

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

R.W. Connell argues that there is not a single form of masculinity, but, rather that there are diverse forms of masculinities that are correlated to and reflect different positions of power (Connell, 1995). For Connell (2005), “hegemonic masculinity is defined as the current configuration of practice that legitimizes men's dominant position in society and justifies the subordination of women, and other marginalized ways of being a man”. Research on masculinity certainly alludes to masculinity’s changing structures and contexts in different environments. And yet, there are some universal ways in which masculinity continues to manifest itself. Dunphy (2000) uses the term masculinity as the set of attributes, behaviours and roles which are generally associated with boys and men. It is the result of both “biologically” created factors and socially-defined factors. For Thompson (2012), masculinity of thoughts and actions associated with “*being a man*” creates differences between the experiences of men and the experiences of women. It is discussed by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) that naturalization of ‘biological’ sex and a focus on the cultural gender shapes masculinity, even though the biological is also considered cultural today. Furthermore, Smith (2010) defines masculinity as the typical behavior of men in society.

It is quite a debated topic whether masculinity is natural or nurtured. Biological research has spoken about masculine characteristics and the sexual orientation process as being specific to the human reproductive system. Moniot et al. (2009) proved by the biological research done under the Company of Biologist Limited that SRY protein in the Y chromosome which activates the SOX9 protein is critical for male sexual development. On the other hand, the construction of the masculine identity of a child is also debated. Some scholars like Reeser (2010) claim that masculinity is linked to male genitalia and does not have a single source. But, some recent research like that of Pletzeret et al. (2015) with their study on the use of steroid hormones by men in different cultures, argue that the concept of masculinity is different in different cultures and societies. Sand et al. (2008) have discussed that in modern times, especially from the beginning of the twentieth century, masculinity has been constructed in a family with the image

of men as fulfilling the demand of his family, having good health, harmonious family life and maintaining a good relationship with his spouse. Furthermore, Lloyd (1993) refers to masculinity as a project of individual personhood and expressed via the need to distinguish between the self (male subject) and the other.

One of the ideas that I try to develop in this thesis is that the images of public figures and various cultural symbols linked with masculinities serve to tie a community together in a bond of unity. For example, military men are generally the glorified heroes of postwar society and the image of heroism is traditionally linked with masculinity; the image of a man with a gun in hand might be the symbol of masculinity in those societies at that point in time; it could also represent the rite of passage from boyhood to manhood. Celebrating the heroes of society invariably shapes the image of masculinity in that society. However, this heroism is itself a construction based on the ideology and perspective of one dominant group in society; in other words, while patriarchal ideology itself may vary from community to community, it invariably shapes the ideas of the heroism of every community.

1.1 Historiography of Masculinity Research: The theory of masculinities has multiple origins. The theoretical underpinnings of masculinities are an amalgamation of contributions of the different aspects of society, all working to establish male supremacy in gender dynamics. In the introduction of her book *Masculinities*, Connell (2005) refers to three major issues compelling her to launch a study on masculinities: Women's Liberation Movement and Men's Liberation movement in the 1970s and reformation of the 'male sex role', multiple patterns of masculinity and femininity among teenagers and the gay men's life and social dimensions of AIDS. She describes her contribution to the theory of masculinities as "One of the things I hoped to do in *Masculinities* was to show that studies of masculinities and men's gender practices formed a comprehensible field of knowledge (though not an autonomous science) (Connell, 2005). I tried to show its history, its context, its conceptual dilemmas, and some of its practical consequences. This field has, of course, continued to develop" (Connell, 2005).

Masculinity Studies is comparatively a very new inclusion to the gender academia. It can be traced back to thirty-forty years. As an academic practice, the sociologist and the anthropologist study the lives of men and masculinities from two different canons. Anthropologists study men with a detailed study on a cross-cultural project to find out different modes of behaviour among

men. For them, masculinities vary in different cultural settings and there are some universal gender features. On the other hand, the sociological inquiry of masculinities relies on studying attributes, attitudes and behaviours appropriate for men. It is explained through its relation with technology, aggression, violence and competition.

