

## CHAPTER 3

### IMAGE OF AN 'IDEAL MAN' IN ASSAMESE SOCIETY: TRADITION, HISTORY AND FOLKLORE

#### 3.1 The Portrait of an 'Ideal Assamese Man' and Male Folklore

The core ethos of the Assamese society is founded on the premise of socio-ethno-linguistic identity. As an ethno-linguistic community, the Assamese exhibit a strong adherence to an agriculture-based mode of village economy. In the cultural front, the Assamese represent variegated cultures of colorful tribes and communities living at close proximity of Mother Nature. Different communities from the region have showcased their brilliance and expertise in handicraft apart from their knowledge of the agricultural viability of the land.



Assam tableau tops at Republic Day Parade 2020 in New Delhi (Sentinel desk, 2020)

Undoubtedly, folklore reflects the diverse culture of the Assamese people, more aptly than most other sources. Even cultural artists use different motifs of folklore as the ideal medium to express their intimate knowledge of the everyday life of the Assamese folk. Normative models of personhood have come down to us through folklore. The folklore of Assam is of course closely related to the geographical terrain of the region; it is also related to the conflict between the plains and the hills, the importance of agriculture and the long political hegemony of the Indian state.

The different ethnic communities of Assam have the knack of coming up with the appropriate kind of folkloric idiom or expression to express a thought. Such folkloric expressions or genres are folksongs, legends, proverbs, slang, and jokes to cite a few examples. Sometimes these genres are also used collaboratively to drive home a point about the importance of a particular ideal. For instance, a collaboration of rituals involving worship of the spirit(s) of nature, bodily art forms encompassing dance and songs, local gossips, legends and proverbs, jokes together help to construct the 'ideals' and allow the performers to reinforce them persistently through repeated enactments. The Assamese take great pleasure in spending times entertaining each other through different forms of folklore.

This study is based on the researcher's auto-ethnographical account of Bachagaon village. The village is located in the Lakhimpur district of the Indian state of Assam. Along with my experience of being an insider of Bachagaon, two other factors are in operation behind my decision to take this particular village as my area of study. It is considered as the largest village of Assam which includes a population of nearly 6,710 people as per the 2011 census data. The concerned village is divided into four sub-villages i.e. Bachagaon, Na-Ali Miri N.C., No-1 Na-Ali Kairbartta and No-2 Na Ali Kaibartta. The second consideration is attributed to its demography. The village is a melting pot of people coming from different social strata. The village is home to mainly the Brahmin and Kaibartta communities (standing at the top and the bottom of ladder of caste hierarchy respectively). Na-Ali Miri N.C. part of the village is inhabited by the ethnic Mising community. Moreover, modernity is not a very new phenomenon here. The so called 'gifts' of modernity, like television, internet, cars are to be found in most of the village households, but it is the folklore through which the people here still express their inner feelings, anxieties and create an image of their own. Moreover, the folkloric texts among the people of Bachagaon call our attention for some larger questions like ethnicity and, class and caste along with the gender matrix. My primary objective, here, is to study how the image of an 'ideal masculine man' is not just limited to the matrix of sex or exactly relational to the binary opposition to the other i.e. the woman.

Throughout five years of my academic research and twenty-eight years of experience as an insider of the community, it is known to me, as the researcher that the same cultural texts and themes are generally repeated (with slight variations of course) across the Assamese community

and across different places of Assam. Moreover, rather than focusing on all aspects of the cultural texts, my attention will be on extracting the themes associated with the notion of Assamese masculinity. Different cultural texts hold the nature of repetition to establish a particular theme in society. Standley Brandes refers to the repetition of the same theme in different folkloric texts as an important element of the construction of men in rural societies (Brandes, 1980).

### 3.1.1 Masculine identity of Assamese Man

It is interesting how the age-old oral folklore has been finding its sphere in contemporary Assamese society. In the age of the internet driving world where local traditions are gradually lost their charm, Assamese people, especially in the rural areas often seen using different folkloric expressions in their daily discussions. They often complete their statements, arguments by either referring to proverbs, popular sayings and other folkloric phrases. As a land situated in a complex topography that is heavily dependent on an agro-based economy, life here is still greatly influenced by the symbolic connection with nature. But, before delving into such a larger question, it is necessary to formulate the idea of an ‘ideal’ Assamese man in the village. Assamese people believe that a man is a social animal who owns the house but, in a sense, has no place there. Any man who likes to stay inside a house is unproductive, ‘*sati, lathi bisoni*’ or umbrella, a stick and a handmade fan is his dearest friend. A man is judged according to four basic parameters (desired attributes within an ‘ideal’ man) here. These are precisely: being rough and tough, wealthy, articulate and visually appealing.

*Naipu Gufe*

*Naipu Mukhe,*

*Naipu Loni,*

*Naipu Dhani.*

(Meaning: A man wearing a mustache is an ideal man; so is the one who is a good speaker, handsome and rich.)

The proverbial phrase reflects exactly the four qualities. *Guf* or moustache is a symbolic metaphor of a man's macho image in most of the rural societies. But what establishes man's symbolic connection with power is his genital organ and moustache. From a very tender age, the boys fear being ridiculed as *gaimua* (female cow-headed) among their male friends, if someone is found to be without any trace of facial hair or beard. Here, they are asked to use some mud from the toe of *nangal*<sup>x</sup> to grow a thick moustache. This practice symbolically establishes a phallic connection with the moustache. In the existing folk beliefs, *nangal* carries the meaning of a penis that penetrates the land for the reproduction of crops. Such symbolic practices certainly allude to a phallic association of moustache.

Being a good and smart speaker is the second quality to be desired in an 'ideal' man. An Assamese man is expected not to indulge himself greatly in front of woman, rather be active among his friends and within the men's arena. Whenever he has to go inside the house, he makes a signal by coughing to make the woman aware of his presence instead of uttering any word. In the family gatherings like dinner, the male head of the family is hardly seen to talk until it is very important and unavoidable. In public, he is not only expected to speak, but to speak with a dignified tone whereas a man with a feeble voice is deemed as effeminate. It is commonly said,

*Mihi mator mota manuhr xoman kulokhyonia nai*

(A man with a light voice is inauspicious)

Different proverbial phrases indicate that a sound health and good physic is the most important attribute of being a 'perfect male'. For instance:

*Buku Xal, Soku Lal,*

*Hei Purushar Lakhyan Bhal.*

(Meaning: He, who possesses a broad chest and red-eyes, is an ideal man.)

While alluding to the future of any male, the body is given the utmost priority

*Deha thakilehe beha.*

(All the matters of the world have meaning only when you have a fit body.)

But, the construction of the cult figure(s) in folk legends portrays the inherited urge to cope up with nature. A sound body seems to be a prerequisite for the Assamese man, for his survival in a land that is full of natural challenges. For instance, at tender age, the young Assamese lads come to know about Sankaredeva<sup>xi</sup>. The legends describe how the great saint had swum across the mighty Brahmaputra in her full might. There are stories that he defeated a raging bull in his teenage. Assigning such legends of bravery and male heroism to a saint portrays how the society conceives of the image of a great man. Thus, the ‘good’ or ideal man is someone who is able to cope up with natural challenges. In addition, he has to be an owner of sound health and good physique. He is someone who apparently consumes a heavy meal in *hatikhojia bati* (a huge bell metal bowl) and undertakes hard labour in the agricultural field.

*Dhan* or wealth is the fourth pillar of masculine status. *Dhan* refers to money in the Assamese vocabulary. But, the concept of wealth carries a much bigger connotation. There is a popular saying in Assamese

*Manuhar kajia tinita karonot hoi, mati maiki aru toka*

(Man fights for three things only - land, woman and money)

This symbolizes that an Assamese man has three assets i.e. money, agriculture and woman. He owns the status of being wealthy by having these three. In the next part of this discussion, I will study the politics of controlling the agricultural field, nature and woman which are closely interlinked in the Assamese man’s collective psyche.

Men have to protect themselves against the threat of being undermined by women (Brandes, 1980). But, there have always been the third enemy i.e. other men; men from other communities, caste or class. I will elaborate on this issue in the next chapter of the thesis. Considering woman as ‘evil’ and man as ‘good’ is a common gendered construction in rural folklore across the world (Brandes, 1980). All women are considered as seductresses possessed of insatiable, lustful appetites in folk beliefs (Brandes, 1980). Following the same patriarchal politics, a woman’s vagina is considered as the door to hell or *narakar duar*, the same word *narak* used for both hell and vagina in Assamese informal language. But this is a message that is effectively communicated to boys at a young age.

A young boy believes that his moustache will not grow if he goes to a *puspita* (menarche) ceremony of girls. The symbolic meaning carried by moustache here is man's honour and he feels the anxiety of being castrated if he has to part with his moustache. Losing his moustache is almost as good as losing his penis. This message is effectively communicated at a very early age. Thus, gradually he comes to see himself as the superior sex and he has to carry that burden to maintain his status. There is always the lurking fear of being called "*mekhela tolot xumua*" (someone who lives under a *mekhela*<sup>xiii</sup>, *someone who is ruled by a woman*). This phase symbolically mocks him for being subdued and coming under the spell of the vagina.

