

CHAPTER 4

EMERGENCE OF THE “NEW MAN”: ASSAMESE NATIONALISTIC MASCULINITY IN POST-INDEPENDENCE INDIA

This study addresses the relationship between the legacy of Assamese nation-making project in post-independence era, the socio-political question and the ideal model of Assamese masculinity. Based on the dynamic, chaotic and restless post-independence history and quest for a unique Assamese identity, this study foregrounds how ideal Assamese masculinity in the post-independence India has been shaped by the prevailing socio-political climate, particularly in relation to the development of Assamese nationalism. There has been a constant process of re-construction of nationalist ideas and re-framing of the masculine idols. The re-framing of masculine idols has a great deal to do with the socio-political changes in Assam in the post-independence era.

This chapter reveals the inextricability of post-independence Assamese masculine identity in this three-fold co-constitutive relationship of history, national identity and gender. I argue here that the shifting of the masculine models in the period has a great role to play in the modern historical formation of Assam. In our discussion on the term *dangoriya* and the politics behind the quest for a signature term to cope the influx of foreign identity (a term like like *bhadralok*), we have discussed how the figure of an ideal man has a great role to play in the nation-making project. This chapter extends the discussion on inter-connection between nationalism and masculinity here in Assam and how the recent socio-political questions demand are molding of the masculinity idols from a folklore and rural based discourse to a militarized discourse.

Twentieth century Assamese nationalism has shaped different societal and gender questions of the state. In a chaotic political scenario, real and imaginary enemies were thrown up by different events like the Assam Movement, the rise and fall in popularity of the ULFA, implementation of AFSPA, Secret Killings^{xxvii}, the rise of regional parties like Asom Gana Parishad, the issue of Bangladeshi immigrants. These events have powerfully shaped the gender dynamics of the Assamese society. These attributes of masculinity can be seen in the respective discourses that have emanated from each of these movements. Thus, the question of masculinity in Assamese

society cannot be separated from questions of ethnicity. Ethnic identity has been powerfully shaped by ideas of masculinity.

4.1 Theoretical reading on Nationalism and Masculinity

In the modern academia, study on nationalism has been a focal point of different schools attempting to make social commentaries. Benedict Anderson in his path breaking study on nationalism describes the idea of nation as a cultural construction of history which roots in the fall of monarchies and colonial empire; for him, the advancement of literacy, technology and capitalism are the focal point of construction of nationalism (Anderson, 1983). Such construction of nations across the globe has an important role to play in giving a shape to the ideas of gender, ethnicity, class and caste of respected nations. Ranchod-Nilsson and Tetreault defines this process of nationalism as “The collapse of old political frameworks and the reconfiguration of global economic power have been accompanied by an impulse to redefine, reassert, and reconfigure meanings of the nation on multiple levels” (Ranchod-Nilsson & Tetreault, 2000). Scholars like Charles Tilly and David McCrone have emphasized the idea of the nation as simply a political community of an established state in order to avoid conceptual fuzziness (Tilly, 1975) (McCrone, 1998). The concept of nation is often discussed with national consciousness; Walker Connor (Connor, 1993) in his study on European nationalism discusses about the diffusion of national consciousness in Europe.

In this regard, it is imperative to find the existing literature which dig out the inter connection of nationalism and gender. The notions of citizenship, sovereignty and national identity have established a deep connection with gender and nationalism. Joyce P. Kaufman and Kristen P. Williams argues

Nationalism and the nation-state are both intimately connected to citizenship. Citizenship and nationalism are also linked to gender, as all three concepts play a key role in the process of state-maintenance as well as in the interaction between states, whether overtly or covertly (Kaufman & Williams, 2011).

On the other hand, Nira Yuval-Davis in her book *Gender and Nation* (1997) has offered an extensive analysis on literature on gender and nation and has argued that gender relations are affected by national projects and the construction of nationhood involves specific notions of both

'manhood' and 'womanhood' (Yuval-Davis, 1997). Men's position in the society as social and public, the variety of normative masculinity across spaces, history and culture and the impact of men's behaviour on socio-political relations invite two basic connections of masculinity and nationalism. Firstly, the study of nationalism by using masculinity as a parameter of the societal formations and secondly the impact of nation making in construction of 'ideal' masculinities.

George L. Mosse in his book "The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity" (1998) argues about the inter-connection between modern masculine stereotypes and nationalism (Mosse, 1998). Other issues in the academic scholarship covers men's authority in national structure and top brass, legal rights, labor, and sexuality (Nagel, 1998), masculine projections of honor, patriotism, bravery, physical virility, rationality, individualism, and duty in nationalist movements (Nagel, 1998).

