

**Masculine Identity and Assamese Society:  
Identifying and Analyzing Different Phases of its  
Evolution**

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## **CHAPTER V**

### **CONCLUSION**

Assam is a land of great geographical and ethnic diversity, and vibrant folklore. It is interesting to find out how the universal ideas of masculinity intermingled with the local ideas or worldview to shape and construct new forms of masculinities here. This study has tried to traverse through major socio-political events in the recent history of Assam to find out the explanations of these questions. Throughout the thesis, I try to understand how the figure of an “ideal Assamese man” is related to the Assamese people’s changing worldview, the everyday perception of gender, Assam’s socio-political history and the patriarchal nature of Assamese society.

Our discussion on Assamese masculinity is mainly based on R.W. Connell’s idea of masculinity as having multiple origins and not being one dimensional (Connell, 1995). The socio-political history of the Assamese has constantly reshaped and re-moulded the image of the “ideal man” among the Assamese. The relationship has been dialectical. Masculinity has been both a construction of the different socio-political contexts of Assam and at the same time, discourses of masculinity have shaped Assamese society in recent times.

To test the legitimacy of the claims made about Assamese masculinity, the thesis traces the ideas of the Assamese nation back to the nineteenth century when Assamese nationalism took its first few steps under the patronage of the new English educated Bengal-returned stalwarts. An examination of the Assamese nation-making is, therefore, one of the first objectives of the study. It is important to establish the base of academic research before it foregrounds the main objectives. The paucity of academic research on Assamese masculinity compelled me to first foreground a base for my study. Regarding this, Chapter 2 navigates the question of an emblem to study Assamese masculinities. It is observed that while Assam history has been considered as patriarchal by referring to it as a men’s history only; yet, there has been a vacuum in studying different problems of men in the academic parlance. In such a context, the thesis proposes a particular culturally loaded term ‘Dangoriya’ as the signifier of the idea of Assamese masculinity for several reasons. At the foremost, this chapter discusses the probable misinterpretation ‘Dangoriya’ may face from another term ‘Bhadralok’ that has already gained a wider currency, notably amongst the scholars corresponding to Bengali identity. Bhadralok is also available in

Assamese vocabulary and it also provides strong arguments for its eligibility. But, for several reasons, I contend that the term ‘Dangoriya’ is more apt to convey the very reverential status that a person is entitled to in the Assamese society owing to his different set of masculine attributes that qualifies him to a revered position. Assamese people’s century-old quest to prove themselves as a distinct nationality from their Bengali counterparts and the age-old language debate concerning Assamese and Bengali scripts makes the ‘Bhadralok-Dangoriya’ question a pertinent one.

Different scholars have pointed out the Bhadrak classification is no longer available in the state of Bengal and it doesn’t operate in the other parts of the country. But, Dangoriya has remained the torchbearer of the ‘ideal image of a man’ in rural Assamese society from time immemorial; it can be found in different discourses, folkloric texts and oral histories. Furthermore, the exact cultural embodiment of ‘Dangoriya’ is not limited as it is not representative of any particular category (like owing to educational merit or professional qualification which is very much significant with regard to ‘Bhadralok’). Dangoriya, a culturally embodied term based on different local beliefs finds its place in daily practices and cultural beliefs in the rural platform. The agriculture-based rural society of Assam in this regard certainly welcomes the term instead of Bhadrak which is considered as the emblem of Indian urbanity and marks the status of an educated Bengali Middle Class. The chapter argues how the legacy of *Dangoriya* as a signifier of esteemed salutation towards a male person has remained constant during several transformations during different periods of the past. The chapter also focuses on the folkloric figure of Dangoriya as a revered male figure who is an embodiment of a multitasking ‘ideal’ man. Such cultural construction of the image of a *Dangoriya* in Assamese society captures our attention about the social significations traditionally assigned to this term and deeply rooted in the Assamese collective psyche.

