

CHAPTER 2

IMAGE OF AN 'IDEAL MAN' IN ASSAMESE SOCIETY: DANGORIYA AS A FIGURE REFLECTING PRE-BRITISH CIVILITY IN ASSAMESE SOCIETY

In modern-day academic parlance, any discursive attempt to investigate the mores of masculinity must not be misconstrued as a one-dimensional proposition. Connell explores the heterogeneity of masculinity studies across the world (Connell, 2005). According to her, characteristically masculinities are pluralistic configurations and should be studied through a multidimensional framework (Connell, 1987). Based on an extensive review of the existing works on masculinities from different parts of the world i.e. Japan (Roberson & Suzuki, 2003), Australia (Tomsen & Donalson, 2003), Southern Africa (Worth et al., 2002) (Law et al. 1999) (Morrell, 2001), Latin America (Gutmann, 2001), The Middle East (Ghoussoub & Sinclair-Webb, 2000), France (Welzer-Lang, 2000), Germany (Bosse & King, 2000), Rural region (Campbell & Bell, 2000); Connell has attempted to demystify the existing contours of masculinity studies.

Since the dawn of human civilization, historically the patriarchal foundation of the family has favoured men to engage themselves with the larger questions of politics, geography and society. Further, a given society moulds the local male-centric 'ideals', often influenced by a wide range of factors like geography, collective ideology and history. The multi-dimensional and multi-cultural constitution of the Indian nation-state often adds to the complexity regarding the formulation of the idea(s) of masculinities in an Indian context. It is quite plausible that a diverse set of historical lineage(s), cultural and linguistic plurality and diversity of terrain qualifies for a multi-dimensional approach towards the study of masculinities encapsulating diverse regions in India.

As a comparatively recent field of academic investigation, the advancement of masculinity research in India till date can be distinguished in its application to interpret the elemental structures of relationships that are closely interconnected with the gendered regimes to uphold a distinct national identity often influenced by various socio-cultural factors. For instance, the rich

military lineage of Punjab province has influenced the masculinity research of the region drawn towards the aspects such as martial caste status, land ownership, dominant caste syndrome, good physique and physical prowess. One notable mention in this regard could be Prem Chowdhry's study concerning how the British Indian army had influenced the martial caste status, and the military recruitment has structurally and ideologically continued to do so, thereby reinforcing those colonial principles, and its existing trends of masculinity in Punjab (Chowdhry, 2015). On the other hand, Ramaswami Mahalingam has discussed the cultural beliefs about men deemed to be machismo, chaste and link with caste identity (Mahalingam, 2007). The historical lineage with the Mughal Empire and internalized caste structure in village areas, too have influenced the masculinity studies in North India. Prem Chowdhry has worked extensively on the male spaces in village and the deployment of power through all-male spaces (Chowdhry, 2014), other issues include gender identity and manhood in the great Indian Mughal Empire (O'Hanlon, 1999), hegemonic masculinity and the paradox of hierarchies within the dominant structure of masculinities based on caste, class and gender (Chowdhry, 2015). Towards the southern part of India, the existing internal social structure in rural platforms has influenced the aspects of South Indian masculinity research to a great extent. Issues like work, cross-sex relationships, sexuality, men's friendships, religious practices and leisure relating to men's life is discussed by Caroline Osella & Filippo Osella (Osella & Osella, 2006). One of the few articles written on masculinities from Northeast India delves into the historical construction of masculinity of Nagaland; as a race of pre-modern savage warriors with their 'headhunting' practices. For Wilkinson, Naga masculinity navigates myriad structures and scales of identity (Wilkinson, 2017). On the other hand, Geraldine Forbes emphasized on construction of masculinity in colonial and missionary encounter with the people of the Naga (Forbes, 2017). But, the gender academia in India has worked extensively on Bengali masculinity or the image of *Bhadralok*ⁱ. Masculinity studies in Bengal could be referred to as the pioneer in the field of urbanity studies that emerged during colonial rule. Different scholars have worked extensively on the Bengali man to understand the emergence of elite politics in India through different parameters like the colonial-colonizer's creation of Indian males and influx of western modernity (Broomfield, 1969), (Ghosh, 2016), (Sinha & Bhattacharya, 1969), (Basu & Banerjee, 2006), (Bhattacharya, 2005), (Sinha, 1995).

The socio-political history of Assam has mostly been the history of men under patriarchal patronage. From the great Ahom king Sukaphaⁱⁱ, who is often credited as the founding father of

the Assamese nation-state, the great saint Sankaradevaⁱⁱⁱ who had, through his democratic principles established a larger egalitarian Assamese society under the umbrella of one religious ideology, the legendary General in the Ahom kingdom, Lachit Borphukan^{iv} who had gloriously defended his motherland against the military aggression of the mighty Mughals, the martyrs and the freedom fighters (to free Assam and the rest of India from the British colonial rule), the new-age fighters in their 'quest for identity, the history of Assam always represented as men's history. Even, the presence of women figures like Mulagabhoru (a woman warrior of Ahom kingdom who had fought bravely against an invading army in 1532) or Kanaklata Barua (a young freedom fighter who was nearly 14 years old only, when she was martyred while leading a procession during the Indian Independence struggle in 1942) could not seriously challenge the patriarchal nature of Assam history nor dismiss it as exclusively men's history. It must be noted that even though, Assamese men continue to occupy the lion's share in all its epoch-making historical periods, but, a detailed account of masculinity studies has been absent from the annals of Assamese academia, accounts of men representing their issues have not been discussed like other parts of Indian region till date in an organized way.