Joane Nagel has the intimate historical and modern connection between manhood and nationhood through

The construction of patriotic manhood and exalted motherhood as icons of nationalist ideology; through the designation of gendered 'places' for men and women in national politics; through the domination of masculine interests and ideology in nationalist movements; through the interplay between masculine micro-cultures and nationalist ideology; through sexualized militarism including the construction of simultaneously over-sexed and under-sexed 'enemy' men (rapists and wimps) and promiscuous 'enemy' women (sluts and whores). Three 'puzzles' are partially solved by exposing the connection between masculinity and nationalism: why are many men so desperate to defend masculine, monoracial, and heterosexual institutional preserves, such as military organizations and academies; why do men go to war; and the 'gender gap', that is, why do men and women appear to have very different goals and agendas for the 'nation?' (Nagel, 2010)

The quest for a unique identity of a nation has always been the focal point of interconnection between nationalism and masculinity. Discussing about cultural roots, Benedict Anderson focuses on the meaning making through "lack". For him, cultural identity is established through the creation of meaning in lack, like loss in a battle. Anderson also argues about other factors

like the politics of language and new technology and the growth of bureaucracy; he writes about three colonial institutions—the “Census, Map and Museum, the role of history itself in nations’ narratives of identity as major force of modern nationalism (Anderson, 1983).

Men and masculinity question in this regard opens up three perspectives: construction of masculinity idols in political symbolism, the institutionalization of masculinity in nationalism and the process of reconciliation. The nature of these questions in different region is certainly varied, but certainly carries universality, a universality which works for the patriarchal establishment across the globe.

The political idea of multi-cultural Indian nation state is relatively new with its origin during the colonial period. Different regions across India carry a variety of nationalist discourses. Such discourses are a mixture of one place’s socio-political history and the colonial constructions. Discussing about the masculinities in Punjab, Prem Chowdhry mentions

Colonialism provided that historically specific phenomenon which moulded a particular societal conception of masculinities in Punjab. The hegemonic masculinity under the British in this region was a condition shaped out of specific political and military circumstances and assembled out of its cultural material. The associated economic and political privileges turned ‘loyalty’ into an inherent and special ingredient of ‘masculinity’ which the nationalists had to confront and deal with till such times that it came to be firmly linked with nationalism and patriotism (Chowdhry, 2013).

It is imperative to discuss about the nation-making projects of any region in India to discuss about the ideological, cultural and political construction of masculinities. Throughout the chapter, I have emphasized on the current manifestation of Assamese nationalistic masculinity and its historical formation.

4.2 The Quest for a unique Assamese Masculinity in late 20th century

Post-Independence struggle of Assamese nation making has been greatly influenced by four factors- the quest for a unique and separate identity from the pan-Indian concept of Indian nation, forming a racial identity which is beyond the biological understanding of biological race, the question of “son of the soil” and threat of economic and cultural domination by the outsiders.

The late 20th century Assam has been a hotbed of sub-nationalist politics; the state has witnessed the Assam movement, the rise of armed rebellion, of the issue of illegal migrants, the wheel of electoral politics. All these events have also powerfully shaped the ideas of masculinity in Assamese society. These socio-political events have certainly shaped the pertinent question of unique Assamese masculine identity.

In the second chapter of this thesis, we have discussed the demand for a unique Assamese masculine identity in the late 19th and first 20th century with the influx of European modernity through Bengal. We have emphasized there how the folkloric term 'Dangoriya' was appropriated by the Bengal-returned English educated Assamese new-age leaders. The masculinity question in nationalism in this region has a great role to play. J.H. Broomfield in his study on Bhadrakok has rightly argued the importance of the respectful male status in the changing scenario of the society. The male question in this regard carries a much larger question than only a gendered one. The quest for a unique Assamese masculinity is related to the larger context of the late 20th century. This study compels us to find this question through two major aspects: Firstly, how a bunch of image of masculine idols are created with the larger political questions and how these idols are different from the image of dangoriya and the reason behind the need of a separation from dangoriya.

The distinct and unique masculinity question of Assam is intricately related to the question of ethnicity. The burning question of ethnic identity of Assamese nation has powerfully shaped the changing demands of new masculine idols here in the region. It appears to be imperative for ethnicity to draw upon both legendary and contemporary symbols of heroism and local accounts to mobilize the people through particular socio-political discourses.