Another aspect that lends a unique attribute to an Assamese man is the matrix of honour. The concept of honour in a rural agricultural society invites a man to be the guardian of his family, a master who controls the sexuality of his family's woman. Brandes mentions that "it is the husband's prime responsibility to control the conduct of his wife and daughters. If the females should go astray, their behaviour reflects as much on him as on them" (Brandes, 1980). But, it is interesting to note how the personal image of a man also plays a vital role here. For example, a father's social image becomes a paternal security, and socially validated assurance in his daughter's marital relations. Assamese people expect the bride's father to be non-alcoholic, monogamous and decent.

A girl's character is very much dependent on her parents. For example, it is said that

*Mati kiniba maj xal, suali aniba jat bhal.*

(Buy a fertile land; marry a girl of good caste)

But, another proverbial phrase i.e. *baap sai beta, mak sai ji* (Like father like son, like mother like daughter) indicates the significance of the father's image in relation to his son.

### **3.1.2 Woman, Nature and Paddy fields: Male Identity and Ownership**

In the study of domesticity and masculinity, scholars like Micheletto (Micheletto, 2015) have pointed out that a man achieve his "head of the family" status with his establishment of a household of his own; his position entails that he can exercise economic and sexual control over the members of his family. His virility is manifested through fatherhood and the act of passing on his property and skills to the ensuing generation. Male power over various categories of

people (Chowdhry, 2015), nature (Littlefield, 2010) and society is established through several hierarchies reflected in different oral and folk traditions.

The following popular Assamese saying is an example of the assertion of gender hierarchy:

*Lau jimane dighal holeu pator talat*

(Irrespective of the size of the gourd, it always lays beneath the leaf.)

An Assamese male's identity as head of the family and economic decision-maker in an agrarian setting depends on paddy fields and on his dependents like wife, children and other members of the family. Traditional gender roles in agricultural production of Assamese society allow a man to plough the land, woman to plant the seed; women cut crop, men bring it home. Such gendered division of labour is a clear representation of the problematic relationship among paddy, men and women. Woman is creator and man become provider, protector and consumer.

This division of labour draws our attention to the fact that Assamese man-woman relationship in paddy cultivation allows a man to own the entire production and exclude a proper position for a woman. This vexed relationship not only bequest man's supremacy, but it compels a man to prove himself as a "good farmer" and fit into a certain gendered frame rooted in the collective imagination through gender stereotypes. Different research works on agriculture and masculinity define agriculture as gregariously constructed as a gendered industry (Liepins, 2007) and theoretical conceptualization on gender like gender as seriality (Young, 1994) leads us to ascertain how man's image in a paddy field is dominated by politics of differentiation. For instance, a man's masculinity is referred to on the basis of his ability to carry *dangori* (an immensely colossal bundle of paddy sheaf) from paddy fields to *bhoral* (its storage); the heavier *dangori* will make a man more 'masculine' or the "ideal labourer" in agricultural works. An agricultural labourer is more likely to ask his friends about the crops they carry that day in their evening meeting in a shop or over a cup of evening tea. It is more prevalent to aurally perceive different comments about glorifying one's power among Assamese adolescent boys like

*moi soy thoriya dangori chari kilometer kohiai loi jau*

(I can carry six bundles of paddy sheaf for four kilometers)

Such comparison of labour also allows a father to use it as a frame to edify his sons about working in the paddy fields and carrying out their family reputation of having an “ideal farmer”. In terms of a paradigmatic relationship between a father and his sons, such a burden of proving oneself to be a good labourer is essential in a society where comparing such abilities with other boys is widely prevalent. Chaitali Dasgupta, Mandeep K Janeja and Radhika Chopra’s (Dasgupta, Janeja & Chopra, 2000) study on Indian man carries a serious insights in this regard, They asserted that masculinity is not only conceived in oppositional cognations of men vis-a-vis women but as men vis-a-vis other men. The question of social class and caste is more intricate and problematic in this quest for the figure of the “ideal man” based on the “ideal farmer”.

Class and caste play a determining role in establishing the relationship between paddy, men and women; but, these relationships are not identical for different Assamese castes and classes. A Brahmin man (having a higher position in terms of caste division) is exempted from physical labour like ploughing lands or carrying *dangori*. Brahmin men’s high caste status establishes his ownership of land, production and women and on his labourers without proving his efficiency in the paddy field. This practice allays any fears of a direct conflict between upper-caste men and men from “lower” castes. The practice ensures that there is no sense of competition for masculinity between the castes. The norms of ideal masculinity are caste specific.

Like an upper caste man, a financially well-off man also enjoys his control over land, production and his labourers by owning paddy production without undertaking physical labour in the field. Where a man of so-called lower caste or lacking high social status must prove his physical strength in the mode of production, upper caste or economically prosperous man is “naturally” endowed.

The folkloric “ideal” image of reputed Assamese man having different status symbols associated with agricultural production reinforces the relationship of man with the agricultural mode of production. For example, the following proverb reflects the importance of the cow in ascertaining a man’s social status

*“Jar nai goru xi xakalut koi xaru”*

(Without a cow, one occupies the lowest position in the social order.)



Besides, bamboo with its utility for house making, paddy works and building fences also plays an important role in constructing the social image of a man as the following proverb says

*“Jar nai bah, tar nai xah”* (Assamese proverbial phrase)

(The one without bamboo is one without courage.)

There is thus a need of visible symbols to establish a man’s social status; such symbols allow upper caste and economically rich men to establish their masculine authority over other men.

However, domestic masculinity is judged on the basis of a man’s leadership and authoritative control over a family’s agricultural mode of production. Fulfillment of prospects, gained ascendancy, gregarious apperception and respectability provide masculine status to a father or head (Tosh, 2005). In Assamese agrarian society, it is the father who retains decisional power (fine-tune the dates of different activity, cull the nature of production and seeds), control the production (assign tasks) and administers discipline.

Saugeres writes about how the image of a good farmer is based on his innate understanding of nature and how women are omitted from direct connection with land, eventually establishing men's mastery over nature and women (Saugeres, 2000). In an Assamese agricultural setting, such masculine understanding is reflected in man’s dominant relationship with women and the land. Such dual supremacy is represented in different folk genres like proverbs, folk musical compositions. In the already mentioned proverbial saying,

*“mati kiniba maj xal, suali aniba jat bhal”*

(Buy a land of the deeper centre; marry a girl of good caste)

reflects the close connection between women and land in man’s psyche; his urge for a productive land (which can retain water for long) is similar to his urge to “posses” a girl belonging to a “good caste” or a “good breed”. This relationship of man with his two most precious “assets” is strengthened in community psyche by different proverbs like

*“Boroxun nidia mati, bhata naha tiri”*

(A land without rain, a woman without husband)

*“moit xil, tirit kil”*

(Stone to make plough heavier, hit to control women),

*“Gherile berile bari, pindhile urile nari”*

(A courtyard becomes one when it is properly fenced; a woman becomes one when she is decked up)

Other genres like folk songs also play the same role of reinforcing the same three-tier relationship of a man with his woman and his property. In Bihu songs, a boy sings

*“tukenu anim buli besilu ghore bari, besilu oi halore goru”*

(I sold my house and bull to marry you),

This stanza reflects that an agrarian labourer's urge for his girl is stronger than for his land and cow. The lion's portion of such Bihu songs reflects such a comparison between woman and nature and man's identity as a member who relishes nature and woman. A man must relish his position of authority by “executing” his supremacy on both nature and woman by actively controlling them. The dual exploitation of nature and woman by a man in patriarchal societies is a much-discussed topic in academic scholarship, but it is interesting to discuss how masculine identity is maintained by showing loyalty and authorship of both “assets” – nature and woman.

An Assamese man uses different folk genres to prove his love for both land and women; but, he must leave his beloved wife in bed to fulfill the duty of a farmer which is of course his prime responsibility. In songs like

*“Heteli patite janoi tumak okole eri thoi”*

(I must leave you in bed early morning for ploughing the land)

On the other hand, a man fights against nature to gift his beloved her favorite flower,

*“Pahar bogai bogai kapou ful anisu”*

(I will gift you *kapou* flower by climbing mountains),

He protects her from nature,

*Daoloni pothart tumar bhorir pora moh juk oi atoram*

(A man safeguards his woman from leeches in the paddy fields)

### 3.1.3 Bihu: Folk Festival and the Politics of Control

A man has to prove his masculinity by dividing his loyalty between nature and woman. Such a sense of masculine domination is a prominent feature of Assamese folk and agricultural festivals. Bihu<sup>xiii</sup>, the most celebrated agricultural festival consisting of three major seasonal festivals of Assamese society plays a paramount role in constituting and forwarding the ascendance of Assamese male on both women and nature. Throughout the festivals a man appears to be merry where a woman is “devotional” and more intimately connected with mother earth. During these festive seasons, young boys play different traditional games like coins, marbles, breaking of-duck or chicken eggs, while elder members of the male community engage themselves in the game of cards (popularly known as *jua* in Assamese).