Masculinity as a branch of academic research was noticed much later than femininity due to its social recognition as a normal thing and consumer of power. But works like *The Male Machine* (1974) by Feigen-Fasteau, *Liberated Man* (1975) by Warren Farrell, Joseph Pleck and Jack Sawyer's *Men and Masculinity* (1974) have introduced different problems of men and masculinities.

Joseph Pleck in his book *The Myth of Masculinity* (1981) introduced 'sex-role strain' among men. Through this approach, he discussed how men are portrayed as 'problematic' and 'deviant' creating no scope for studies on men's problems in academic parlance. This approach has opened the window to analyze masculinity as complex, multiple rather than a singular one. It started the new dimension to study how masculinities are different for each man and how there is a vast scope of studying masculinities across regions, peoples and academic canons. Afterwards, different academic writings have worked to create a theoretical approach to study men and masculinities across the world. Some of the noticeable mentions can be stated as Michael Kimmel's *Changing Men: New Directions in Research on Men and Masculinities* (1987), Harry Brod's *The Making of Masculinities* (1987), Tim Carrigan, R.W Connell, and Joh Lee's *Towards a New Sociology of Masculinity* (1985), and Jeff Hearn's *The Gender of Oppression* (1987).

R.W. Connell in her extensive study on masculinities across the globe has successfully established how masculinities are multiple rather than singular. She has developed a strong argument through several books including *Gender and Power* (1987), *The Science of Masculinity* (1995), *Masculinities* (1993), *The men and the boys* (2000).

From a sociological perspective, researchers are more concerned about masculinity in everyday life, the relevance of institutions and economic structures in the shaping of masculinity, and the differences, contradictions, similarities and dynamic nature of masculinity. Since its inception, masculinity research can be classified into several stages - Male Gender Role Theory by Joseph Pleck, the development of the concept of the centrality of male power to dominant ways of being a man, the development of the concept of hegemonic masculinity and the influence of feminist post-structuralism and theories of post modernity.

Studying about Indian masculinities, new theoretical approaches have developed in the recent years. While trying to sum up the nature of the masculinity studies in India, Rohit K. Dasgupta and K. Moti Gokulsing explain,

One of the most important areas of research in gender and postcolonial studies is the analysis of indigenous masculinities within colonial contexts. This contour of exploration foregrounds the gendered, race and class dynamics of colonialism and nationalism and also provides opportunities for alternative gender practices that challenge hegemonic structures of white, middle-class patriarchy. In theorizing the production of masculinities in postcolonial systems, it is useful to remember that an interplay between power and structure creates hegemonies which in turn transform indigenous ideologies of gender and power. Questions around representations are central to an understanding of postcolonial masculinities. Masculinities in the colonies were created and perpetuated as a contrast to the colonizers' own masculinity (Dasgupta & Gokulsing, 2014).

The question of the historical formation of gender during the colonial period and the concept of masculine identity carries serious insights to study the constructions of Indian nation. As a form of gender practice, masculinity carries a significant impact on historical writing by making provisions for national identity. And, therefore, apart from examining the gender realm, it encodes the political and ideological constructions of different nations within India.

Mrinalini Sinha (1995) in *Colonial masculinity The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century* writes

.....For colonial masculinity points towards the multiple axes along which power was exercised in colonial India: among or within the colonisers and the colonised as well as between colonisers and colonised. Neither the colonisers nor the colonised represented homogenous groups; there were not only important internal hierarchies of class, gender, and status within each group, but also alliances across various axes that in fact helped fashion the opposition between colonial and nationalist politics. Indeed, Colonial Masculinity reframes, from the perspective of the uneven and contradictory intersection of various axes of power, the dynamics between colonialism and nationalism, on the one hand, and between colonial Indian and metropolitan British society, on the other. It thus recontextualises some of the major colonial controversies of the late nineteenth century in India.

On a different note, the various sub-nationalisms of India have influenced academic studies of various nationalistic masculinities.