Sonya Lipsett-Rivera, in her study on the Colonial Mexican Macho man, has highlighted how men occupy only "a formulaic role-cardboard figure dominating their wives, daughters and mistresses" (Rivera, 2019) and refers to Steve Stern's argument about stereotyping of men as "the explosively violent, virile man who dominates women and other men. Quick to anger, his passions are deadly". The rich patriarchal folkloric tradition of Assam has stereotyped the image of Assamese male as the virile counterpart of women and nature, a sole breadwinner and shelter provider for the family, one who enjoys exclusive dominion in the public sphere, somebody who has ascended to the status of a guardian of women and culture and is a devoted worshiper of 'Mother Assam'. But, different academic studies on the socio-political history of Assam open up a multi-dimensional scope of studying the masculinities of the region. For instance, Assam and its socio-political history has been studied through various canons like women's subordination through the instrumental change of patriarchy by colonial baggage of ideas and policies (Deka, 2013); the armed rebellion of Assamese people as the instrument of resistance within the statist paradigm of postcolonial India; raising the voice of dissent concerning unequal representation, myriad contestations concerning governance, citizenship, making of a nation-state and the adequate representation of the smaller ethnic groups (Mahanta, 2013) and the influences of

various colonial establishments with an ambition of becoming more affluent and subsequent revival of the age-old anxiety of domination (Gohain, 1973). Such availability of academic works provides a fertile ground for a multi-dimensional approach for unravelling the aspects of masculinities in the region. Assamese masculinities in this regard have manifested into a hierarchical pattern corresponding to status and ethnicity, thereby showcasing their masculine attributes and image. As, Rivera (2019) has pointed out “In many colonial societies, a hierarchy of both status and ethnicity forced man to exhibit a masculinity deemed appropriate for their place.” For her, a typical colonial man adopts certain attitudes and conducts himself with mannerisms seemingly appropriate to their social rank which eventually engenders the pluralistic nature of masculinities (Rivera, 2019).

Mrinalini Sinha in her study on ‘Effeminate Bengali and manly Englishmen’ of the colonial era also points out “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 helped fashion the opposition between colonial and nationalist politics” (Sinha, 1995).

It is in such a context, that I propose the term ‘*Dangoriya*’, a culturally loaded term, as the signifier of the idea of Assamese masculinity for two reasons. The word ‘*Bhadralok*’ also figures in the Assamese vocabulary. However, the term ‘*Bhadralok*’ has already gained a wider currency, notably amongst the scholars corresponding to Bengali identity; therefore, the cultural specificity of this very term in another context renders it susceptible to misinterpretation. Secondly, I would like to contend that the term ‘*Dangoriya*’ is more apt to convey the sense of masculinity in the greater cultural context of Assam. The word ‘*Dangoriya*’ echoes 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.

In popular Assamese lexicon, one may find the term ‘*Dangoriya*’ for a long time. Most notably, a two-level officer of the state in the Ahom kingdom (Burhagohain, Borgohain, Borpatra Gohain) was conferred with this term (Sharma, 2017) (Neog, 1962). It is interesting to find the dynamic signification of the term *Dangoriya* in different context of Assam history; it has remained in vogue, often pregnant with multiple connotations. From the popular folkloric imagination in rural landscape to the literary imagination amongst the English-educated

Assamese people (Bezbaroa's literature^v), from modern-day discourses in social gatherings to the articulation of public speech by various present-day political leaders, such a dynamic term possibly holds more connotations corresponding to the heterogeneous subject of masculinities.

Etymologically, the term '*Dangoriya*' is derived from the word *dangor*, which carries multiple connotations such as *Shrestha lok*; *manyobyokti* (a nobleman; a respectable man), *Manyolok*, *bixistobyokti*, *shresthabajesthalok* (Honoured gentleman), *Manyoborlok*, *borlok* (a respectable man, a nobleman, a grandee), *Borlok*, *shrestha ba manyo manuh*, *mahasay* (a nobleman, sir, a grandee) (Sharma, 2017) (Neog & Goswami, 1962). A *Dangoriya*, according to different Assamese dictionaries published during different periods of modern-day history is attributed to be the signifier of *shrestha* (best), *manyo* (respectable), *bixisto* (honoured), *jestha* (elder) (Sharma, 2017). Yet, it would be difficult to equate the term as a direct equivalent to English Gentlemen or even '*Bhadralok*' in Bengali masculinity. In the existing volume of literature on normative Bengali masculinity, the term '*Bhadralok*' occupies a significant usage. As a result, figuring the word *Bhadralok* in Assamese vocabulary is subjected to misinterpretation; since *Bhadralok* has already gained a popular acceptance amongst the scholars concerning Bengali identity. Therefore negotiating the notions of Bengali masculine identity between the colonial construction of what was deemed to be national 'effeminate man with knowledge' and the ethnic/local notion of men with physical strength, courage and virility (Chattopadhyay, 2011) offers ample scope for undertaking a study that attempts to re-examine the position of the term *Dangoriya* within the existing Assamese lexicon; and its validity as the cultural signifier of what could be deemed as an 'ideal' Assamese masculine head.