The first and foremost need of local heroic masculine idols comes from the question of Assamese peoples' demand for a unique Assamese identity which is separated from the pan-Indian idea of Indian nation. The perceived socio-economic and cultural domination of the mainland India has shaped a need for a unique nation here in Assam. This question is not a new one; but, what is important here is the nature of it in the later part of the 20th century. Unlike the 19th century demand, recently, such demands have been shaped by several issues. Different political events like Indian Freedom struggle, Mahatma Gandhi's visit to Assam have inspired Assam to become an integral part of Indian state. But, the question of economic and cultural

domination by the Indian state, 1962 Indo-China war and its impact in North-East India, the question of illegal migration has re-ignited the separation question in the late 20th century. Even though during the high time of integration, the quest for a separate identity was not omitted. The question of self-determination was most often espoused in territorial terms with the question of ethnic variants of nationalism defined by a common language; inheritance and culture of the Assamese-speaking people were very common among the writings of nationalists like Ambikagiri Roychoudhury (Gogoi, 2018). His writings in Assamese weekly like *Chetana* and Jnananath Bora's writing in *Awahon*, clearly highlights the idea of the Assamese as constituting a nation (*Jati*) with the Indian concept of greater nation (*Mahajati*) (Gogoi, 2018). They also speak about Assamese *swaraj* or self-independence (Gogoi, 2018). In the late 20th century, unrest in Assam was linked with the issues of domination in socio-political representation, governance, citizenship, state making and nation building by mainland India towards Assam.

Nanigopal Mahanta has divided the separatist question into three periods. For him

The first phase began during the period of the freedom struggle itself. The Assamese middle class in the 1920s became highly apprehensive about the continuous immigration of East Bengal people to the region (Mahanta, 2013).

The second phase of conflict (1947–85) can be considered as an attempt for assertion for resources, language and identity (Mahanta, 2013).

The third phase of conflict with the Indian State began through regional movements and militancy broadly from 1979 to 2005. The Assam Movement had laid down the foundation for the growth of an independent Assam by ULFA. For the majority of the Assamese this was the last fight to ensure their identity and culture. The Assam Movement brought to the surface the already palpable secessionist feeling in Assam (Mahanta, 2013).

Such socio-political questions have laid the foundation for an alternative masculinity cult in Assam with a reframing of the old-figure of *dangoriya*. It created the demand for a male model which carries the local traits like *dangoriya* as a symbol of uniqueness; on the other hand a figure which is furious, young blooded and with revolting sense to cope up with the economical and social domination.

The second point I want to emphasize based on the existing literature is forming a masculinity which is based on a racial identity beyond the biological understanding of race. By referring to the armed rebellion as a language, a voice of North-eastern people to express their grievances, Nanigopal Mahanta has cited that

A majority of the armed rebellions in the North East region are led by people of Mongoloid origin. In other words, the indigenous North Eastern people of Mongoloid origin whose roots spread out in the South-East Asian region are yet to feel comfortable with the idioms of the Indian nation-state (Mahanta, 2013).

This argument certainly refers to a South-East Asia connection with our discussion. It is very significant in late 20th century Assam how the ideal masculine role models were selectively created from the Mongoloid origin ethnic tribes like Lachit Borphukan. Masculinities of the North-eastern communities have been greatly influenced by their warrior past and are reproduced in folklore, museums, tourism and local histories (McDuie-Ra, 2013). Furthermore, men's participation in the armed struggle (McDuie-Ra, 2013) and glorification of the warrior past enhance the South-East Asian connection (Mahanta, 2013) in the construction of a separate masculine identity from the Indian man. The militancy of North East India is a historical formation of the capitalist development of the colonial period and the intervention of the welfare state after independence, the new socio-economic set-up and scope for grievances in the democratic constitution (Gohain, 1997). These armed rebellions are a language of expressing grievances by the people whose roots spread out in South-East Asia and who are still not comfortable with the Delhi based Pan-Indian government (Mahanta, 2013).

Forging a separate identity from the Pan-Indian nation has been the main force of creating new masculine icons of late twentieth century in Assam. The separatist ideology based on threat and age-old domination has influenced both the creation of new symbols of masculinity and to re-discover cultural icons from the history. Such negotiation of nationalist identity and masculinity certainly is an outcome of the "son of the soil" discourse emanated from socio-economic domination by the Indian state.