By getting suggestion and approval of the family head, other members start their preparation for the next agricultural season from spring. During the first day of Rongali Bihu, male members of the society concentrate on the ceremonial bath of their cows, bullocks, calves and buffaloes. Such celebration and importance of cows (*garu*) represent ceremonial connections between a man and his beloved bullock. Man throws vegetables like brinjal, gourd and other stuff to his cow and urges it to be salubrious by singing

*Lau kha, bengena kha, bosore bosore bahi ja*

(Eat gourd, eat brinjal; grow year by year)

As a man’s practice, it reflects the consequentiality of bullock’s work in deciding a man’s position in society as a “good farmer”. On another note, the second day’s ceremony of greeting the male head of the family by offering *gamocha*<sup>xiv</sup> establishes male supremacy.

Unlike some other geographically adjacent communities, the Assamese community assigns woman folks the role of worshipping mother earth and paddy field in different agricultural festivals; Rongali bihu reflects male ascendancy over nature, where women's role is more oriented towards worshipping, men relish more cordial relationship with cows and the paddy field. Woman's role as a worshipper of mother earth is strengthened when she must worship the *Tulsi* tree and burn earthen lamps for the prosperity of the paddy field during Kati Bihu or Kangali Bihu. The tradition of Magh Bihu or Bhogali Bihu involve woman worshipping fire to defend her family from any unforeseen calamity by lighting the sacred fire; during the same, a man goes near the fruit trees and beats it with sticks and repeats the following words

*aam, kothal, narikal, lag lag lagoi*

(O mango, jackfruit, coconut trees, bear more fruits in the years to come).

Both the examples of throwing gourd, brinjal and other stuff during Rangali bihu and urging cows for a salubrious life and beating trees to ask them to bear more fruits for the year to come help to construct the dominant relationship of Assamese men over nature.

The folk belief of prohibition on ploughing the land during Ambubasi mela<sup>xv</sup> reflects a direct connection between woman's fertility and land productivity in Assamese society. During the festival, Assamese Hindus believe that mother earth goes through a cycle of menstruation; the same kind of belief is in practice for an Assamese woman. The linkage of a paddy field and a female body can be sensed here as a woman is prohibited from performing any activities like ploughing, plucking of flower, and digging of soil during these days. Here, Mother goddess Kamakhya is the antediluvian fertility cult; Ambubasi is the symbolism of productivity. This can be perceived as a resemblance of a man's sexual connection with his woman in the purpose of fertility which remains unproductive during menstruation period.

Simon de Beauvoir in her groundbreaking study *The Second Sex* verbalizes about how the patriarchal logic constructs both woman and nature as "other" (Beauvoir, 1952). In this regard, as Eco-feminism argues about how the phallic order is a threat for woman and nature with overpopulation and the depletion of resources, the same can be perceived in patriarchal image of the "Ideal man".

An “Ideal” man is considered as masculine by virtue of his ability to control certain symbols and structures. The desired physical appearance of a man in different oral and folk genres reflects the attributes of a “man” as connected to his supremacy over nature and his woman. Examples from different Bihu musical compositions like

*Pahar bogai bogai kapou ful anisu*

(I bring *kapou* flower for you by climbing mountains),

and

*daoloni pohart tumar bhorir pora moh juk oi atoram*

(I will protect you from leeches in the paddy fields)

reflect the male love and trust for his woman by defeating nature. In both cases, a man expresses his love and urge for the girl in a two-fold connection by defeating different obstacles of nature and “protecting” his woman.

Folk beliefs and practices during Bihu festival regarding the fertility of the paddy field are reinforced by assigning religious attributes to trees and plants having high reproductive capacity (Barua, 2009). Bihu dance, an important component of the festival conveys a significant metaphorical meaning of a man’s position in controlling sexuality. In such performances, boys play instruments like *dhol* (drum), *pepa* (horn) and *taal*(cymbals) and girls dance and play some light instruments like *gagana*. A man’s clear ascendance over women (during the performance by controlling her dance moves with drumbeats and horn sounds) and nature (by the virtue that lands fertility is believed to be enhanced by woman’s dance) can be examined from such performances. Moreover, several girls dance circumventing a horn player in a very submissive way reinforcing such submissive position of women. Drum and horn can be optically discerned as the most potent implements of male power in a Bihu performance. Phallus-like shape of these instruments and other linguistic connection with phallus makes us our view to perceive it from the point of view of phallic symbolism. In Assamese folk literature, there are many proverbial phases which connect horn with the phallus. For example, the proverbial phase

*Moh jiman burha holeu xing burha nohoi”*

(It doesn't matter how old a buffalo is, his horn will not be old)

inherits direct connection between a man's phallus and the buffalo's horn. Buffalo horn is used to make *pepa* and a man's control over woman dance moves through it can give us a clear-cut connection between controls of woman's sexuality by man. A man "controls" the sexual performance with his phallus, a man controls bihu performance with drum and horn; transcending it to some other cultural context, one can find such ideas extended to prohibition against women playing the "male" drum. Similarly, these phallic symbols are also to be worshipped – *dhols* are to be worshipped by the female dancers. Such folk beliefs allow us to understand how a man's "ideal" identity is very much dependent on his drum/horn playing performances. Koskoff (Koskoff, 1996) discusses how performance of musical instruments is often bound up with cultural notions of gender and control in ways that vocal performance is not. Through the agency of monopolies and taboos, one group may claim possession over an instrument to the omission of another as the power play between humans over musical instruments is often enacted along gender lines (Koskoff, 2000).

Marriage and sexuality play a consequential role in such folk performances. Prafulla Dutta Goswami in his book *Asomiya Jana Sahitya* (Assamese) discusses how Assamese marriage has been traditionally dependent on Assamese Bihu dance, even though this was more prevalent in Mising community (Goswami, 2014). There were beliefs that a boy was eligible for marriage only when he could "defeat" or "beat" a female dancer by vigorously playing a musical instrument. A man's "ideal" masculine identity is questioned in songs like the following

*Pepa bhale kori babi oi lahari, dhule bhale kori babi*

(Play the horn well my love, play the drum well)

*Dhulore najane seu mur dhulia, mridonor nejane seu*

(My beloved doesn't know how to play the drum)

Folk songs present a highly contested, effective political space in which women can also articulate their views (Dlamini, 2009). An Assamese woman constructs an image of her man based on his ability to control folk instruments. On the other hand, the connection between agriculture and artistic performance is perceived in such songs like

*Tumi kori jaba ruwani dawoni, moinu kori jam hal*

(In the future, you cut the crops, I will plough our land)

*Tumi logai diba bihure gamosha, moinu pati dim xal*

(When you will weave *gamosha* for me, I will provide the amenities by making the weaving machine)

The ideas of sexual and cultural control have always been there in determining an ‘ideal’ man in agricultural festivals; a man’s position in Assamese agriculture-oriented folk performances glorifies male’s dominant position in the sexual act through a two-fold relationship with nature and the female. His identity has to go through the contradiction between showing his care and love for two of his most precious assets – woman and land; in addition, he needs to shuffle between different positions of the sexually dominant male, the protector, the decision-maker, the skillful and strong labourer and also the active cultural performer.

### **3.1.4 Folk Narrative, Assamese Modernity Discourse and Male Model**

Human beings do not live by sustenance alone; they are imaginative storytellers too. Neither are the Assamese people unaccustomed to this ritual of storytelling. The Assamese rural folk in their community centered living often exhibits an exulted sprit in matters related to the recollection of any past adventures, however remote those might be. The village folk would often sit under a nearby banyan tree/ Moraceae tree, or people in a small group might occupy any available wooden slabs in front of a small solitary rickety shop standing nearby a village square or in the winter nights both the elderly and the younger people would sit encircling a small fire-all eager to listen in rapt attention the next local legends, mythical tales or gripping recollections of someone’s forefather. Such instances of storytelling are quite ubiquitous in the everyday life of common folks. But it would be naïve to assume such tales or the storytelling practices to be innocent of any ideological and cultural innuendos. In fact, these stories play a pivotal role in the discursive constructions and disseminations of a masculine identity unique to the ‘idea’ of being an Assamese. The oral recollection and reconstruction of the stories from the preceding generations appropriates a particular kind of discourse on masculinity and modernity. Any kind of discussion with regard to the changing dynamics of a traditional Assamese society and

supposedly a diminishing description of the Assamese people would remain incomplete without reiterating the moral distinction between so called “*agor aru etiar din*” (the past and the present times) and lamenting over the onset of *adhunik din* (modern days).