2.1 *Bhadralok* or *Dangoriya*: A pertinent question

J.H. Broomfield in his pioneering research on the elitist conflict in Bengal with extensive reading on the nature of status conflict in nineteenth-century Bengal elucidates various factors that construct the '*Bhadralok*' (Broomfield, 1969). The availability of the term '*Bhadralok*' in Assamese vocabulary and close geographical proximity of the two states i.e. West Bengal and Assam certainly had its appeal for appropriating the term '*Bhadralok*' as a signifier of socially respected man in Assam as well. But, a meticulous reading of the term '*Bhadralok*' in academic research (Broomfield, 1969) (Ghosh, 2016) and the ethnographic accounts of Assamese society disqualifies such an assumption. In this regard, based on the critical evaluation of the

characteristics of masculinity in Assam, I would like to propose another term i.e. ‘*Dangoriya*’ as a more adequate term. The ‘*Bhadralok-Dangoriya*’ question is also pertinent from various other aspects like the Assamese people’s century-old quest to prove themselves as a distinct nationality from their Bengali counterparts; likewise, there is the language debate concerning the Assamese script being a distinct form from the Bengali script, and so on. But, the present analysis attempts to propose a more appropriate term for Assamese masculinity based on the existing documentation and a literary and ethnographic account.

“Assamese identity politics has been trapped in the world of appearances, migration, language and cultural narrative of being exploited by the outsiders, including from its neighbouring states and countries such as Bengal in the recent centuries” (Sarmah, 2021). “Moreover, there are different political events that have further worked and transformed the image of the ‘Assamese masculine man’ to a figure which protects the ‘mother nation’, ex. war heroes such as Lachit and Chilarai” (Sarmah, 2021). In the subsequent centuries, the various other factors like age, knowledge, patriotism, sound economy, the legacy of the Neo-Vaishnavite tradition (which is one of the most important aspects of Assamese social life), all these too have far-reaching consequences in the workings of constituting the ‘perfect image of a man’ in rural Assamese society. Such grounded picture of Assamese society and the recent discourses which shaped the idea of ‘Assamese’ through different canons like the aspirations of ethno linguistic nationalism and the anxiety of the outsiders, is quite a precise indication about the need for a different conceptual framework to attempt any discursive study on the masculine gender in Assam.

The traditional framework previously employed with regard to the parameters of a *Bhadralok*^{vi} will not simply do any justice. While projecting ‘*Dangoriya*’ as the lexical emblem of Assamese society, it follows a similar mechanism with ‘*Bhadralok*’ i.e. as a subjective analytical category; the word has to confront several obstacles. Firstly, its root as a social group may face disagreement from different individuals with different experiences. Furthermore, *Dangoriya* does not follow certain qualities of cultural embodiment of (like *Bhadralok* owns significant qualifications like educational merit or professional qualification (J.H. Bromfield has calculated what could be deemed to be ‘*Bhadralok* population’ as somewhere between 3 to 4 per cent in 1900) (Bromfield, 1969). *Dangoriya* is definitely a more inclusive category.

In Assam, approximately 86 percent of her total population still resides in the rural areas of the state, unlike 68 percent in Bengal; according to 2011 Census data (Census of India, 2011). It

must be noted that an ordinary ‘rural’ Assamese life is deeply influenced by the existing folklore and the inherited folk culture. While looking through the lens of Max Webber’s theory of class stratification, we may observe that individuals who qualify as *Dangoriya* do not share the same economic position, but they do enjoy the same prestige and position. Such social respect and the reverence as *Dangoriya* go hand in hand in Assamese society unlike the *Chotolok-Bhadralok* distinction in Bengali society. The term *Dangoriya* connotes multiple meanings in different speech acts and socio-cultural contexts; as a second person salutation, it refers to the greetings and respect that people offer to one another. Such usage is very common in any speech act between two elites; as it is highly rooted in Assamese traditional life, as a mark of reverence towards the people belonging to the elite class who commands a great socio-cultural capital, thereby often deemed to be a worthy recipient of such a projection of being a highly respected Assamese man. On the other hand, in some of the writings of Laxminath Bezbaroa, and in some of his public addresses in front of august audiences, the term is also used in the third person.

For example, in a formal public gathering, the respected person is felicitated as

Atia ami amar manoniyo atithi Dangoriyak hambhason jonabolois loisu

(Meaning: And now, we are going to felicitate our respected guest!).

Ghosh argues about the Bengali *Bhadralok* that only the *Bhadralok* mythology remains which mark the status of an educated Bengali Middle Class (Ghosh, 2016). But, *Dangoriya* has been constant for Assam. From the newly arrived administrative officers during the last decades of the 19th century to the new-age political leaders of the last decades of the 20th century, the concept of an ‘ideal man’, who is to be revered in Assamese society has undergone several transformations during different periods of the past; but the legacy of *Dangoriya* as a signifier of esteemed salutation towards a male person has remained constant. Owing to Assam’s troubled history, replete with upheavals of varying magnitudes, and the political confrontations with the Indian state have indeed metamorphosed the concept of an elite ‘real’, ‘respected’ man from often being someone who is either “English educated, social reformer, or intellectual” to identifying someone as “the real son of the motherland”; here also, the term ‘*Dangoriya*’ has continued enjoying the earlier reverence side by side in both the cases. Basically, it denotes two connotations; firstly, the deeply embedded image in the folklore, and the image of an elite

created as an alter-ego to *Bhadralok* by the English educated Bengal return Assamese middle class during the 19th century. Both these historical developments will be discussed in the later part of this chapter.