More or less, the "son of the soil" question is the manifestation of age-old cultural economic and cultural domination by the Indian state. The community consciousness among the Assamese

people to protect the motherland and own people have its root in the different policies of the colonial administration (Guha, 1977). Hiren Gohain believes that

The capitalist development within colonial constraints during the colonial period, and the intervention of the welfare state after independence, gave the initial impetus to the ethnic movements. As the hopes aroused were undermined by the new socio-economic set-up, while the democratic constitution provided scope for ventilating grievances, various ethnic groups in the north-east gravitated towards militancy (Gohain, 1997).

The ethnicity question across North-East India is an amalgamation of colonial policy by British government, its geographical location and different policies of Delhi-based independent Indian government. However, the main argument of this chapter investigates different motifs and symbols of ideal manhood emanating from the questions of ethnicity and nationalism here in Assam.

4.3 Motifs of Sacrifice and Courage: Constructing a New Benchmark of Masculinity for Student's Political Movements

Aye dia mur bihu-gamosare guli khua tej mosi randevotar rong a thaponat jolau solita gosi
(Nath, 2015).

(I devote myself to the god of war after erasing the blood oozing out of the wounds caused by bullets with the *gamosa* my mother has given)

Assam has been a hotspot of student's activism in the political struggle; both India's struggle against British colonialism and the identity question in post-independent Assam foregrounds a strong legacy of student's participation. More significantly, students become the main force of post-Independence Assam's different political movements like the outbreak of the Refinery Movement in 1956, the Language Movement in the 1960s and even in the movement against the food crisis in the 1960s, the Movement for Medium of Instruction in 1973 and the Assam Movement of 1979-85. The formation of the All Assam Student's Movement (AASU) and its political significance in the electoral politics of Assam has been playing a major role in the construction of Assamese identity politics. The idea of sacrifice has for long been a cherished ideal in Assamese society. Assamese nationalism has often derived strength from the idea of

sacrifice from the colonial period. During the colonial period, literary texts like Lakshminath Bezbaroa's historical drama "Joymoti Knowari" and Jyotiprasad Agarwala's film "Joymoti" (1935) draws upon the notion of "sacrifice" in different sites of nationalist cultural politics. It is important to find out how the idea of "sacrifice" been constructed, re-structured and popularized during the student movements of Assam in post-independent India; the main intention behind this study is to find out how the idea of "sacrifice" during the students' movement in Assam was romanticized by constructing an image of manhood with patriarchal masculine heroism along with making the struggle a patriarchal one.

Robert A. Nye in his studies on western masculinities argues,

The indispensable masculine qualities of the combat soldier have altered little over the long run of modern history: personal courage, the willingness to sacrifice for comrades, the fear of shame or dishonor-without these behavioral norms, fighting could never have endured for long (Nye, 2007).

The Assamese students' struggle for more than half a century was not a militarized one initially, but it is certainly based on the qualities of personal courage and willingness to sacrifice for the nation. In this regard, let us focus on two major aspects which project the 'masculine nature' of the students' movement of Assam. Firstly, there was a shift from Gandhian nationalist sacrifices in colonial Assam for the sake of 'Mother India' to a local concept of sacrifice to 'Mother Assam'. Secondly, it emphasizes the concept of 'suffering' and the construction of patriarchal masculine heroism.

For instance, every educational institute of Assam has established a *SwahidBedi* (Martyr's column) in their respective campuses remembering the martyrs of different student movements. It certainly carries a glorification of martyrness among Assamese students which eventually works to create the community consciousness about the role they have to play for the mother nation.



Martyr Column in a High School of Assam

The martyrs of the students' movement became the symbol of nationalistic masculinity, standing for the cherished value of sacrifice. Their sacrifice has been remembered and honored to inspire the young generation to be concerned about their nation and develop a capacity for sacrifice to overcome the problems and threats faced by the Assamese. In this regard let us compare two historical figures Joymoti and Lachit Borphukan as role models for Assamese students. Joymoti was the benchmark of Assamese nationalistic sentiment during India's fight for independence raising a lot of feminist concerns. Joyeeta Sharma argues that Joymoti is a patriarchal creation of the nationalist writings of Colonial Assam

Joymoti had made a significant journey, from persecuted Ahom princess to a Pan-Indian figure of Sati. It was the image of Joymoti that fitted much more easily into the dominant Gandhian nationalist mobilization of that time (Sharma, 2014).