This chapter foregrounds the close affinity between the terms ‘*Dangoriya*’ with the aspirations of Assamese nationalism in different periods since the nineteenth century. The young English educated minds well versed with the colonial ideas of progress because of their stay in Bengal in the nineteenth century had reinvented the existing socio-cultural institutions and re-structured some of the ancient social institutions. It was their policy to give a considerable amount of importance to distinguish the constitution of the Assamese ‘ideal’ man from Bengali ‘*Bhadralok*’ and establish the age-old figure *Dangoriya* as the reference. Furthermore, the colonial ruler’s old

policy of igniting the Assamese community consciousness also focused on establishing the term *Dangoriya* in the same way. As an argument, it re-emphasized the cultural proposition of how the earliest proponents of Assamese nationalism had trodden the path to re-mould and re-construct the local ideas and local elements in order to formulate a counter-narrative to resist the potential threat from the outsiders.

At the outset, the chapter focuses on the *Dangoriya* image as characteristically embedded with the hegemonic masculine traits of Assamese man; owing to its signification in the folklore of Assam and standardized during the afore-mentioned period and had surely been assigned a nationalistic connotation. To sum up, the above discussion, based on the aforementioned arguments, one may observe that due to the cultural differences between Bengal and Assam during various epochs of history, the term '*Dangoriya*' is found to be more adequately qualified as the lexical emblem of Assamese masculinity. As a term, it satisfies several parameters. Firstly, it offers a clear picture of the Assamese society, essentially rooted in the traditional practices of the day-to-day life of an Assamese living in a rural landscape. Secondly, it helps to discover a more authentic genealogy of Assamese masculinity which would be organic and free from any kinds of prejudices and cultural assumptions about the masculinity of the Northeastern part of India. One of the most important connotations of the Assamese term '*dangoriya*' as against '*bhadralok*' is the sense of indigenous civility that it so strongly and adequately conveys. In order to understand and appreciate this sense of indigenous, pre-British civility, it is important that we take stock of the rich rural and folkloric associations of '*dangoriya*'.

Assam has been a land of folkloric variety and diverse cultures. It can be said that the Assamese people have stuck to their folklore for self-projection as well as to express their states of being. In this regard, one of the main objectives of the study is to find out how the Assamese constructed ideal manhood through different folkloric genres and how they inherited the local ideal of masculinity. Chapter 3 in order to analyse the construction of the "ideal Assamese man" in agriculture-based rural Assamese society, follows autoethnography and reading of cultural texts as methods of the study. By focusing on different cultural practices and daily life of the Assamese, Chapter 3 problematizes the interconnection between local ideas, practices and folklore with the universal politics of masculinity creation. It analyses various folk genres and provides an inherited structure for creating masculine identities. It is the folklore that reflects the diverse culture of the Assamese more than any source. The Assamese express their intimate

knowledge of everyday life through different motifs of folkloric expression. Normative models of personhood are closely related to the geographical terrain of the region. Moreover, the conflict between the plains and the hills, the importance of agriculture and the long political hegemony of the Indian state plays an important part in the construction of normative personhood. The complex topography and agro-based economy of the land construct the normative model of masculinity through different symbolic connections with nature. For instance, a healthy body seems to be a prerequisite for the Assamese man for his survival in a land that is full of natural challenges.

An 'ideal' Assamese man is believed to be the owner of three assets i.e. money, agriculture and woman. But, it is the patriarchal politics that impacts the Assamese man's collective psyche and encourages him to "control" these three assets. In projecting the ideas of sexual and cultural control, the Assamese man always relies on agriculture-oriented folk performances. The symbolic meaning of these folk performances refers to a two-fold relationship with nature and the female to glorify the male's dominant position in the sexual act. It is important to refer here to the fact that An Assamese man's loyalty between nature and his woman is a prominent feature of Assamese folk and agricultural festivals.

Another aspect that carries our attention in defining masculinities here is the debate between modernity and tradition. The recurring images of the challenges encountered in different geographical terrain have neatly coalesced with these. There is a growing belief that the inflow of foreign goods and consumables has made the Assamese man unhealthy and delicate. For an Assamese man in the twenty-first century, it becomes a tough challenge to cope with two discourses; one with the overflow of the so-called 'globalized' ideas and thoughts and secondly the traditional beliefs and ideas, on which his idea of masculinity has been cherished from a long time.