Modernity has been and still continues to be a widely debated subject in the eastern part of India under the canonical influence of colonialism. The current study on the construction of masculine identity through the lens of rural storytelling closely identifies with the model of “our modernity” as propounded by Partha Chatterjee (Chatterjee, 1997). Chatterjee’s model of the construction of a modernity which can be deemed to be indigenous in origin is centered on the historical documentation of storytelling. While quoting Rajanarayan Basu’s ‘*Se kalar e kal* (Those Days and These Days), Partha Chatterjee opines that Rajanarayan Basu’s take on the inhabitants of the eighteenth century “seems to have been very much around in the inner precincts of Calcutta houses in the 1930s.” For Chatterjee, our modernity project in India is a cultural project of nationalism; a project to produce distinctly national modernity. (Chatterjee, 1997).

It should be noted that our current account on the aspects of modernity and storytelling is founded upon an auto-ethnographic study of an Assamese village, whereas the theoretical canon that we have appropriated is concerned with the available literary scholarships and accessible public lectures; nevertheless our collective experience(s) echoes similar characteristics of the storytelling, notably in this regard, the glorification of the past and correspondingly, a rather pessimistic attitude towards the present, in the eastern part of India.

Chatterjee's model of our modernity is chiefly centered on the seven key areas discussed by Rajanarayan Basu i.e. health, education, livelihood, social life, virtue, polity and religion. Further he also takes into account the improvement or decline in the above parameters. Otherwise, any ill-defined hypothesis about the people of the preceding times as simple, caring, compassionate and genuinely religious and the present-day society as cunning, devious, selfish and ungrateful (Chatterjee, 1997).

*Deha* or *Sarir* (body) constitutes an important motif in the collective psyche of the Assamese people. In the repository of Assamese tales, one may identify many such stories with similar design. Such stories are greatly significant in relation to the present study. For instance, the proverbial maxims such as, *deha thakilehe beha*, or *dehai natane aru* encapsulates the



prerequisite importance assigned by the collective psyche of the Assamese folk to an ideal corporeal entity in the creation of an ideal personhood. It must be noted that what Rajanarayan Basu has mentioned as *sarir* is quite exceptional in the vocabulary (Chatterjee, 1997).

It is intriguing to read how the recurring images of the challenges encountered in different geographical terrain are neatly coalesced with these different folkloric expressions of Assam. In the previous discussion concerning the aspects of the corporeal body and the folklore, I have duly emphasized how a man's identity is ingeniously connected to the nature of geographical challenges confronted by him. The stories which they treasure and recollect time and again, the episodes from their own past or their forefathers' underlies a strong sense of affinity towards the image of an ideal Assam inherited from the forefathers.

In one such discussion, an elderly person (ageing in between 65-70 years) fondly recollects his past. He is an inhabitant of Bachagaon, who had migrated from Majuli, a nearby river island in the year 1954. He aged nearly 12 years in 1954; and has started living at Bachagoan since then. He says:

During our days when we were young, we needed an entire day whenever we had to journey from Majuli to this village. This was due to the lack of any proper road connectivity or any transportation system. The only option we had was to travel on foot. During such adventures, we had to cross the mighty Brahmaputra, the dense forests populated with different species of wild animals. (He *pauses*) By no means was it an easy affair. You must be aware that the distance from here to Majuli can't be more than 25-30 Kilometers. But we had to start our journey in the early morning itself so that we could manage to reach here by the same evening. (He laughs and his eyes dazzle with pride) We used to carry *Bhimkol* (*Musa balbisiana*) and *Sandahguri* (roasted rice flour). Sometimes even the people that we came across on the road would generously offer us some snacks. I wonder! If you people who eat broiler chicken<sup>xvi</sup> could even think of undertaking such an arduous task? We used to cross ways with wild animals during the journey. So there was always that fear of getting killed, everywhere. One day, one of our friends lost his left hand in an encounter with a tiger. The villagers started calling him *Baghekhowa* (a victim of tiger attack). We often brought big fish and also tortoises from Majuli and distribute those among the whole village community. Catching such kind of

huge fish has only become a legend in your age. Aah! Those were the golden days, all gone forever!

A sound body or *deha* is the most essential element for an Assamese man. He has to beat the obstacles of nature, the challenges of the jungle. But there is a growing belief that the inflow of foreign goods and consumables has made the Assamese man unhealthy and delicate. It has become a custom (more or less) on the part of the older generation to refrain themselves from consuming any “imported” fish or chicken. They still relish dishes of local fish from the local *bills* (wetlands) and the rivers. Likewise, they are equally fond of meat recipes, if only the chicken, pigeon, duck, pork are taken from the households. It is a common assumption that these people make about the new generations that they are lazy and more vulnerable to diseases because they eat broiler<sup>xvii</sup> and imported fish (*salani mas*).

The breed of broiler *murgi* insinuates a symbolic metaphor of how Assamese people construe the flow of an alien lifestyle along with all the kinds of imported commodities and how these have gradually impaired the sound lifestyle and healthy habits of the Assamese. As if, it has become customary to reprimand the ‘new’/ young boys by referring to them as ‘broiler chicken’, men who lack physical strength:

You are all becoming broiler chicken; always want to have everything in front of the bed by not doing anything! You not only consume a lazy, feeble thing like broiler, indeed, you also have turned into a broiler! This will lead to the degeneration of the entire generation. Whereas your forefathers used to spend the whole day furrowing the fields for cultivation, you people forget even to take a walk for the smooth circulation of blood.

Partha Chatterjee referring to the notion of ‘our modernity’ states that it has been an old project of nationalism in Bengal from eighteenth-century itself (Chatterjee, 1997). But such inventions of ethnographic elements (from the late 20th and the early decades of the 21st century) indicates that the project of creating a version of modernity which could be identified as indigenous is relatively a newer phenomenon to the Assamese society than its Bengal counterparts.

Modernity is not a very new phenomenon to Assam. The ‘colonial idea of modernity’ which had arrived in Assam via Bengal initially made its appearance in realm of the Assamese literature of the 19th century and eventually emerged as a catalyst for the re-engineering of the social

structure of Assam. Noted personalities like: Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Hemchandra Baruah, Gunabhiram Baruah, Lakshminath Bezbarua, Padmanath Gohain Baruah, Hemchandra Goswami, Chandrakumar Agarwala, after getting English education in Bengal contributed to the changing social structure of Assam (Saikia, 1988). Most of these ideas were the offshoots of the colossal stratagem of the colonial modernity. The ethnographic accounts of storytelling (most of the stories, I have come across, belong to second decade of the 21st century) refers to the adaptation of colonial modern thoughts and lifestyle in the rural areas of Assam as a relatively new phenomenon. It reflect show two parallel discourses of thoughts and lifestyle have co-existed since the advent of colonial modernity in Assam: one refers to the modern life encompassing the colonial thoughts and ideas and the other often alludes to creating an imaginary past (as argued by Chatterjee, 1997) by glorifying the past days.

An Assamese teenager during the 21st century is arguably a hybrid specimen of these two discursive practices. The overflow of the so called ‘globalized’ ideas and thoughts through different mediums like television, the internet and so many other sources have manifested a notion of an ‘ideal’ modern man. Such projections are replete with the western values, of course, which have often the potential to overshadow any other ‘non-white-western’ values. On the other hand, it is the stories and folk knowledge that appeal and induce him to traverse on a quest in search of his roots and his ancestral legacy. Chatterjee (1997) has aptly observed that “we have described our experiences with modernity in the last century and a half, from Rajnarayan Basu to our contemporaries today. But this ambiguity does not stem from any uncertainty about whether to be for or against modernity.” (Chatterjee, 1997). Such a hybrid masculinity model is unique, which is different from the earlier models engendered from the ideals of other institutions such as: nationalism or colonialism. This model apparently emphasizes the aspects of ‘sound body’ as a prerequisite, not an option, to survive in a territory where challenges of nature are ubiquitous. This is a land where people are heavily dependent on the nature’s seasonal bounty, yet he identifies himself as a world citizen now transgressing both visible and invisible boundaries. He can aspire to dream and draw inspirations for his own ambitions from either the Korean pop-star group BTS or American WWE wrestlers whoever he identifies as his role model(s). But, his parents and elders will always persuade him to step into the fields, take up the plough for a sound body.

### 3.1.5 Kela: Slang, Folk Speech and Phallus Symbolism

In one of his television interviews aired on Frontier Television Channel, Zubeen Garg, arguably the most popular singer icon of Assam in the contemporary times, uses an Assamese slang i.e. *Kela*. This is a term that in common parlance alludes to the phallus (penis).

*Amar pratitu lorai kela nukuake kotha nokoi, khong uthileu kela, bhalpaleu kela*

(One would hardly find any guy who doesn't speak without alluding to *Kela*, whether he is angry or jolly, doesn't really matter.)

This particular word *Kela*, is gradually finding its expression into newer sphere(s) following its injection into the popular culture by a youth icon of the stature of Zubeen Garg himself. Therefore, quite naturally it does strike our imagination towards a pertinent question of inquiring the significance of certain speech category, particularly slang in this regard, in the creation of a masculine phallic symbolism.