1.2 Introducing the Problem:

The researcher has to investigate the frameworks which are constructed through different social institutions rather than studying the immediate texts in which the narratives are embedded in isolation. So, a gender studies scholar has to unravel the politics of patriarchal society to find out the roots of the constructed images of masculinity and femininity. It is on this premise that I begin my thesis on masculine identity of Assamese community to find out two larger questions. Firstly, my intention was to look at the politics of masculinity creation which encompasses different aspects of creating gender in the community. And, secondly, I intended to examine the interconnection of masculine gender and the society.

While gender as an academic practice has become multi-dimensional in the current intellectual discourses, it is essential to interpret the gendered identity of living men change and are re-interpreted in different regions of India and then connect these to the socio-political context of the nation. I therefore, situate myself at the intersection of intellectual debates regarding being a man and construction of manhood.

Assamese masculinity (the image of masculinity among the Assamese speaking community) is based on the images of the *Ideal Assamese Man* created by the cultural institutions of media, folklore, and literature which are shaped by patriarchy. Furthermore, important socio-political events that took place from the nineteenth century have powerfully shaped the current account of masculinity in Assamese society. These attributes of masculinity can be seen in the respective discourses that have emanated from each of these movements. It is important to mention that the questions of ethnicity are important to bear in mind any respective academic discourses on gender and society in Assam. It appears to be imperative for ethnicity to draw upon both legendary and contemporary accounts of masculinity to mobilize people for a particular socio-political cause.

The researcher is aware of the raging ongoing debate about who is an Assamese; there are still serious differences about whether Assamese identity should be linguistically or geographically defined. I am also aware of the multiple ethnicities that constitute the state. However, in this study, I propose to use the term 'Assamese' in its linguistic sense (all the people speaking the

Assamese language) for two reasons. Firstly, a study of masculinity across the diverse communities of Assam would greatly enlarge the scope of the work. Such a study will not be possible for the limited duration of time at my disposal for my work. Secondly, all the texts in the thesis belong to the Assamese language and it will be good to refer to it as Assamese masculinity. But, it is important to state here that the term 'Assamese' refers to all the people who live here in the state of Assam and to date no proper definition of the Assamese has yet been decided on. I choose to work on the Assamese society from the 19th century onwards for my study since the nineteenth and twentieth centuries marked the most important phase when Assamese identity gathered momentum, was redefined and re-invented for several reasons.

Assam is said to be a comparatively backward state in comparison to the other states of the country, it contains some of the most remote and challenging geographical terrains of the country. Yet, it is famous for its vast diversity and colourful amalgamation of cultures of different ethnicities. It reflects enormous variety of folkloric material. The traditional communities of Assam have not completely given up their warrior past and they are still proud of their martial legacies. The society has not completely abandoned its traditional lifestyle by depending on agriculture.

The origin of all aspects of Assamese masculinity can be explained historically as a result of its challenging geographical questions, the contradictions of modernity and tradition, the ethnic questions and the colonial rule. Different periods and historical events like Ahom Rule and the spread of Neo-Vaishnavism by Sankardeva have also shaped the concept of masculinity among the Assamese. But, since the 19th century, Assamese society has come under the influence of both the British colonizers and of Bengali society. Thus, ideas of Bengali masculinity influenced the Assamese to a great extent concerning food habits and dress. The colonial experience also shaped the identities of the Assamese people. During and after colonial rule, old and traditional customs lost their appeal; different dresses, food items, images were introduced, and these started to become the new form of Assamese culture. In this regard, the normative idea of Assamese masculinity also changed.

1.3 Objectives of the study:

In this sense, this thesis is an attempt to fill the existing vacuum in the study of Assamese masculinities in particular by offering a grounded ethnographic analysis of different aspects of masculinity in the state. It foregrounds the unique features, problems and depth of the Assamese socio-political scenario from a gendered perspective. The study, therefore, tries to address questions about how the idea of Assamese has influenced masculinity in Assam. It foregrounds what socio-political questions highly work for gender creation of the Assamese and how masculinities can reflect the changing socio-political question of Assam. The most important addition to the masculinity analysis of Assam is the assessment of how it reflects the local geographical terrain, borderland tensions which are immensely relevant in the present in shaping and understanding the image of the Assamese.