Assamese people are often considered to be emotional. In a state like Assam, ordinary people are more bound together by emotional attachment rather than common intellectuality, as pointed out by Jawaharlal Nehru (Kakar & Kakar, 2007). One could help but admit that there is a sense of ethno-nationalistic sentiment that has always proved to be an indispensable part of the people of the land throughout history. One may notice a close affinity between the terms '*Dangoriya*' with the aspirations of Assamese nationalism which invariably induces a strong argument in favour of the usage of *Dangoriya* as the signifier of an 'ideal' man in the region. This indomitable nationalistic fervor to contribute and, if need be, even ready to offer supreme sacrifice to safeguard the motherland have been considered as the most important elements in the constitution of Assamese masculinity; and the terms denoted to salute the "real son(s) of mother Assam" has been undergoing transformations in different historical times and contexts, but during any public salutation of these revered "real sons", the term *Dangoriya* has remained the most preferable signifier even today. On the contrary, the status group *Bhadralok* established by the social, religious and cultural renaissance of Bengal had remained severely limited within the English-educated community (Ghosh, 2016). Therefore, the role of such groups is not relevant for the present Assam where the quest for identity and "son of the soil" discourse controls the lion's share of social order. During all the subsequent years of nationalist struggle under Assamese elite nationalists, different political movements of Assam have distinctively re-constituted the aspects of Assamese masculinity; the popular discourse on nationalism, the new political 'icons' leading the fight of an Assamese nation against either real and imaginary enemies; thereby the contemporary attributes of masculinity can be interrogated in the light of these growing narratives often engendered in the ideological wombs of these movements over the years. Certain groups of people have been glorified with different accolades like *luit poriya deka* (brave boys from the bank of Luit), *notun purux* (new age man), *lachitar senani* (Soldiers of Lachit) and many more. But, as a term *Dangoriya* shares the same position in every circumstance of Assamese social life. The hero-worshipping of Lachit Borphukan as the new symbol of Assamese masculinity during the second phase of the twentieth century draws our attention towards the importance of Assamese nationalism in projecting a revered Assamese man

(Sharma, 2006). By the 1970s and 1980s, this new class had raised the demand for cultural identity which had no cultural link with the '*Bhadralok*' class or 'Babu' identity. They appeared to have fashioned a new-age *Dangoriya* group commonly mentioned as *notun purux* (*new age man*) or *deka Shakti* (*power of young*).

Primal Ghosh hints at how the category of the *bhadra* and non-*bhadra* or *choto* do not operate in other parts of India and is very much a Bengali phenomenon (Ghosh, 2016); As J.H. Broomfield in his pioneering research on the social class of *Bhadralok* opines, "the starting point of the 'educated middle class'" (Broomfield, 1969) who eventually succeeded to merit the most respected position in Bengal's history could be traced back to the moment in history when the British recruited an increasingly large number of Indian associates mostly from the upper classes like Brahmin, Bidya and Kaystha; most of them were previously were in various administrative roles under Mughal provinces or local Hindu Kingdoms" (Broomfield, 1969); but, in the state of Assam, the government servants hired by the British officials were mainly from the Ahom oligarchy who are referred to as *Dangoriya* (not *Bhadralok*) in different official documents and newspaper articles. This class recruited by the colonial rulers was different from their Bengali counterparts. For instance, the knowledge of English was often not deemed to be a very important quality of *Dangoriya* like Ghosh said about *Bhadralok* (Ghosh, 1969). But, the new English educated middle class during the initial parts of the twentieth century who in fact had played a crucial role in Assam's history reflected upon the *Bhadralok* and Babu culture along a similar vein; where '*Bhadralok*' is a social stratification primarily based on education and intellectual power, while '*Dangoriya*' can be seen as encompassing every aspect of Assamese social life.

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 day-today 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.

2.2 Society, Folklore and *Dangoriya*

Assamese people have a rich repository of folklore. Folks here in Assam love to give expressions to their cultural beliefs through different imaginative and creative mediums. The cultural construction of the image of a *Dangoriya* in Assamese society captures our attention towards the social significations traditionally assigned to this term. Across several genres, one of the most interesting here is ghost lore. I found it interesting for two reasons: firstly, how Assamese people attribute class distinction among the various folk beliefs about ghosts, and secondly, how they try to re-emphasize the exact meaning to an image of spirit that assigns to a respected Assamese man. Assamese ghost lore is rich like any other genre of folklore. It is a universe where any avid listener may find infinite captivating stories, and one could similarly be enthralled by thousands of folk beliefs relating to different ghosts or spirits, treasured in the living memory of the people of this region.