But, it is the gallantry war-hero, Lachit, who has always been cherished during the students' movement. We find a reflection of this in Dr Bhupen Hazarika's songs which inspired the young generation of Assamese to participate in the student movement. Slogan like "*Kune koi Lachitnai,*

Hazar Lachit Aguai” (Who says Lachit is not here, Thousands of Lachit march forward for the sake of the nation) is an emotional recreation of the concept of sacrifice. The shift in association from Joymoti to Lachit is significant. Joymoti represents the ultimate sacrifice of self-effacement but Lachit stands for heroism, significantly, heroism of the male kind. It is interesting to note that during this period it was the figure of Mula Gabharu that was evoked more frequently than Joymoti. Mula Gabharu represents the same form of heroism that Lachit stands for. “*Kune koi Mulanai, Hazar Mula Aguai*” ((Who says Mula is not here, Thousands of Mula march forward for the sake of the nation), was a popular slogan from the days of the agitation.

Reassertion of such historical models of sacrifice was undertaken with intent to revive the sense of pride of the Assamese nation. In reimagining the pride of the Assamese nation there was a shift from the soft, self-negating sacrifice of Joymoti to the more “masculine” sacrifice of Lachit. These new constructions of nationalist role models foregrounded a ‘masculine image of sacrifice based on rebellion, courage and anti-India stand. Lachit is certainly an opportunity for boys to bond with boys and reaffirm their common codes of nationalistic masculinity. Assamese man’s imagination of Indian people to Indian nationalism during colonial India transformed into a new Assamese sub-nationalism were slogans like “Go Back Indians” (Nath, 2015), raised by the Assamese people against the real or perceived sense of economic marginalization by mainstream India. Student movements re-established the pre-British heroes like Lachit Borphukan and Chilarai (although Chilarai was not invoked to the same degree) and glorification of their sacrifice.

The construction of Joymoti as a tool for anti-British discourse can be seen in Jyotiprasad Agarwala’s projection of Joymoti as “Princess Joymoti” or *Satyagrahi*. So, Joymoti can be seen as a symbol of Gandhi’s non-violent protest against the British. But, such peaceful ways of sacrifice and protest became unimportant during the Assam Movement. The loss of appeal of such manners of protest during the phase of the Assam Movement can be seen from different articles published in the era like “*Satyagraha apat astra nohoi*” (*Satyagrah* cannot be a weapon), “*Ravane Sitak haran korisil, rame anahan kora nasil*” (Ravana kidnapped Sita, Rama did not undertake fast) in different magazines (Mahanta, 2017). Anjan Sarmah, in an article published during that era in the magazine entitled *Mahabahu* asked, “*Ami kun pothe jam?*” (What should be our path?). “The savage army man who took away the chastity of our mothers-sisters in front of

our eyes cannot be immortal only because they have sten-guns in their hands; these CRPF cannot be allowed to be monsters against whom we are powerless. But *Gandhibadis* will not agree to this.” (Goswami, 2015). The songs of Dr Bhupen Hazarika penned during the era and different slogans of the Assam Movement also depict the idea of protecting the mother nation Assam through sacrifice which is no longer based on tolerance. The emergence of new ideas of sacrifice definitely had a role to play in inciting different incidents of communal violence that took place during the Assam movement. The violence during the Language Movement of the 1960s, the attack on Marwari businessmen in Fancy market of Guwahati in 1968, violence during the Medium Movement in 1972, the conflict arising out of the marginalization of the natives in Digboi Oil India in 1977, the violence in the Football match between East-Bengal and a foreigner club in pre-Assam Movement time (Nath, 2015) contributed to this idea of protecting the nation by violent means if required. So, the new conceptualization of sacrifice which completely changed the idea of self-negation that emerged during the 1942 Freedom Struggle movement and this can be seen as the outcome of a century-long sense of marginalization by the outsiders.

The image of a nationalistic leader is constructed through the commonly shared beliefs and traits of the national community; for this, one has to include himself in the dominant discourse created by the society. The image of the typical Assamese leader during the Assam Movement with a *gamosa* around the neck became a powerful symbol for an ideal Assamese leader; it is a symbol of love, a gift and reflects the love for the nation. The importance of *gamosa* around the neck of an Assamese nationalistic leader can be seen in slogans like

Aye dia mur bihu-gamosare guli khua tej mosi randevotar rong thaponat jolau solita gosi

(Nath, 2015)

(Meaning: I devote myself to the god of war after erasing the blood oozing out of the wounds caused by bullets with the *gamosa* my mother has given)