In this regard, the above research questions has led to frame my research objectives as follows

1. Critically analyse the concept of masculinity among the Assamese-speaking community, particularly in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries based on readings of select cultural texts and examining them from a gender and media discourse perspective.
2. Analyse the changes in the trends of masculinity.

The above objectives are examined through three-tier methodological underpinnings. Firstly, I offer auto ethnography, being an insider of the community. Secondly, I examine different cultural images, icons and historical incidents. These two methodologies have supported me to find out the image of an ideal man in society. Thirdly, through the reading of the previous two methods, I try to analyse larger social questions like historical formation, caste, class and the changing patterns of masculinities in the present era.

1.4 Methodological consideration:

This study has adopted a multidisciplinary approach to examine the above objectives and research questions. The theoretical perspective of Cultural Studies encourages its researchers to adopt a wide range of tools and techniques to study a particular research question. For Nelson et al. (1992)

.....The methodology of cultural studies provides an equally uneasy marker, for cultural studies in fact has no distinct methodology, no unique statistical, ethno-methodological, or textual analysis to call its own. Its methodology, ambiguous from the beginning, could

best be seen as a bricolage. Its choice of practice, that is, is pragmatic, strategic, and self-reflective.....The choice of research practices depends upon the questions that are asked, and the questions depend on their context. It is problematic for cultural studies simply to adopt, uncritically, any of the formalized disciplinary practices of the academy, for those practices, as much as the distinctions they inscribe, carry with them a heritage of disciplinary investments and exclusions and a history of social effects that cultural studies would often be inclined to repudiate.

Referring to the methodological framework of cultural studies, I tried to understand how the meaning of 'being masculine' are generated, re-generated and historically, socially and politically manifested in Assam. On a different note, encompassing the methodological framework as the link between research and broader epistemological and ontological questions, researching men and masculinities has been using different research methods. For, Hearn (2013),

There is nothing new or intrinsically 'good' or 'bad' about studying men and masculinities: 'it ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it.' *Doing Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities (CSMM)* presents continuities and discontinuities with other research approaches, both non-feminist and feminist. Studying men raises recurring issues of methods and methodology. Many different research methods have been used in these studies, including social surveys; statistical analyses; ethnographies; interviews; memory work; qualitative, discursive, deconstructive, textual and visual analyses; as well as mixed methods.

With the awareness that every social discourse has, directly and indirectly, affect the creation of gender identity, the thesis has adopted an amalgamation of research including historical, social, folklore, media, literature and so on. It attempts to look at the constructions of masculinities in two ways. Firstly, an attempt has been made to understand how the ideas of masculinities are created. Secondly, the thesis aims to understand how these ideas are moulded and re-moulded for various socio-political aspects of Assam. The first objective mainly involves a self-ethnographic account of the researcher that covered the local perception of being an 'ideal man' in Assamese society; it also encompasses different folkloric texts to support the various aspects of ethnography. Carolyn Ellis (2004) describes

Auto ethnography refers to writing about the personal and its relationship to culture. It is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness....First they look through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal; experience; then they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract and resist cultural interpretations. As they zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition.....They showcase concrete action, dialogue, emotion embodiment, spirituality, and self-consciousness. These features appear as relational and institutional stories affected by history and social structure which themselves are dialectically revealed through actions, feelings, thoughts and language.

Since the study deals with auto ethnographic accounts of my insider position; daily life, social practices, discourses created through using folkloric texts and speeches, local beliefs, social events are among the sources that are taken into account while examining the process and construction of an 'ideal man' in Assamese society. Following this, I also adopted a qualitative analysis of some of the oral and written works of literature which reflect the local beliefs and ideas about being a man. It helps the study to provide substantial materials to both observe the construction of local ideas of masculinities and at the same time, offer materials to find out the uniqueness of Assamese masculinity. The oral and literary texts on the other hand threw light on how historically Assamese masculinity has been re-imagined in certain socio-political contexts.