In Assamese ghost lore, one may find *Burha Dangoriya (Aged Dangoriya)* which is believed to be dressed in white clothes and a white turban, sometimes seen to be riding a white horse, deemed to be the guardian spirit of Namghar, the community centre for worship where the sacred Bhagvat Gita is kept. There are different ghosts in Assamese folklore like *Baak*, *Puwali Bhoot* (tiny ghosts), *Bira* (Poltergeist), the ghost of the bamboo grove, *Jokhini*, *Bordoisila* (the storm goddess), *Ghoda Paak*, *Kon* etc. Where most of the other ghosts in this list are believed to be malevolent and ugly, a *Burha Dangoriya* is a benevolent divine spirit. He is imagined to have an elite dressing sense; he moves around riding a white horse and undertakes the holy work of guarding the religious text.

Different meanings assigned to assigns to the figure of *Burha Dangoriya* certainly allude to a revered male figure who is an embodiment of a multitasking ‘ideal’ man. His dressing sense with *suriya-sola* and turban, riding a horse and guarding the holy place of Namghar renders him the role of the perfect father figure in society. Symbolically, by guarding the Namghar, the community hall dedicated to religious worshipping and cultural events, *Burha Dangoriya* ensures the smooth functioning of the social order. His elitist attire resembles other esteemed figures in the village like *Gaonburha* (village head) or *Namghariya* (one who look after the Namghar). Such images as well as the popular perception of *Burha Dangoriya* have a great deal to do with the rich Sattriya tradition. The attire he wears (turban, *suriya-sola*) is very much

similar to that of the *Satradhikar*^{vii} or *bhakata* (Sattriya disciple). The Sattriya connection can also be identified in a religious place Bharali Naghar of Kaliabor region of Nagaon district. This holy place of Sattriya tradition is believed to be the rest house of *Burha Dangoriya*. The local history of the place recalls that it was razed to ashes by the Burmese Army during Burmese invasion in Assam. On the other hand, the legacy of *Burha Dangoriya* continues in the twenty-first century city culture also.

This figure has a crucial role to play concerning the concept of social strata which we will discuss in the next chapter. But, here it is very interesting to note how these cultural beliefs are still very vibrant even in the modern-day folkloric tradition. From the oral traditions to the modern-day cyber world, the medium and shape have changed, but *Dangoriya* remains to carry the same meaning. For instance, one popular Facebook page named ‘Daakor Basan’ has recently released the modern-day artistic creations of various Assamese ghost figures in their series named ‘Oxamiya Horror! (Daak edition)’. This new shape of the already existed meaning re-emphasizes the *Dangoriya* figure in the modern-day context against popular cultural beliefs of ghosts as dangerous and evil. The digital art format that the creators have used alludes to the modern-day re-imagination of age-old folklore. They have uploaded digital arts of fourteen Assamese folk ghosts including *Burha Dangoriya* as follows:

Burha Dangoriya: Dressed in white cloths and a white turban, this benevolent spirit is sometimes seen on a white horse. He is said to guard Namghars, the community place of worship.



This is a popular perception about the *Burha Dangoriya* figure is a modern-day re-imagination in cyberspace, but one may easily identify the cultural binary between the figure of *Burha Dangoriya* and other spirits from both the visual and literary projection of all fourteen figures. From applying white colour which is believed to be pure and peace to the attributes assigned to him; everything is quite suggestive about the sense of respect the Assamese people have traditionally bestowed upon the spirit of *Burha Dangoriya*.

From one generation to another countless stories have been transmitted, even the oral histories about the infamous Burmese invasion, from the sacred precinct of the institution of Namghar to modern-day digital art and urban legends, the legacy of *Burha Dangoriya* has proven to be an ageless saga in Assamese society. Such a deeply rooted image of a respected male figure in Assamese folklore renders to the present study a quite compelling attribute, a study that is devotedly centered on the image of a *Dangoriya* being the embodiment of any socially revered ‘ideal’ Assamese man.

2.3 *Dangoriya*: A Tool of Nineteenth Century Nationalistic Uprising of Assam

It was in the year 1826, when Assam, following the Treaty of Yandoo^{viii} was annexed as part of the British Imperial India. The ensuing one hundred and twenty years long imperial rule in this resource frontier had irreversibly altered the constitution of the socio-political institutions of Assam. The burgeoning idea of an Assamese nation under the patronage of what is often deemed as Assamese linguistic nationalism (sub-nationalism) had its genesis in the multifarious tides of socio-cultural, linguistic and economic transformations of this period. This idea of community consciousness among the Assamese speaking people throughout the 19th century, and during the early decades of 20th century Assam had been engendered by numerous factors. Some of the notable highlights would certainly be the establishment of the railway lines, the initiation of Assam’s tea industry and the discovery of the crude oil, the arrival of the American Baptist missionaries as well as the influx of modern ideas and lifestyles adopted by a new breed of English-educated Assamese middle class who had induced several socio-political changes during that period of Assam history. With the onset of colonialism started the inland migration of a work-labour force from the various regions of what is referred to as the geographical ‘mainland’ of India in search of better opportunities, the introduction of Bengali as the official language from 1836 to 1873, and the inclusion of Bengali speaking majority district of Sylhet in Assam in