In rural parlance, the informal discussions (*addas*) among the young boys hardly conclude without using the word *Kela*. This expression, during such occasions makes the debates and discussions more friendly, participatory, "masculine" and informal. It must be argued that, the expression is largely suggestive of the male genitalia (the phallus) amongst the Assamese speech community, therefore it fosters to two key aspects to ponder upon, corresponding to the present study. Firstly, it avails a scope to inquire how the agents of meaning making with a particular system of folklore imply the idea of being 'male' thereby assigning the influential male power within the collective psyche, and diametrically its symbolic inference of the lack and anxiety. In a friendly conversation among some boys, it becomes quite evident in different kinds of sentences. For instance:

*kela! Ki thanda porise o'* (ahh, it is very cold weather!).

Here the word *Kela* as an exclamatory interjection.

Furthermore, *Kela ki koi aso be toi?* (Uff! What are you talking about?),

Here the word *kela* amplifies an interrogative sentence.

And lastly,

*(bol noi kaxole jau, amoni lagise kela.)* (Let's go to the riverbank, I am quite bored).

Here the word *kela* enhances the state of boredom of the speaker in a descriptive sentence.

In every context, it adds varied emphasis, becoming a 'signifier' which emphasizes the rest of the structure of the sentences. As a word, it contributes to the process of meaning making in two ways, either used as an exaggeration or as a symbolic metaphor of friendship. It is obvious that neither the speaker nor the listener in the conversation recollects the phallic signification, rather it becomes a spontaneous, even an unconscious verbal interjection during the speech act, at times enhancing emotive signification. Therefore, in Lacanian estimation, it becomes no more than an 'empty signifier'-a signifier which has a phallic signification but doesn't refer to any particular signified (Lacan & Fink, 2006). As a 'symbol', the signifier *Kela* apparently linked to the 'imaginary' phallus (often regarded as a *taboo*) to the 'real' mechanism of power, repressed desire and anxieties corresponding to the collective Assamese psyche. *Kela* is not the signifier of the phallus in real sense of the term; rather it links with the greater connotations.

Let's shift our locus in relation to the signifier *Kela* to a more amiable and common parlance where it is uttered as verbal insignia of 'male' identity, the element of being 'superior', 'brute' or 'normal', thereby conforming to the norms of 'hegemonic masculinity'. Only a few months ago, during one of our usual gathering in front of a shop, under a Banyan tree playing carom with my friends, in an unbridled state, were getting loud at each other by uttering the word *Kela*. It must be noted that we were so deeply invested in the game that we hardly noticed the elderly people who were present at a close proximity. Then, we heard a voice of one of our village uncles: He reprimanded:

*"Ki koltu logai logai kotha koi aso!"*

(Why are you guys uttering the *banana* word, (indirectly referring to the use of 'kela'))?)

We were made to feel ashamed in front of him. Being from a society that advocates a high degree of moral integrity; and expects the younger ones not to relapse into any form of speech or utterance deemed to be indecent especially in presence of the elderly persons and that too in a

public space; we indeed find ourselves trapped in an inexcusable moral *aporia*. His insinuation of ‘banana’ made us recollect the other possible innuendo i.e. the phallus. And instantly the earlier intended expression as an innocent qualifier of being ecstatic is undermined; whereas it acquires an overtone of being an abusive slang that *simply* refers to male genitalia only. Hence the *free play* of meaning(s) gets temporarily suspended.

Another day, during one of our ritualistic evening *addas* with the friends, Nabajit (a friend of mine) and I, standing by the roadside, were discussing the cricket match we had played the previous day; then came Bikash, a mutual friend. Soon, we had noticed Bablu, a boy from our neighbourhood passing by all alone. He did not like to spend time with us, maybe, because he identified himself more with the what we colloquially term as ‘*maiki*’ (female)

Here is a snippet from that particular episode:

My friend asked him with a smile:

‘*Bahh! Aji toiu ahili dekhun keti!*’

(Wow, you also have come *keti!*)

*It must be informed that, in this particular region, the colloquial expression, Keti is inferred as the opposite signifier (having a kind of gendered overtone) in relation to kela, i.e. female genitalia in Assamese speech repository. The utterance of this word is noticeably infrequent, (once in a blue moon) among the boys’ community; the occasional uses imply mockery of a boy having effeminate qualities or to make a sexist comment on women. It is found then even women have greater tendency to employ Kela; thus, keti remains an exception. Underlying in this regard, a deeply embedded gendered taboo, often culturally reproduced and hence, associated with the women’s sexuality (the ‘other’ in opposition to the ‘masculine traits’), the cultural connotation of these two words calls for a deeper understanding of the hegemonic masculinity, both these two words symbolize here the ‘lack’ in a Lacanian sense (Lacan & Fink, 2006). The use of Kela by a woman unconsciously warps herself into the trap of ‘being the lack’. She further attempts to satisfy her repressed patriarchal desires and thereby conforming to the male maker of the meaning in ‘Mulveyian’ estimation (Mulvey, 1975). This is more problematic for the gendered ‘other’. In my example of the supposedly ‘effeminate’ boy Bablu, whenever he is mocked with*

the word *Keti*, he is being castrated; here his ‘masculine’ subjectivity is unacknowledged by substituting the linguistic- cultural signification of the ‘real’ phallic symbol appropriated for the ‘ideal’ male. Subsequent anxiety would eventually affix within his conflicting subjectivity, an acute apprehension of the castration.

The implication of the word as an exaggeration and its phallic connotation constantly persuades, reminds a boy to acquire more masculine traits and be powerful. This masculine symbol, culturally produced within a distinct speech community, hence actualizing the connotation of the phallus, as the chief signifier of male power and reaffirming of its ideological supremacy assigned to the male, in the collective unconscious of people. Indeed, it has great deal to do with the Lacanian concept of Phallus. (Frosh, 1994). The subjectivity of this word laid in the concept of how power operates in the society through speech act and socially prohibited lore of the society. The discourse of *Kela*, being an emblem of masculine image and its appropriation by the male subjects help establish and justify the male being the dominant, superior and the desirable gender.

The first example that we have cited about Zubeen Garg’s utterance of the word *Kela* on a public platform which triggered a series of ‘reposts’ in social media platforms thereafter indicates a very critical aspect of how a ‘phallic’ symbol represents the collective unconscious i.e. the repressed id of the Assamese community. Zubeen Garg, a popular singer, often projected to be the ‘heartthrob of the Assamese youth’ by the popular media has arguably been one of the most powerful male icons in the new millennium for Assam.

In the backdrop of the statewide agitation(s) against the then controversial, “Citizenship Amendment Bill (2019)”; seemingly occupying an anti-BJP led NDA government stance , Zubeen, characteristically, in an interview regarding the BJP government’s much hyped earlier political slogan of *Pariborton meaning* ‘for a change’, once remarked:

“*Pariborton Xobdotu xunibole bhal, kintu hoise bal kela!*”

(*Pariborton* is an appeasing word to the ears, but in reality everything is nonsense, *Kela!*)

As expected, this one statement spread like wildfire in the social media platforms, exacting immense popularity and validation from his fandom in a very short span of time. It triggered the

surge of repressed sub-nationalists aspirations, of being a nation that has always been at the periphery of the ‘mainstream’ discourse of a postcolonial nation-state. The sentimental call to seek greater freedom for self-determination, to be a determined voice against the state sponsored agencies of marginalization.

I shall take up these questions of nationalism, sub-nationalism in the later section(s) of the thesis. But, what I find genuinely interesting here is how the public persona of Zubeen Garg seamlessly translates as “I” in the public sphere; arguably this shift can largely be attributed to the icon’s unbridled utterance, expression of the desire for the ‘forbidden’ pleasure of the slang. *Kela* in this regard encapsulates the collective ‘id’, something pervasive. It is unacceptable to the society, forbidden by the ‘superego’. It is not only an utterance of exaggeration; it is closely entangled with the darker side of the subject ‘I’ or the ‘I’ his follower(s) who finds a relational, an ideal ‘I’ in him, the extended ‘self’ which is repressed therefore desires to speak the unhallowed in front of the public. The word, *Kela* constituted as a metaphor of masculinity works as an ‘unconscious’ i.e. the ‘id’ of the patriarchal structure. It reinforces the patriarchal values of being a hegemonic masculine man; be a heterosexual man with a rough and tough body, of becoming one who owns a sexual body which can inflict a ‘paradox of anxiety’ for those who cannot fulfill these gendered demands, the one who is doomed to be ‘the other’.