Caste has been another very important aspect in defining a local contextualized picture of Assamese masculinity. It is seen as a determining factor in the relationship between paddy, men and women, in the social image of men and caste-based endogamy. In most cases, notions of masculinities get intermingled with caste. But, the local masculinities here based on physical labour and challenging geographical terrains often problematize the existing concepts of caste scholarship. The higher caste people establish their 'pure' status through endogamy and fulfilling

their duty as protector of 'caste purity' by protecting women from marrying into the lower caste. But, the caste mechanism of exempting the upper caste from physical labour in the agricultural field traps him into a psychological dilemma of masculinity. So, the upper caste masculinity here breaks the barriers of already established caste dynamics and tries to cope with the local measures through a hybrid form of manhood: this is a manhood that always attempts to validate itself in both the spectrum of caste and local worldview. On a different note, it is more about how the tribal in the land are constructed as less witty and more dependent on physical strength to cope with the non-tribal's anxiety of being less powerful to fight with the challenging geography.

On a different note, Assam's chaotic socio-political history has been centered on the quest for a unique Assamese identity. Different political questions have established Assamese nationalism as a major academic concern in any research done among the community. In this regard, Chapter 4 navigates the relationship between the legacy of the Assamese nation-making project in the post-independence era, the socio-political question and the ideal model of Assamese masculinity. It is about how the idea of Assamese masculine idols has been re-framed in a constant process of re-construction of nationalist ideas in Assam in the post-independence era. It argues that there is a three-fold co-constitutive relationship of history, national identity and gender. There have been four factors of Assamese post-independence nation-making project, all delivering important insights for the construction of male models- - the quest for a unique and separate identity from the pan-Indian concept of the Indian nation, forming a racial identity which is beyond the biological understanding of biological race, the question of "son of the soil" and threat of economic and cultural domination by the outsiders.

Different events in post-independence Assam history including the Assam movement, the rise of the armed rebellion, the issue of illegal migrants, the wheel of electoral politics, has delivered strong elements for the nationalistic masculinity model of Assam. But, the most important feature relies on the ethnic politics of the state. The love for the nation and the idea of sacrifice has for long been a cherished ideal in Assamese society. The chapter argues the idea of sacrifice has constructed an image of manhood with patriarchal masculine heroism and such ideas of nationalism have represented the identity struggle of the Assamese as a patriarchal project. The historical models of sacrifice have been re-asserted from time to time through different modes to construct an own-ness among the members of the young brigade. The most notable figure in this

regard can be seen in the figure of Lachit Borphukan, an Ahom military war hero. Lachit is a reflection of the valour and strength of the Assamese youth, a cardboard figure of sacrifice and courage. This chapter deals with the contemporary accounts of Lachit Borphukan's reception as a symbol of Assamese nationalism; and how the glorification of his legend symbolizes a masculine connotation of Assamese nationalism. His figure is certainly a tale of men's resistance to the emotional dilemma on a battlefield. On a different note, his courage, bravery and successful encounter made Lachit an important symbol of the Assamese people's fight against the 'outsiders', a figure which encourages the members of the community for the nation's duty. But, simultaneously it reflects the 'ideal male' image in strengthening the question of separating Assam from mainland India.

This chapter argues that Dr Bhupen Hazarika's literary imagination of Assamese nationalism was essentially 'masculine' in the sense that it reflected distinct 'masculine' traits- sacrifice, courage, the worshipper of 'Mother Assam'. It includes four different 'masculine' motifs- *notun purush*, Lachit Borphukan, Saraighat and the river Brahmaputra or Luit. The chapter investigates the masculine frame of the nationalist philosophy of Dr Hazarika. His literary motifs like *notunpurush* have always portrayed the nationalistic masculinity theme of martyr hood. Furthermore, he silently manifested the masculine connotation in Assamese nationalism through the motif of Luit or Brahmaputra Lachit and Saraighat.

The chapter navigates the construction of a cultural icon Bishnuprasad Rava and the inherited masculine politics of a perfect male figure during an age where Assamese people desperately needed icons to cope with their threats. Bishnuprasad Rava has been a figure combining heroic personhood and a protective father.

The armed rebellion of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) reveals the militaristic imagination of Assamese nationalistic masculinity. This study focuses on tracing the 'masculine' nature of ULFA's armed rebellion through three major canons: the interconnection of patriarchy and nationalism, the militarization of nationalism and forging a separate identity from the Indian nation.

