parts of the world, he was also propagating views on the difference of Assamese women from others. "This politics of difference", as Papori Bora (2017) argues, "a difference from the political and cultural identity of 'India', is at the heart of politics in India's Northeast" (Bora 2017: 244), with Assam being no exception. As we have noted above, this politics of difference in assertion of unique identity found expression through assumed normativity about women's 'appropriate' behaviour in the Assamese context.

Conclusion

Assam in recent years has undergone political turbulations. The process of updating the National register of citizens (NRC) and amendments in the Citizenship Act in the country with obvious communal intentions combined with muscular nationalism exhibited by the ruling party in the state have put the question of identity once again at the centre of political life of the state. These debates are centred around the question 'Who is an Assamese' - a query rendered essential by Clause 6 of the Assam Accord.^{1.4}

This question, as our discussion has shown, is embedded in gender. Cultural specificities demand investment in construction of the ideal man and woman of a community, a phenomenon witnessed in historicization of Lachit Borphukon and Sati Jaymati respectively. As the former's rise to prominence with active state sponsorship is accompanied by fading away of the memory of Jaymati, masculine anxiety dominates the feminine in subnationalist politics. It may not be wrong to argue that this anxiety finds expression in the increasing violence against women in the state.¹⁵ In an uncanny similarity to the police officer described by Fanon (2001) who became violent towards his own family as he tortured Algerian freedom fighters, in present day Assam the insecurity about the 'outsider' often imagined as a perverted male body as we notice in Raichoudhury's writings- is expressed through aggressive masculinity.¹⁶ It is in this context that a reevaluation of movements seemingly based on Gandhian ideology- the Assam Movement being the most prominent- through gendered lens is warranted. Through a gendered inspection of the Assamese nationality question this paper prepares the framework for that.

Notes

¹ While acknowledging the feminist scrutiny this essay has been subjected to, I have chosen to read it along with Chatterjee's more recent response to these critics. See Partha Chatterjee (2019)

² For details of the varying definition of 'Assamese people' that has emerged over the years, see Deka (2013), Pisharoty (2019), Gogoi (2022).

³ The Assamese word Jati is used to denote an ethnic-linguistic national identity instead of a political community.

⁴ Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, the most distinguished personality of modern Assamese music, literature and cinema. Though he started as a congressman and took active part in the Quit India movement, after 1947 he drifted towards Communism. He was the founder of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) in Assam.

⁵ According to Tilottoma Misra (1987) the most militant expression of Assamese linguistic nationalism was found in Bezbaroa's writings, thus earning him the title Sahitya Rathi or literary charioteer in Assam (p 199).

⁶ In Raichoudhury's formulation this invasion was of landless peasants from neighboring Bengal.

⁷ King Sulikpha. According to Hiteswar Barborua (2013), he was called so because of his fragile, boyish appearance. See *Ahomar Din*, p-270.

⁸ Lakshminath Bezbarua wrote a play named Jaymati Konwari which would later be adapted into the first Assamese film. Padmanath Gohainbaruah wrote a novel on Jaymati.

⁹ See speeches of Bezbaroa at meetings of the Asomiya Bhasha Unnati Sadhini Sabha (ABUSS) in Calcutta, Bezbaroa Rachanavali, vol 2.

¹⁰ Assam saw mass protest movements for broad-gauge railway lines, bridge over the Brahmaputra and refineries immediately after independence. These movements, according to Gohain (2007) reflected a combination of frustrations over the identity question and shortcomings of the Indian federal system.

¹¹ An article published in a now defunct Assamese daily on February 4, 1968 argued that at its moment of crisis the Assamese jati was in dire need of a unifying national

symbol and there was no better contender for this than Bir Lachit. The writer had urged for collection of funds for celebrating Lachit Utsav, which should be utilised to erect a twenty feet tall statue of Lachit.

¹² <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-ahom-warrior-lachit-borphukan-and-the-battles-of-alaboi-saraighat-7791371/>

¹³ For details of this incident see ‘Two Refugee Camps and an ‘Unpatriotic’ Journalist’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Apr. 19, 1980), p. 735.

¹⁴ The Assam Accord (Memorandum of Settlement) was signed on 15th August, 1985 by representatives of the All-Assam Students’ Union (AASU), All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad, Government of India and Government of Assam. It ended the six year- long Assam Movement. Clause 6 of the Accord makes provisions for ‘constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards, as may be appropriate, shall be provided to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people’. Full text of the accord can be accessed at https://assamaccord.assam.gov.in/sites/default/files/swf_utility_folder/departments/assamaccord_medhassu_in_oid_3/portlet/level_1/files/The%20Assam%20Accord%20-%20English.pdf

¹⁵ According to National Crime Record Bureau data, Assam recorded the highest rate of crime against women in the country in 2020 for the 4th consecutive year.

¹⁶ The hateful wrath with which an Assamese photographer assaulted an injured person during a violent eviction drive in September 2021 in Darrang district is the epitome of such aggression.

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