1874; all these developments heightened the apprehension of the Assamese community of becoming marginalized in their native place owing to a potential linguistic influx in Assam. It must be noted that different scholars have highlighted a diverse set of reasons for such an ignition of community consciousness among the Assamese people. For Amalendu Guha, the threat of becoming a minority in their province had been the reason behind the formation of the community consciousness among the Assamese people; he further argues that different policies of the colonial administration had betrayed the incitements for stirring up what he refers to as anti-Bengali nationalist sentiments in Assam (Guha, 1977). Hiren Gohain believed that the prevalent chauvinistic attitudes of the Bengalis in Assam (Gohain, 1985) had a role to play in raising anti-Bengali sentiment in Assam. Some other scholars have also stressed on some other aspects such the 'ruthless' attitudes of the Bengali functionaries of the colonial administration (Nag, 1990), the resistance of the immigrant Bengalis towards the process of assimilation (Baruah, 1991), the colonial geography of the imperial ruler (Baruah, 2001) which had been crucial in the formation of the spirit of Assamese nationalism (sub-nationalism) and the ensuing quest for recognition of its unique identity with regard to the Assamese culture, language and its people.

The community consciousness of 19th century Assam arose under the patronage of a first-generation English educated Assamese middle class. These young English educated minds had made up their minds to return to their native Assam. They were well versed with the colonial ideas of progress because of their stay in Bengal. Debabrata Sharma has opined that the new Assamese middle class during the 19th century had invented and re-shaped the old institutions (for instance, the Sattria institution and the hero-worshipping tradition of history) and standardized those and subsequently appropriated those as agencies for stimulating the community consciousness for furthering the cause of the Assamese nation. He also highlights how Assamese literature has undergone since long, a period of standardization as part of the larger endeavour i.e. towards the forging of a unique Assamese identity (Sharma, 2006). This present study is an attempt to focus on the aspects of the formation of a linguistic and nationalistic community consciousness among the Assamese people during the colonial era. And the ensuing impact of such a development in congruence with the re-imagining the image of *Dangoriya* as 'the ideal' Assamese masculine figure; and how the subsequent nationalist

movement had re-defined the Assamese male model for the larger political and historical questions.

The Assamese middle class had reinvented the existing socio-cultural institutions and re-structured some of the ancient social institutions. To endure the threat of becoming marginalized in their native land owing to the influx of Bengali speaking migrants, they further conceived different mediums like press or newspapers and magazines as potent and favourable domains to advance their resistance (Sharma, 2006). Some of the notable mentions would undoubtedly be *Jonaki*, *Bijuli*, *Usha* and *Banhi*. Subsequently, the idea of social stratification of men as *Bhadralok* and *chotolok* had already found its prevalence in Assam as well. The agents of the 19th-century nationalist uprising of the Assamese community were mostly the English educated returnees from Bengal. They were highly influenced by the western ideas of modernity and progress. It is interesting to note that people like Rajanikanta Bordoloi (1894) and Anundaram Dhekial Phukan (1841) mentioned about the usage of the *Bhadralok* and *chotolok* in Assamese society. Along with this Bengal-returned educated group, the idea of *Bhadralok-chotolok* division had made its inroads into Assam through the class of *babus* who were brought to Assam by the British administration to facilitate its administration in the region. It is important here to note that how a considerable amount of importance was given to distinguish the constitution of the Assamese 'ideal' man from Bengali '*Bhadralok*'. One must pay equal importance to the subsequent attention accorded to the term *Dangoriya* as a linguistic signification for an 'ideal' Assamese man in the later period by these pioneering members of the English educated Assamese elite.

It must be mentioned that Bezbaroa's writings too, draw our attention to reflect upon how the educated Assamese were very selective in their self-projection. They took inspiration from the western thoughts on modernity, and subsequently experimented with new literary genres to expand and enrich the ambit of Assamese literature with the ingredients of literary modernism and modernity. They also assumed the role of torchbearers with intent to forge a unique Assamese identity. Beside the popular assumption of the anxiety about the possible economic and cultural marginalization induced by the presence of Bengali *babus* that demanded a community consciousness among middle-class Assamese (Guha, 1977), it is interesting to delve

deeper into the various reasons behind the growing demand for the local term of *Dangoriya* and the intent to standardize it as a linguistic signification of the ‘ideal’ Assamese man.

It is interesting to see how the colonial rulers stuck to their old policy of igniting the Assamese community consciousness. Different historical documents and academic writings have made the postulations that the colonial rule provided the initial stimuli for the growth of community consciousness among the Assamese people by adopting different policies like enrolling educated Bengalis in the government offices, the inclusion of the Bengali speaking district of Sylhet in 1874 in the frontier province Assam, the unchecked cross border immigration from the overpopulated belts in East Bengal. Further the ever-increasing apprehension that the native Assamese, in the subsequent decades would become minority in their homeland found a partial validation in the 1931 census report (Guha, 1977) (Sengupta, 2006). The colonial administrators had adopted a meticulous tactic in distinguishing the *babus* they hired from Bengal and the government officials they hired from the Ahom oligarchy. Instead of *Bhadralok* or *babu*^{ix}, the local government officials are mentioned as *Dangoriya* in different official documents and newspaper articles. *The* biographical account of Dinanath Bezbaroaby his son Lakshminath Bezbaroa in his 1909 published book “*Dangoriya* Dinanth Bezbaruahr sankhripta Jibon Charit” (Saikia,2010) foregrounds how the term *Dangoriya* was used as a mark of reverence for the British employed administrative officials during the British rule. While publishing news about Dinanath Bezboroa’s demise, The Times of India writes:

It is with extreme pain that we have to record the death of *Dangoriya* Dinanath Bezbaoroa (Saikia, 2010).