This age of militarization for more than a decade has undergone a process of 'normalization of threat and terror for the Assamese. It establishes a two-fold crisis for men. Firstly, their 'masculine' identity becomes the prime suspects of the military force and secondly, their identity of being the protector of the woman of the clan becomes vulnerable. The atrocities of the Indian

military force forced a reassertion of the idea of 'sacrifice' associated with Assamese nationalistic masculinity. Take for instance; it becomes common in contemporary times to glorify the life sacrifice of the local people in the atrocities of the Indian military force.

Furthermore, the chapter develops an argument that the rapidly changing Assamese society and the construction of nationalist discourses in the social media created cyberspace has re-imagined the old ideas like nationalism on a superficial level. It refers to a brand of masculinity that was emerged from an ultra-nationalist stage of Assamese nationalism historically built around fear, and the economic, cultural and political negligence by the Indian nation-state.

The internet has become the benchmark for defining both the self as well as the other in Assam in recent times. It projected and reinterprets different positions of individuals and re-introduced the political discourses of Assamese nationalism in a completely new manner. The hyper-reality of cyberspace certainly provides the space for the creation of a hybrid masculine sphere of Assamese cyber masculinities.

Referring to the major observation of the main chapters, it is important to foreground and examine masculinity as a trajectory of the political construction rather than merely a gender construction. One of the most important points here is to see masculinity creation as a reflection of the meaning assigned to the daily life struggle of the Assamese. Masculinities are not only an element of patriarchal domination here; it foregrounds how the Assamese constructs themselves in the challenging geography and socio-political challenges they face from different aspects. To sum up, it is observed that masculinities here among the Assamese not only reflect the gender matrix within the community but also projects a detailed picture of the nation, how they express their identity, their problems and local ideas about survival and life in the challenging geographical terrains, how they cope up with the anxieties of being in the Indian borderland and age-old threat of marginalized by central India. In the process, different masculine idols are created, re-created and manifested over the years. This they do with their age-old folkloric tradition and different cultural practices, by creating cultural icons, literary imaginations and the day-to-day practice of expressing themselves.



<sup>i</sup>*Bhadralok* literally mean ‘gentleman’, ‘well-mannered person’ in English and refers to the new class of ‘gentlefolk’ during colonial rule in Indian state of Bengal.

<sup>ii</sup>Sukapha is the first Ahom king in medieval Assam, he is known for founding the Ahom kingdom and establishing the greater Assam.

<sup>iii</sup>Sankardeva was a 15th–16th century Assamese polymath: a saint-scholar, poet, playwright, dancer, actor, musician, artist social-religious reformer and a figure of importance in the cultural and religious history of Assam

<sup>iv</sup>LachitBorphukan was a commander in the Ahom kingdom. He is, known for his leadership in the 1671 Battle of Saraighat that thwarted a drawn-out attempt by Mughal forces under the command of Ramsingh I to take over Ahom kingdom.

<sup>v</sup>LakshminathBezbaroa, was an Assamese poet, novelist and playwright of modern Assamese literature.

<sup>vi</sup> J.H. Broomfield has pointed out that various attributes of ‘*Bhadralok*’ and further elaborates the parameters which distinguishes a ‘*Bhadralok*’ from ‘Chotolok’. Some of the parameters include: someone who is the recipient of an elite education, a member of elite cultural life including learned societies, who has a taste for theatres, museums, art galleries, libraries, and someone who owns a flourishing book-publishing company, someone who exhibits a particular pattern of behavior (speech, dress, style of housing, eating habits, occupation, sense of social priority), someone belonging to the higher strata within the caste pyramid (Brahmin, Baidya and Kayastha), someone who takes pride in one’s language, someone who is deemed to be qualified to act as guardians of a great cultural tradition, someone having easy access to the urban environment of Calcutta and economically dependent upon landed rents and the professional as well as the clerical employees (Broomfield, 1969).

<sup>vii</sup>Sattradhikar is a head of monastic institutions called Sattras, who generally draw apostolic lineage from Sankardev.

<sup>viii</sup> The Treaty of Yandaboo was signed between East India Company and Burmese; it ended the first Anglo-Burmese war and starts the British Rule in Assam.

<sup>ix</sup> The ‘babus’ were the neo-urban Bengali gentleman created from the close connection with British and working under the colonial rule in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>x</sup> Nangal is an agricultural instrument used to soften the soil to create favourable conditions for seed placement and plant growth

<sup>xi</sup>SrimantaSankardev was a 15th–16th century Assamese polymath: a saint-scholar, poet, playwright, dancer, actor, musician, artist social-religious reformer and a figure of importance in the cultural and religious history of Assam, India.