### **3.2 The Perception of Caste in Assam**

Invariably, masculinity is dependent on the social status assigned to a man by different social practices and belief systems. Such a mechanism of masculinity construction may vary either marginally or considerably in different regions of the world. The idea of a ‘masculine man in India is highly contingent on the inter-connections of gender and caste. Caste appears to be one of the significant indicators of gender disparity in India. A formidable body of existent research works on the inter sectionality of gender and caste in India have emphasized on the experience(s) of women. Different scholars discuss how the boundaries of caste were regulated by the concept of ‘Surplus Women’ and the control of women sexuality through endogamy (Ambedkar, 1917) (Mitra, 2021). Uma Chakravorty mentions about the concept of Brahminical patriarchy (Chakravorty, 2018), Rege has written about how the oppression of women and the oppression of



the lower castes is inextricably linked (Rege, 2006). On the other hand, the question of caste and men in India has been debated by different scholars concerning various aspects including concepts like honour (Gupte, 2013) (Gorringe, 2018) (Chowdhry, 2004), the domination of Dalit women by sexually attractive men (Vandana, 2020) (Rao, 2014). But, regarding the importance of caste in Indian masculine idols, what I am invested with is the nature of masculinity with regard to the dynamics of caste; how masculinities are perceived, practiced and transferred through social behaviour, along with the pervasive nature of caste politics and psychology of men. It is interesting to observe how caste continues to impact in a dominant way in both the personal and public space of man, often spilling into the socio-political sphere. Universally, masculinity is dependent on the social status of a man assigned by different cultural practices or codes like folklore, social practices, rituals, festivals. But, the mechanism of masculinity construction is different in each region. The idea of a 'masculine man' in India is conditioned by the existing social parameters including caste. It is interesting to note how the concept of caste itself becomes a contested premise in determining gender relationships like masculinity in rural parlance. The masculinity of any region also reflects a contextualized socio-political understanding of that region. The issue of caste stemming from the masculinity canon problematizes the notions of caste and gender, more importantly, the regional concept of caste in a region. This study aims to focus on the issues of gender and caste through two main perspectives. They are namely: How caste becomes an important factor in the masculinity crisis for both lower and upper-caste men? Secondly, the nature of caste in the construction of masculinity here in Assam needs to be looked at. It also foregrounds how inter sectionality of masculinity and caste in Assam assigns new meanings to the study of caste.

Caste stratification in Assamese society is radically driven by the dogmatic behavior of the upper caste like in other Indian states. Bimal J. Dev and Dilip K. Lahiri mentions that "Caste in Assam and the system of social stratification are significantly free from rigidities and dogmatic overtones" (Dev & Lahiri, 1984). Non-dogmatic approach of Brahmins, non-oppressor status and non-availability of untouchables (Dev & Lahiri, 1984) hints a caste frame of Assam which cannot be identified in the lines of caste structure of the other states. This study aims to encompass two major aspects: firstly, we intend to look at the inter-connection between caste and masculinity in Assam; secondly, we intend to look at how masculinities could prove pivotal in finding out the unexplored manifestations of caste in Assam. I have divided the study into

several sub chapters; each chapter will deal with a social practice to locate the larger questions of caste dynamics in the region.

A cursory glance at the daily life at Bachagaon would endow preliminary insights regarding how the inhabitants of this locality have over the years constructed, imbibed gendered notions with regard to various social practices; thereby providing valuable insights into how caste is often perceived, lived with or practiced at the local level, and how notions of masculinities get intermingled with caste. Different social practices, oral literature, customs, rituals and performances are juxtaposed to create the contextualized meaning of caste. Assamese masculinities and caste proffers two basic premises for academic engagements. Firstly, it ascribes to the fact that ‘othering’ and ‘difference’ are common among male, and the meaning of masculinities vary in relation to socio-cultural contexts and demographic composition(s) of a region.

The notion of an ‘ideal’ Assamese personhood persisting in localized form of popular culture and folklore among men is a dynamic concept. It takes on different shapes and the meaning varies for different caste of males. For instance, let us take the example of an ideal look of man. It is common belief that

*kola bamun aru boga dum (kaibartta) k biswas koribo nuari.*

(One must not believe a dark-skinned Brahmin or a fair person belonging to the Kaibartta caste).

This sentence assigns the fair colour to the Brahmin and the dark skin tone to the *kaibartta* caste. Apparently innocent, this is a wonderful example of how racism works in veiled ways.

Apart from subscribing a high degree of value to the physical attributes, the character attributes of a given caste is also culturally pre-determined. It is commonly believed that

*Burha garu sin ghahonit, mahanatar sin mahonit*

(The sign of a Mahanta is in the bean farm whereas the sign of an old cow is in the grass field)

Through this popular saying, a man from a high caste Mahanta community is expected to show his caste “highness” by practicing abstinence in society. Assigning the fair colour to the upper caste male certainly connotes the sense privileges to the upper caste male. But, what I find

interesting is the floating of the frames and stereotypes set by the society for every caste male to achieve ideal personhood. Such cultural segregations based on skin colours within men and different caste indirectly reflects a cultural system that stereotypically excludes the lower caste man from any 'ideal man' status. But, the study of men and masculinities has a larger role to play in such studies. Every privilege enjoyed by men always brings buckets of obstacles in front of them; the issue of caste has to be thus studied through perspectives like male anxiety, duty and psychology.

### 3.2.1 Adolescent, Masculinity and Rites of Passage in Assamese Society

During the Bhadra month (September-October) of the Assamese calendar, the Assamese celebrate the birth month of Neo-vaishnavite saint Sankardeva by celebrating a month-long *Naam*<sup>xviii</sup> performance in the Namghar (Community prayer hall). Irrespective of caste, groups of young boys go to the Namghar to take part in the ceremonial *Naam prasnaga*. Because of the advice of their parents or because of their own sense of identity-consciousness, they dress up in traditional attires such as *Dhoti*<sup>xix</sup>, *Chelleng sadar*<sup>xx</sup> and *Gamosha*<sup>xxi</sup>. Their participation in the ceremony symbolically refers to two kinds of connection. Firstly, it indicates their urge and curiosity to dress like their grown-ups, their fathers and elders. Secondly, there is also an urge to follow the path of religious salvation, one of the important rites of passage of manhood in Indian philosophy. Rites of passage as a ceremony or event that marks the transition from boyhood to manhood is a dying tradition in modern societies. But, in the rural and traditional Assamese society, these practices continue. It continues through two ceremonies *Sharanloa*<sup>xxii</sup> and *Lagunloa*<sup>xxiii</sup>. *Sharanloa* is a Neo-vaishnavite traditional ceremony of taking religious and spiritual teachings from the Sattradhikar or Gosain (neo-Vaishnavite monk) and *Lagunloa* refers to the swearing ceremony with a holy thread. In *Lagunloa* ceremony, with the holy thread one continues wearing from the left shoulder to the right crossing the chest thereafter, he is accepted by the *gurus* or teachers. This ceremony is believed as the individual's initiation into the school in Hinduism. One's participation in *Lagunloa* ceremony symbolically refers to two kinds of meaning. Firstly, it initiates the visible difference between a "high caste" Brahmin or Nath Yogi boy with the other caste boys. It is important to cite here that *Lagunloa* (Upanayan) ceremony is exclusive for the Brahmins and Nath Yogi communities. Secondly, the ceremony imposes a high degree of caste duties in their next life. Both the ceremonies carry significant meaning for an

individual; through these two ceremonies, a boy attains the status of a man. After these ceremonies, he formally attains the new status of a young man, accepted by society as a contributor. These two rites of passage are mandatory before marriage and both the rituals are sacred and provide young boys with the opportunity to transform their consciousness. Van Gennep in his study of Rites of Passage considers it as a transition from one social role to another through three elements i.e. separation, transition and reincorporation (Gennep, 1977). But, what is important here is that the local meaning of masculinity attains through such practices of rites of passage. Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette focus that rites of passage urges on masculine attributes like aggression, competitiveness and the need to dominate, which they refer to as 'immature masculinity' (Moore & Gillette, 1990). Whereas Lagunloa is an adopted idea from Pan-Indian Brahminical tradition, Sharanloa certainly refers to a religious and spiritual meaning of manhood, a meaning which signifies the local idea of Assamese masculinity and the impact of Neo-Vaishnavite spiritual ideology in Assamese masculinity. An Assamese boy attains the status of manhood through the ceremony of completing religious and spiritual teachings from a guru (teacher).

What I find interesting is that these rituals reflect caste stratification both literally and symbolically. Where marriage is the essential responsibility according to the Hindu tradition of India, Saranloa and Lagunloa are the symbols of getting salvation in life. These two rites mark the entry into the adult community and separate a boy from childhood and boyhood. Through these rites of passage, young boys are assigned the role of complete personhood through religious-cultural ceremonies. In the rural world of Bachagaon, the caste division among young boys is blurred in different social practices and spheres; one cannot divide young boys by their castes in public spheres like Namghars and cricket fields. Caste becomes a marker of identity at the time the boys near the age when they are considered fit to undertake the rites of passage.