Whereas, The Statesman remarks:

The death of *Dangoriya* Dinanath Bezbaroa at the age of 84 has deprived Assam of one of its best-known inhabitants (Saikia, 2010).

Mrinalini Sinha’s study on ‘Colonial masculinity’ encompasses how the construction of a ‘masculine man has larger connotations of multiple axes along with power exercised in colonial India’ (Sinha, 1995). The specific practice of ruling the Indian states by the British was largely influenced by the clear distinction between the masculine status of colonized and the British colonizers. It thereby alludes to how gender politics has a large role to play in the political

economy of 19th century colonial India. The constructed image of ‘effeminate’ Bengali ‘*babu*’ or *Bhadralok* as ‘bookish, over-serious, languorous, lustful and lacking in the self-discipline of the ‘manly Englishman’ with ‘love for physical sports, particularly hunting, accompanied by the disdain for the ‘bookworm’ has a connection with establishing an indigenous elite’s collaboration with colonial rule, where the colonial rulers are more ‘masculine and holds the power of hegemonic masculinity (Sinha, 1995).

Colonial Rulers treated Assam as a frontier land for Bengal throughout the entire colonial rule (Baruah, 2001) (Sengupta, 2006). But Assam didn’t come under the colonial policy of creating ‘effeminate *Bhadralok*’. Different policies adopted by the colonial ruler for Assam certainly emphasize this argument. For instance, colonial rulers referring to local employees hired from Ahom obligatory as *Dangoriya* instead of *Bhadralok*; on the other hand, British rulers designated the martial caste status to the people of Assam by establishing a military regiment Assam Rifles (Earlier known as Kachar Levy till 1917) in 1835. William Robinson in his ‘A Descriptive Account of Assam’ clearly differentiates Assam from Bengal (Robinson, 1841); Edward Gait praised people of Assam for defeating the mighty Mughals in his 1906 published book, ‘A History of Assam’. He writes

Assam was one of the few countries in India whose inhabitants beat back the tide of Mughal conquest and maintained their independence in the face of repeated attempts to subvert it (Gait, 1906).

He again writes,

It is interesting not only in themselves, but also from the light which they throw on the old methods of warfare, and from the evidence which they afford of how little superior arms, numbers and discipline can avail against difficulties of communication, inadequate supplies and an unhealthy climate (Gait, 1906).

Such colonial writings surely suggest about a different policy appropriated by the colonial rulers to describe Assamese people from their Bengali counterparts who are supposedly ‘effeminate’ in a different sense. But, with the incipience of the *Bhadralok* culture here in Assam along with the modern ideas and lifestyles; the availability of *Bhadralok* in Assamese can be traced in Rajanikanta Bordoloi’s ‘Miri Jiyori’ where he mentions about *Bhadralok*-Chotolok division in an

urban set up in Lakhimpur district. Even before that, people like Anandaram Dhekial Phuan had openly conceded the influence of *Bhadralok* class stratification when he strongly resented the colonial policy of introducing Bengali as the official language of Assam. In Arunodoi, he writes:

Asomor adalot samuhata eta bidexi bhasa, Bangla bhasa prasalan kora hoise, adalotor logot jorito bisoya ba tene luksokolehe sadharanate Bangla buji pai, xadharan raiz anki Bhadralok prayjanta byokti xakalaru bhasatur xamparke kunu gyanei nai. (From A.J.M. Mills "Report on the Provinces of Assam") (Sharma, 2006).

(A foreign tongue i.e. Bengali has been introduced in proceedings of the courts of Assam. Only the court officials and like-minded people can comprehend Bengali. The ordinary men, even the people deemed fit to be called *Bhadralok*, have little understanding of this tongue.)

Debabrata Sharma has highlighted that the middle-class led nation-building project of the late 19th and early 20th century had mostly centered on the anti-Bengali sentiments rather than anti-British (Sharma, 2006). A closer look into the different articles by Lakhminath Bezbaroa during that period would help us to project the construction and restoration of *Dangoriya* as a signification for a socially revered Assamese man. Thus, finding a term which could encapsulate the unique identity of Assamese culture, and the potent role it had to play as a national masculine identity alongside other national emblems like Lachit as a national hero, Bihu as a national festival, Suriya-sola as national attire for the Assamese male and so on.

In one of his articles, 'Babu aru srijut', Bezbaroa mentions

Ami asomiya manuh, xake khare egal khai thaku, ami Babu tabu nohoi deuhe, tumi amak babu pati bahu nogur nagoti nakariba deuhe, babu buli kole ami bor asambhantra kora jenhe pau, ear dwarai babu xobdotuk axambhanto mat bulisu tene navabiba. (Bora & Hujuri, 2014)

(We are Assamese people, we live a simple life, we have no intention to be *babus*, please do not ridicule us, we feel insulted when someone calls us *babu*, but it doesn't mean that we deride the word *babu*.)