While the auto ethnographic research with the help of oral and written literature focuses on the construction of the ideal image of man; in order to measure the changing pattern of the idea of masculinities, this thesis looks at the impact of history in manifestation and re-moulding the idea across different times. Reading gender through the historical construction of the society here demands a study on the political history of Assam. It foregrounds the colonial and pre-colonial historical narratives to find out how certain historical narratives are used to construct the 'ideal image' of man to fulfill certain political purposes. Pickering (2008) says,

.... Some of the most important work in cultural studies has been informed by thinking in historical terms, whether this has been manifest in tracing the lineaments of social criticism, the realisation of popular resistance and creativity in the past, the long-term linkages between media development, democracy and structures of power, the recurrent

waves of social fears and anxieties among the middle classes, or the bearings that imperial social relations have had on the development of national identity.....It conceives of history as a broad set of resources for studying everyday cultures in the past and as a broad set of techniques and strategies for thinking about historical experience and representation in the present. The two-way focus this involves is intended to address the ways in which history shapes and informs current cultural practices and formations, and the ways in which history is only accessible to us analytically through our cultural participations and understandings in the present.

Discourse analysis was primarily applied to provide a systematic account of how the idea of being an 'ideal man' is manifested in the social situation and local knowledge. Barker (2008) refers to Chris Barker and Dariusz Galasinski (2001), "The critical discourse analysis includes a range of philosophical positions (about self and identity, about the nature and role of language in society, and about the wish for cultural studies to 'give voice' to disadvantaged and silenced groups), and which derive from a pantheon of recognised theorists (Saussure, Pierce, Wittgenstein, Barthes, Hall, Foucault, Lacan, Butler, and so on)." It provides a conceptual framework to encompass local knowledge, history and gender paradox altogether in the thesis. Alongside the discourses created by written and oral media, the thesis also encompasses the social media site, Facebook, as a space for creating discourses in the twenty-first century.

1.5 Limitations of the Study: At the very outset, it is important to point out that researching a topic that formulates insights on the construction of a particular gender and its manifestation throughout more than a decade is not easy. The biggest difficulty I faced throughout the research was to decide on a historical timeline to focus on the most important aspects of masculinities about the socio-political history of Assam and the Assamese. However, even though tempted on many occasions, I have refrained from stretching my area beyond some particular genres of folklore and some important aspects and incidents of history. Moreover, I also refrained from studying every period and focused on those periods which have played important role in the construction of an 'ideal man' figure. As such, certain aspects and time frames have not been elaborately tackled in the study. The aim of completing the work within the specified time allowed by the university compelled me to stick to certain objectives only. On another note, minimum time and the Covid pandemic did not allow me to access some of the important texts

and resource persons. Another obstacle I found during the research was on finding existing literature on masculinities in the region. Hence, although I have tried to cover all the major aspects of masculinities of the Assamese, a few might have escaped the analysis due to several mentioned reasons. Thirdly, maintaining my objectivity as a researcher in a study based on my nation and maintaining the independent position of researcher amidst the burning political questions such as the debates and political manifestation of sub-nationalism, insider-outsider debate, was one of the biggest challenges I faced. With all these constraints, throughout the thesis, I tried my best to maintain its objectivity and articulate the arguments through the analysis of my auto ethnographic account and different primary and secondary texts.

1.6 Brief Outline of the Chapters: The thesis contains five chapters, inclusive of the introduction and the conclusion chapters. The first chapter is an introduction to the thesis. Rather than going for a long review of literature in the introductory chapter itself, I have laid down my literature review in the introduction of each respective chapter. The first chapter includes the theoretical background of the study, the key arguments, objective and methodological considerations that grounded my work. It also outlines the obstacles I have faced during the research period.