The symbolic pattern of both the ceremonies symbolizes the social meaning assigned to both the caste. The Lagunloa ceremony here in Bachagaon is organized by the community-members at their homes. They invite three or seven Brahmin men as a symbolic teacher and through a two-day long ceremony, complete the religious and spiritual teaching for a young boy by providing him with a holy thread which he has to wear through his lifetime. In the ritual of sharanloa, folks traditionally move from their homes to the adobe of the neo-vaishnavite guru (Sattradhikar or

gosai). Sometimes, the people in the village invite a Sattradhikar to their Namghar for the ritual. Where Lagunloa ceremony is considered as an individual ceremony for a boy, the Sharanloa is organized in a social platform for a group of boys. Symbolically, the place of the ceremony reflects the societal value assigned to a Brahmin boy, as something which is an act of obligation with regard to societal norms, and similarly for a lower caste boy it is an individual need. A lower-caste boy has to prove his urge for such teachings, something considered for a Brahmin boy as a birthright.

The other aspect that needs to be looked at is the meaning of a teacher. Any Brahmin man who has readily participated in the ceremony and wears a Lagun is considered to be qualified to teach the new boy about his duties and roles in the upcoming life. But, attaining Sharana does not allow a man from another caste to give religious and spiritual teachings to a newcomer. It can only be performed by a Neo-Vaishnavite monk. The literal meaning of Sharana itself signifies taking shelter under a teacher (which is not for the Brahmins). The impact of Neo-Vaishnavite ideology, the high degree of meaning assigned to religious and spiritual knowledge in Assamese masculinity plays a vital role in such constructions of manhood. Such classification of rites of passage among men certainly reflects the inherited caste structure in Assamese society, a structure that becomes visible with a boy's transition to early manhood.

The two rituals of Sharanaloo and Lagunloa belong to two different worldviews of Neo-Vaishnavism and Hinduism. More importantly, the caste dynamics of Neo-Vaishnavism and Hinduism are different from each other. But, what I argue here is that the rites of passage of men certainly reflect a contextualized manifestation of caste mechanism in the rural areas of Assam. Comparison can not be done between these two ceremonies. But, the popular acceptance of these two ceremonies in the Assamese worldview certainly refers to the inherited caste mechanism in the region.

### **3.2.3 Controlling and Protecting Woman: the Concept of Honor**

The concept of honor has been a focal point of masculinity studies in India. The caste-based honor practices through endogamy plays a crucial role in establishing caste-based hierarchy as well as subjugation of women. The concept of honor and caste purity has registered a

considerable degree of academic scholarship on Caste and Masculine identity in India. Prem Chowdhry discusses the association of masculine identity with honor by controlling land, money and women (Chowdhry, 2015). Endogamy, honor and caste hierarchy in Assam foreground two academic questions. Firstly, it is about how the higher caste people create their understanding of caste honor; secondly, it is also about how the marriage relations influence the anxieties of manhood. In the annals of history, it is interesting to find out how a higher caste Brahmin man's masculine image is dependent on his role as a protector of caste purity alongside consumer of women's sexuality by marrying a Brahmin girl at an early age. The second aspect that catches our attention is how a social class attained through the position in the decision-making body defines the issue of endogamy and caste among the higher caste Brahmins.

Endogamy is probably best understood as representing caste honor for Brahmins in Assam. Among all the caste, I intend to discuss endogamy and honor through Brahmins as they are the main group to carry forward the legacy of caste hierarchy. To establish our intention to demonstrate endogamy here, Brahmins from our research site Bachagaon represent the overall caste-based gender mechanism of Assam. Like the other regions in India, traditionally, men play the role of the protector of caste and family honor in Assam. But, the nature of its mechanism reflects a localized picture of Brahmin masculinity. Traditionally, women have no caste of their own. Through the *Kanyadan*<sup>xxiv</sup> (giving away of one's daughter by the father) in the marriage ceremony, women sever the entire lineage with her family (*sut singi jua or gotra singi joa*<sup>xxv</sup>) and adopt her new family and caste. If a 'high caste' woman marries a 'lower caste' man, she gets relegated to her in-law's 'lower caste'. But, if a Brahmin boy marries a 'lower caste' woman, she attains Brahmin caste status through her husband. But, to achieve the status of a Brahmin woman, a 'lower caste' woman has to go through a series of purification rituals.

What I am interested in exploring here is how through the practice of endogamy, the image of a Brahmin male is created as more 'pure' than other caste males. Moreover, my intention here is also to find out how a male member is believed to be the protector of 'caste purity' by protecting women from "falling" into the lower caste. My collected accounts are not prevalent in the area in contemporary times; such examples are half a century old. But it has a great deal to do with the current beliefs of endogamy. In the later section of this study I will discuss how such beliefs of 'caste purity' and male duties have impacted the social status of individuals.

Child marriages were common during the mid-twentieth century in Bachagaon among Brahmins. A Brahmin girl had to get herself married before attaining puberty to protect her family from getting relegated into a lower caste. One of the informants, Bimali Devi narrates about her family's past:

My father had to marry two sisters from the same family under a pressing circumstance. When he went to see my mother, she was about to attain her puberty. Her family was in a hurry to arrange her marriage. But, my father fell in love with the younger one of her family. So, he decided to marry both of them; if he had refused to marry the elder sister, she had to get married to a *sudir* (non-brahmin).

Such instances were commonly found during the mid-twentieth century. It portrays the duty of a Brahmin man to “protect” Brahmin woman from “falling” into the lower caste. The role assigned by his caste to save a Brahmin woman's caste status elevates him to the rank of a savior of his caste honor too. But, it also foregrounds a connection between the purity of Brahmin men and social stigma towards women's sexuality. It symbolizes an inherited caste mechanism that makes a Brahmin man's social image different from another caste man who can marry a woman after the attainment of her puberty too. The acute sense of social stigma associated with the woman after the attainment of puberty is loaded with meaning here. It is believed among the Brahmins that a girl after reaching puberty becomes impure till she sits in front of the holy fire of Hindu marriage. Such practices of endogamy in the history through child marriage enhanced the gap between Brahmin and other men. Here, A Brahmin man becomes the symbol of pureness, not to be attacked by the impurity of a woman.

Such practice of child marriage is not prevalent in the village in contemporary times. But, endogamy remains an important tool of Brahminical patriarchy. One can see more than a single case of inter-caste marriages every year. In the year 2020 itself; Brahmins in Bachagaon witnessed four such marriages by their boys. But, the Brahmin community maintained the caste status through the excommunication of all the four boys from the caste matrix and imposing restrictions against taking part in community gatherings of Brahmins. They had to go through a purification process by offering “fines” (generally monetary) to the Brahmin society to re-enter the community. The Vishnu temple situated in the midst of Bachagaon is considered as the place where Brahmins use to sit, discuss and take decision to protect their caste status. This temple is

exclusive to the Brahmins of the village. A society named Brahma Samaj (managing committee of the temple) takes every community decision regarding marriage, ritual and other caste matters from this place. As an institution, what I find interesting about this society is the intersectionality of matters of caste honour and class privileges.

In 2020, amid the Covid pandemic, Jibo Sarma married a girl from the Kalita caste and Sonal Sarma, son of the Secretary of the Vishnu Mandir Managing Committee married a scheduled caste girl. The family of Jibo Sarma was banned from community functions for more than one year till the interview stated below was taken. Interestingly, the Vishnu Mandir immediately arranged the purification ceremony for Sonal Sarma within twenty days. Ratul Sharma, the brother of Jibo Sarma, angrily said

I will file a case against this committee; forget about the inclusion, the members of the Brahma Samaj does not even take a glass of water at our home. But look at Sonal, only because he is the secretary's son, he is no more an outsider of the community. Who will speak about this truth? I will wait for another one month and will eventually file a police report against them.

Such examples surely draw our attention towards the inter-connection between caste honour and social statuses possessed by the Brahma Samaj committee within the Brahmins in the village. It reflects how internal hidden privileges based on social status plays an important role among the Brahmin males. The caste status of a Brahmin is hereditary; but, one may lose through establishing marriage connection with the lower caste people. The focus here is how social class is a non-separable element of safeguarding the superior Brahmin male status. The combination of the privilege of being Brahmin, the social burden of caste purity and the position in community decision making makes a very complex picture of Brahmin masculinity.

### **3.2.4 Anxiety, Jokes, Construction of Tribal**

The ethnic diversity of Assam reflects the complexity of the social set-up in the state. The tribal and non-tribal question is perhaps linked with every aspect of the Assamese society. It is important to look at how such division has a diverse role to play in the construction of masculinity. This study encompasses two aspects of masculinities. How the non-tribal people construct the image of tribal as non-witty and over-dependent on physical strength and how such



representation problematizes the existing contours of masculinity based on physical strength here in Assam. Stanley Brandes in his theory about jokes and masculinity argues that “Jokes and joking provide the main fabric by which men are bound to each other daily” (Brandes, 1980). He extends his argument that “In Jokes, men reveal and share their most deeply buried anxieties with one another and thereby achieve a feeling of intimacy and camaraderie that they would find difficult to express through more overt means” (Brandes, 1980). Here in Bachagaon, I find it interesting how jokes about a tribal group, the Mising carries connotations of non-tribal men’s anxiety about being less superior in physical strength. The non-tribals who narrate jokes and different touches of humour about the Mising<sup>xxvi</sup> play away with their anxieties of being outcast from a local masculinity frame based on physical strength. People of Assam are divided into three distinct groups i.e. tribes of the hills, plain tribes and non-tribal of the plain. There have been different tribal non-tribal and plain-hill tensions throughout the history. But, to establish our point, the plain tribe and non-tribal question is more evident. Demographically, the tribes in the plain have more daily connection with the Assamese non-tribal and they use to share same social environment in their daily life.