<sup>xii</sup>An wrapper women wear to cover her lower body.

<sup>xiii</sup>Bihu is a set of three highly celebrated agricultural festivals of Assam including Rongali or Bohag Bihu observed in April, Kongali or Kati Bihu observed in October, and Bhogali or Magh Bihu observed in January. The Rongali Bihu is the celebrating spring festival, the Bhogali Bihu or the Magh Bihu is a harvest festival, with community feasts and the Kongali Bihu or the Kati Bihu is the sombre, thrifty one reflecting a season of short supplies and is an animistic festival.

<sup>xiv</sup>Gamocha (Gamocha/ Gamusa) which is a symbol of Assamese culture is equivalent to towel by meaning ‘Ga’ means ‘body’ and ‘mosa’ means ‘wipes’.

<sup>xv</sup>The Ambubachi Mela is an annual Hindu festival Assam, India. This yearly festival is celebrated that happens to fall during the middle of June. It is the celebration of the yearly menstruation circle of goddess Kamakhya. It is believed that the presiding goddess of the temple, Devi Kamakhya, the Mother Shakti, goes through her annual

cycle of menstruation period during this time stretch. It is also believed that during the monsoon rains the creative and nurturing power of the 'menses' of Mother Earth becomes accessible to devotees at this site during the festival.

<sup>xvi</sup> The Broiler is a chicken breed that is bred and raised specially for meat production. Traditionally Assamese people don't welcome broiler meat in their households due to the belief that it is a mix breeder between chicken and vulture.

<sup>xvii</sup> A broiler is an imported chicken that is bred and raised specifically for meat production.

<sup>xviii</sup> The hymns sung as prayer in the Namghar, the community prayer hall.

<sup>xix</sup> A rectangular piece of unstitched traditional Assamese cloth wrapped around the waist and the legs.

<sup>xx</sup> Traditional Assamese men's wear to cover his upper body.

<sup>xxi</sup> a white rectangular piece of cloth with primarily a red border on three sides and red woven motifs on the fourth. This traditional hand woven piece is considered as one of the identity markers of Assamese people.

<sup>xxii</sup> The process of religious and spiritual teaching by a neo-Vaishnavite guru.

<sup>xxiii</sup> One of the traditional rites of passage of Brahmins and Nath community that marked the acceptance of a student by a guru and an individual's entrance to a school in Hinduism. During the ceremony, a sacred thread is received by the boy that he continues wearing from left shoulder to the right crossing the chest thereafter.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Practice of gifting bride to groom's family by the bride's father or brother.

<sup>xxv</sup> The belief in Assamese society that a woman cut all relations with her maternal family with her marriage.

<sup>xxvi</sup> The Mising is a scheduled tribe community by Government of India inhabits in Assam and Arunachal. They were also known as Miris in the past and still recognized as Miris in the Constitution of India.

<sup>xxvii</sup> The secret killings of Assam (1998–2001) of Assam refers to that portion of Assam's political history when relatives, friends, sympathisers of ULFA insurgents were systematically killed by unknown assailants.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Tezpur University is considered to be one of the outcome of the Assam Accord (Signed between Indian Government and All Assam Student's Union after six years long Assam Agitation), along with Assam University and Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati.

<sup>xxix</sup> Lachit Borphukan was a commander and Borphukan in the Ahom kingdom known for his leadership in the 1671 Battle of Saraighat that thwarted a drawn-out attempt by Mughal forces under the command of Ram Singh I to take over the Ahom kingdom.

<sup>xxx</sup> Chilarai was the commander-in-chief of the army of the Kamata kingdom in the 16th century.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Joymoti, also known as Joymoti Konwari, is a celebrated princess for the native Assamese, who is a symbol of sacrifice, courage and endurance for the cause of her husband and of the nation.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Interview was taken on 18<sup>th</sup> September, 2019 of Mr. Prafulla Sharma of Bachagaon village of Lakhimpur district.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Kakopathar Killings carries the memory of killing at least 10 people by Indian Army during 2006 at a peaceful protest. This place in Tinsukia district of Assam was also believed as one of the main stations of ULFA during their active days.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Interview was taken on 19 December, 2019 of ManjitGohain (Pseudo name), from Chabua area