The second chapter titled “Image of an ‘Ideal man’ in Assamese society: Dangoriya as a figure reflecting pre-British civility in Assamese society ” tries to establish a particular local term *dangoriya* as an emblem for referring to masculinities in Assamese society and understanding the signification of the term in the local worldview. It encompasses how *dangoriya* has been in the Assamese folklore and local knowledge as a reflection of the ‘respected man’. It also focuses on the historiography of the term in history through official documents, newspapers, written literature during and after the Ahom regime. Referring to the political use of the term, the chapter tries to discuss how *dangoriya* is characteristically embedded with the hegemonic masculine traits of Assamese man; owing to its signification in the folklore of Assam; and, there has been a constant politics of re-moulding and re-construction of the term for vested political motives. Hence, this chapter provides a basic understanding of the possibilities of a critical study on masculinities of the region through the figure *dangoriya*.

The third chapter titled “Assamese Masculine Identity: Tradition, Oral History and Folklore” is based on the researcher’s auto-ethnographical account and examines how masculinities are created through different folkloric expressions in Assamese society. It encompasses daily life practices along with different folkloric genres to find out how masculinity in the Assamese society is a complex idea of men’s psychology, private and social life, performances in agricultural production and so on. It contains a separate analysis of some of the folkloric genres by linking it with a particular masculinity trait. In this chapter, I also try to understand how larger social entities like caste and class play a vital role in the construction of the masculine gender. I tried to look at how masculinities not only reflect the gender matrix in Assamese society; but, they also work as the agents of social parameters of caste.

The fourth chapter titled “Emergence of the “New Man”: Assamese Nationalistic Masculinity in Post-Independent India” is an attempt to address the relationship between the Assamese ideal masculine model and the legacy of the Assamese nation-making project in the post-independence era. It also focuses on the different chaotic and restless socio-political questions which provided the scope for the emergence of new masculine models in Assamese society. The chapter basically aims to find out different politics of re-framing of masculine idols which have been a great deal to do with the changing scenario of socio-political changes in Assam due course of the post-independence era. Throughout the chapter, I have analyzed different metaphors of post-independence Assamese masculinity and how it reflects the changing socio-political scenario of the Assam state.

The fifth chapter is the conclusion of the study and it contains the key findings of the thesis. Following the analyses in the previous chapters, it summaries that the Assamese masculinity or Assamese masculine Identity is a combination of different social, political and geographical factors of the region. It is the geography of the land, which plays the most vital part in the construction of an “ideal Assamese man”; but, throughout the years, it has been remoulded and re-imagined based on different socio-political questions.

1.7: Introducing key terms

Nationalistic Masculinity: As a genre of masculinity, nationalistic masculinity is understood as the attributes that interlink nationalism and masculine symbolism and cultural urge. It refers to

the duties of the members of “imagined communities” to safeguard the nation. It includes the historical and contemporary connection between manhood and nationhood, construction of patriotic manhood, the dominant masculine culture in interest and ideology of a nation.

Hegemonic Masculinity: As a theoretical concept of gender matrix, hegemonic masculinity refers to the practice of legitimizing men’s dominant position in society and helps men to become dominant in social roles. It overthrows the possibilities of women and other marginalized men to achieve a dominant position in the societal gender ladder.

Id: In Freudian psychology, Id refers to the instinctual component of an individual personality which reflects bodily needs and wants, emotional impulses and desires, especially aggression and the libido.

Unconscious: In Freud psychology, the unconscious refers to repressed desires of an individual which includes include feelings, thoughts, urges, and memories that are outside of conscious awareness.

Oral History: In historical research, oral history refers to the study of history through oral documents. Generally, it is about the experience of any incident, period or culture someone tells somebody else. It becomes important to study the history of some particular groups which has been relied on oral tradition to preserve and record their past and have the absence of written documents of the history.

Sub Nationalism: Sub nationalism can be defined as the aspirations of a particular community to express their identity differ from the collective nation. It allows them to represent the interests of their state or province as separate from the nation’s collective interests.

Cultural Icon: Cultural icon refers to any person or artefact recognized by the members of a culture as the representative of their culture. Through a subjective process of identification, these icons are certified as authentic symbols of the culture by the people.

Bhadralok: A new class of gentlemen aroused under British rule in the Bengal state of India. They are considered the group that brought western modernity to India.