In Bachagaon village, the Misings live in the extreme south of the Subansiri riverbank of the village. According to J.H. Bhandari “Mising people are composed of many tribes which migrated to the plains of Assam from the hills in the past” (Bhandari, 1984). Their historical lineage to the hill tribes certainly reflects the hill-plain tension. For livelihood, they depend on agriculture, poultry farming and some of them are involved in the ferry service of the Subansiri river, a major river way that connects Lakhimpur and Majuli island. The physical appearance of a Mising man is short and muscular. In informal discussions, it is common to hear from Mising boys

*Ami ranga saul r bhat khau, tahati axamiya bure boga saul khai keneke amar xoman jur pabi.*

(We Misings eat red rice. How can you (the Assamese) strong like us when all that you can manage to eat is white rice?)

Such statements certainly refer to how Mising people are considered as superior in physical strength from the non-tribal. The other factor which is important about the Mising man is their connection with the river and the higher natural obstacles overcome by them in comparison to

the non-tribal people. Yearly floods, non-availability of modern basic needs like electricity and proper road communication compels them to involve more with nature.

The earlier discussions of this thesis have already discussed the dependency of masculine identity on physical strength and nature. The geographical milieu creates a high degree of demand for physical strength and good health. It is a common perception about the tribal man of North East India being physically strong and fit. But, the jokes and humour about the Mising men in the non-tribal men's informal discussions actually reflect their anxiety. For instance, Cricket is a game widely played in every corner of Assam. In Bacahagaon, Assamese teenage boys spend most of their time playing cricket matches between different localities at weekends. During one such match, we played between our Warriors Club and Na-Ali Cricket Club

*Hehti okol lal sakka, lal sakka siori thakibo. Ji ball e paok okol bat ghurabo, ami jadi good lengths low ball di jau atau ball hehti logabo nuare. Mising e jiman ga jur dibo heman slow ball koribi sob ball catch uthibo.*

(They will only cry for six. Whatever we bowl at them, they will only swing their bats, using brute force. If we bowl at good length and cut down the pace, they would find it hard to connect. They may use all their physical strength but we should deliver slower balls. They will get out trying to hit every ball.

Such statements indicate the non-tribal men's common perception about "tribal" Mising using brute strength in a strategic sport. Already existing stereotypes and prior experience compel them to create the image of Mising boys to be physical strong and less strategic. Another aspect to be considered is the creation of Mising as untrustworthy. One such popular joke about Mising ferry drivers goes like:

One day a Mising ferry driver was shouting '*firi (Free) nau, firinaw*' to attract passengers and all the passengers went to his ferry for crossing the Suwansiririver during their journey from Lakhimpur to Majuli. Once they boarded the boat, the Ferry driver started demanding ferry fare and by arguing that he was shouting *Miri (MISING) nau*, not *firi nau*.

This joke about them reflects the perception of Mising as not trustworthy. Another proverb '*Mirit mita, Balit muta*' (Making friendship with Mising is like peeing in the sand.) re-emphasize the same untrustworthy image about Mising men among the non-tribal men discourse. All the examples here at the symbolic level invite our attention towards the high degree of gender politics involve in masculine spaces like a cricket ground. As Brandes (1980) refers to jokes as the medium to reveal the most buried anxieties of men, such jokes about the Misings certainly refers to the male anxiety of being inferior to the tribals in physical strength which is the most glorified aspect of masculinity here in Assam. It is a common perception about tribal Mising in Bachagaon that Mising people are healthier. It is common among non-tribals to refer to the Mising as corporally superior as they consume different meat and boiled dishes. Men's anxieties and insecurities about their lack with other men's presence have a great role to play in how men adopt different measures to deal with it. There is no doubt that the most popular humour, narrative and jokes about the Mising in Bachagaon reveal the male anxiety and concerns about masculinity. Misings as untrustworthy and over-dependent on physical strength and less strategic in the non-tribal narratives certainly carries a broader connotation of male anxiety, which is constructed by the worldview and daily practices of people in Assam.

### **3.2.5 Brahmin Man, Agriculture Practices and Hybrid Masculinity**

Our study on Assamese man has focused on two parameters -connection with nature and dependency on agriculture. These two common questions and the local practices of caste hierarchies influence a hybrid concept of caste. My argument here is based more on the psychological anxieties of men rather than the direct manifestation of caste and masculinity. The concept of physical strength is relatively marginal in the projection of local Assamese masculine idols; nevertheless, it certainly invites a direct connection between geography and caste. Such dependency of masculinity on local geography symbolizes how the geographical terrain of Assam problematizes the already established concept of caste.

The caste parameter here is hugely influenced by the exemption of the higher caste i.e. the Brahmins from doing physical labour in the agricultural field. On another note, the community knowledge created by the rural folklore and daily practices creates a masculinity frame heavily influenced by the physical work in the agricultural field. The amount of caste privilege enjoyed by the higher caste Brahmin by getting exempted from doing hard physical labour also

symbolically exempt them from having the masculine attributes constructed in an agricultural field.

The meanings of agrarian masculinity are constructed through different mediums: in oral folklore, in social interactions and during festivals. It is inherited in men's direct and psychological connections with their assets like bullock and paddy fields. The most notable manifestation of such masculinity can be found during the annual festival of Garu Bihu. The symbolic relationship between men and his bullock during the annual bath of cattle's through his urge to the bullocks to be stronger and healthier establishes a direct psychological connection between the men, bullock and agricultural productivity. The annual bath ceremony we have discussed in our previous chapter reflects how folk festivals, agricultural field and the image of a 'good farmer' renders the agricultural connection of a man mandatory in the masculinity frame of an Assamese man. A similar significance can be construed when a Brahmin man also involves himself with the bullock bathing ceremony during Garu Bihu. His involvement in the festival can be seen as a floating signifier that has no connection with the literal meaning of the ritual. Neither does he plough the land with his bullock, nor will the unproductivity of his bullocks hamper his image in the society. But, his involvement in the bullock bathing ritual signifies his urge to be a 'good farmer' along with the importance of agrarian activities in the construction of Assamese masculinity. The urge is personal, a psychological dilemma to compete with the men belonging to other castes. He lives in a land where agricultural works assign every meaning. Thus, he is trapped in a dilemma between the caste privilege and demand of the local masculinity. My own experience in the agricultural field has helped me witness many Brahmin men who carry *dangori* (a bundle of paddy sheaves) on their heads instead of using *biriya* (a traditional bamboo made tool used to bring paddy sheaves on one's shoulder). In the agricultural field, during the time of rice crop gathering, it is common to see Brahmin males in the paddy fields, often advising his labourers or lending a helping hand.

Throughout the chapter, we have examined how masculinities and caste hierarchies are reflected in themes like anxiety, dominance and control. Here, I wish to put forward an argument that local paradigms of masculinity offer a new dimension towards the already accepted theme of caste and gender in the Indian region. Whether I am writing about involves the agricultural practices, marriages or folklore texts like jokes and proverbs; the recurrent pattern of masculinity

and caste provides a local idea of control, dominance and has been greatly influenced by the idea of being 'ideal' and is a collaboration of age-old idea based on nature and the influx of caste hierarchy. Masculinity and caste status in Assam reveals a pervasive concern with the local meaning of caste in Assam. In this regard, it is also mandatory to study how this relationship of caste and gender problematizes the hegemonic connotation of caste. From physical strength to social status, masculine identity, here, it is established through a local, geographical and organic nature of man's relationship with fellow men, women and nature. Traditionally being an agriculturally dependent nation, Assamese masculinity carries perhaps the most dominant meaning of social relationships. I find it interesting to observe that gender relationship in agricultural practices is based on the existing caste norms of India. On a surface level, caste carries a larger meaning of masculine stratification, but the local inherited meaning certainly foregrounds a hybrid meaning of caste-based privileges. Brahmin men's masculinity here carries the privileges of belonging to the higher caste, being a man and enjoying the Brahminical patriarchy. But, the accepted norms and symbols based on agriculture and physical strength certainly compel them to feel the lack of being able to display raw physical strength of other castes working in the agricultural fields. In contrast to other castes, they feel the sense of being deprived of a muscular body that works in the field, feeding and protecting his family from the obstacles of nature and presenting a model of survival in the hilly and plain terrains. So, the Brahmin masculinity here breaks the barriers of already established caste dynamics and tries to cope up with the local measures through a hybrid form of manhood; this is manhood which always attempts to validate itself in both the spectrum of caste and local worldview.