He further extended the line as

Kunu eta bostu lukor pora lua jai ketia? Jetia sei bostur hochahochikoiye amar avab hoi; aru avab noholeu jetia hei bostu amar sei shrenir thoka bostutkoi uttam shrenir; aru tak graham korile ami bixex labhoban hou. Engraji xikoni aru engraji sabhyata adi ami ghaikoiei duta karon nimittehe graham korisuhok. Eiduta karonor kuntur mukholoi sai aji ami bidexi "babu upadhi" loboloi hat melim hok? Amar ei upadhi sambodhanar avabot pora nai. (Bora & Hujuri, 2014)

(When do we need to borrow something from others? That is when we feel the lack of it, and sometimes, borrowing promises a better bargain. This is the only reason why we advocate English education and English culture. Could any one of the reasons compel us to adopt a foreign salutation such as *babu*? Neither are we impoverished nor there is any urgency to borrow anything.)

In the same article, Bezbaroa refers to a newspaper named *Asam*,

The truth is, the titles such as Borborooah, Borooh, Phukan bestowed by the Ahom Rajas were considered sufficiently honorary and did not necessitate any kind of further embellishment for them. For instance, Dhekial phookan, Anandaram or Borbhandar Borooh Moniram is better designation than Babu Anandaram Dhekialphukan, Babu Moniram Borbhandar borooh, or Anandaram Dhekialphukan Esquire, or Moniram Borbhandar borooh Esquire. (Bora & Hujuri, 2014)

The article also argues:

Bangali ba aan kunu bidexik babu bular thait asomiyak ki bulibo lage, ei kotha tumi jadi najana tente tumi xikiloboloi jatna kora (Bora & Hujuri 563)

(If you do not know how to address an Assamese gentleman, you should better learn it. Please do not use the Bengali ‘Babu’.)

Agor axamiai babu mane marowari mahajan aru bangali manuhok e bujisil, ageye kunu axamiya Dangoriya k babu buli dithakat nalage xamajikot u sambhodhan koribo nuarisil.
(Bora & Hujuri, 2014)

(Earlier the Assamese people greeted only the Marowari tradesman or Bengali gentleman as *babu*; it is beyond someone’s imagination to extend the salutation *babu* to a native Assamese.)

Further in his article ‘AsamiyaJatiDangorJati’, Bezbaroa writes:

Asamiyat Dangoriyar bhag sarah. Gaone gaone, nagare nagare Dangoriya brinda brinda. Ageye rojar dinata somoteman Dangoriya nasil swikar koru, kintu ajikali eman Dangoriya bahise je asom-borpukhuri Dangoriya-lalukire kola pori ahise.

(The number of *Dangoriya(s)* in Assamese is large, it can be found in every village, every town. It is true that during the king’s rule, this number was less, but now-a-days, this number is greatly increasing.)

Though perhaps there is a hint of sarcasm in the statement, it indicates how the number of *Dangoriya* had increased during Bezbaroa’s time, when the Assamese middle-class elites were involved in creating a community consciousness in the state. As a metaphor for encapsulating the Assamese sentiment to counter the influx of Bengali threat, *Dangoriya* could be seen in two aspects. Firstly, it is seen in terms of how the image of an ideal man had played an important role in the initiation of Assamese linguistic nationalism led by the newly English educated Assamese

elites of nineteenth century. Secondly, the Assamese elites were equally reluctant to accept the influx of modern thoughts and ideas during the age. It is noteworthy that the anxiety about a potential Bengali threat has played an important role here. Such words indicate the nationalist politics of projecting *Dangoriya* culture as a counter measure to negate the influx of the *Bhadralok* kind of social stratification which had started in Bengal. The intention behind using *Dangoriya* as a culture here means it was more than just a terminology, different changes in men's life during the period like using of *suriya-sola* by replacing coat pants, invites a more elaboration of a *Dangoriya* image beyond the literal meaning of the term itself.

As a deeply rooted term for respectful man in Assamese folklore, its association with the three officers of Ahom kingdom; *Dangoriya* certainly does not allude to the Bengal-returned new English educated Assamese middle class. These new-age *Dangoriya(s)* were part of the colonial policy of creating a English educated class native who were local by birth and name, but British in taste and outlook. A similar figure of *Bhadralok* in reference to Broomfield's study (1969) and Brown Saheb in reference to Hiren Gohain's study (1985).

But, those torchbearers of community consciousness had appropriated such a local term to standardize a linguistic reference for an ideal Assamese; had dovetailed their larger socio-political aspiration to establish an Assamese identity dispelling all kinds of inimical external forces like Bengalis. The re-use of *Dangoriya* as a nationalistic sentiment had added new meaning to the image, it encompasses the old age *suriya-sola* wearing respected man of a rural area with the English educated new age social leaders with modern western thoughts and ideas.

At the outset, the proposed salutation called *Dangoriya* for a socially revered Assamese man opens the avenues for us to look into the significant contribution of a man's image in the nationalist uprising of Assam during the last decades of the 19th century and the first decades of 20th century colonial Assam. The *Dangoriya* image is characteristically embedded with the hegemonic masculine traits of Assamese man; owing to its signification in the folklore of Assam, nevertheless its standardization during the afore-mentioned period had surely assigned a nationalistic connotation. In other words, the introduction of *Dangoriya* motif in the study of Assamese nationalism thereby re-emphasizes the cultural proposition of how the earliest proponents of Assamese nationalism had treaded 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. In doing so, they had standardized a local image of a revered Assamese man as a metaphor of Assamese masculinity itself.