So, the Assam Movement created this new image of a male Assamese student leader who tries hard to reconcile the contradiction between the ‘modern’ coat and the ‘traditional’ *gamosa*. But, let us move to our next argument about how the idea of “suffering” came to be romanticized in this regard, establishing a patriarchal “masculine heroism”. These new nationalist leaders

repeatedly used the motif of “suffering”, a motif created through their troubled families, exploited community. Bhupen Hazarika’s song “*Juie Pura Tirasi*” (The Burning eighty-three) projects an Assam movement martyr and the sacrifice his family made for the sake of the nation. These imaginations invite our attention to the heroicness based on “sufferings”, focusing and constructing an own-ness, an own-ness among the members of the young brigade belonging to the oppressed land.

4.4 Lachit Borphukan: The Politics of Selecting Role-Models of Nationalistic Masculinity

“Kune koi Lachit nai, Hazar Lachit aguai”

(Who says Lachit is not here, Thousands of Lachit march forward for the sake of the nation)

During the historic Assam Movement, this slogan was often used in protest rallies use by glorifying the Ahom war hero Lachit Borphukan and urging the same sacrifice as Lachit Borphukan for the nation.

In February 2016, the then chief minister of Assam, Tarun Gogoi inaugurated a 35 feet bronze statue of Lachit Borphukan in the middle of the Brahmaputra river (Das, 2016, Times of India).



The figure of Lachit Borphukan is an evocative image for Assamese nationalistic masculinity on multiple counts. Our focus in revisiting the image of Lachit in Assamese society centered on several questions of masculinity. Firstly, it created a masculine consciousness in Assamese

nationalism through the celebration of sacrifice and courage in the battlefield. Secondly, it marked public support for celebration of a war hero whose qualities and character encourage and justify different ideological and cultural questions of Assamese nationalism. Thirdly, the figure of Lachit Borphukan brought together people and organizations in the making of a separate and unique identity.

Lachit is reflection of the valour and strength of the Assamese youth, a cardboard figure of sacrifice and courage. Different popular legends about Lachit Borphukan raised significant questions of masculinity and sacrifice. He is a much-celebrated Assamese war hero of the 17th century, a commander in the Ahom army who thwarted the invasion of the mighty Mughal Empire in the battle of Saraighat (1671). Rather than highlighting his brave and courageous fight for the Ahom kingdom, this sub-chapter deal with the contemporary accounts of his reception as a symbol of Assamese nationalism; and how the glorification of his legends symbolizes a masculine connotation of Assamese nationalism.

It is common for Assamese people to use the saying “*Dexot koi mumai dangor nohoi*” (Family is not more important than the nation) perhaps on every occasion to devote oneself to the nation. According to folk legend, during the Battle of Saraighat, Lachit assigned the task of building an earthen wall for fortification to his uncle. As a strategy that he devised for the war the next day, the fort wall needed to be completed before sunrise. To his utter shock, he returned to find an extremely tired and demotivated troop. The bridge too was incomplete. In anger and in fair judgment, he drew his sword and killed his own uncle, without a second thought. This inspired his troops. He justified his act by saying that his uncle was not greater than his country.

Such legends are certainly embedded in the questions like how the image of Lachit Borphukan is created in people’s memory. It is certainly a tale of men’s resistance to the emotional dilemma on a battlefield. More than a symbol of courage, it represents the ideal ‘masculine’ symbol on a battlefield who sacrifices his life for a greater cause. The celebration of Lachit’s heroism in late twentieth century Assam certainly is an attempt to form a collective consciousness of men who wish to sacrifice for his land. Amid the social unrest and chaotic situation, the image of Lachit invites Assamese young boys to sacrifice for the nation.

The second significance of the Lachit figure is linked with his successful encounter with the mighty Mughals. His courage, bravery and successful encounter made Lachit an important

symbol of the Assamese people's fight against the 'outsiders', a figure which encourages the members of the community for the nation's duty. But, simultaneously, it reflects the 'ideal male' image in strengthening the question of separating Assam from mainland India.

In different nationalistic writings like Dr Bhupen Hazarika's literature, popular fiery nationalistic writings like *Moidamor Pora Moi Lachite Koichu* (which was later on banned by the Government of Assam) by Suresh Phukon symbolizes the importance of Lachit Borphukan and his image in the construction of a strong nationalistic force of the late twentieth century Assam. Lachit has been a masculine metaphor; a metaphor that emerged from the glorious past, re-invented during the heydays of Assamese nationalistic movement under young brigades and politicized to consciously or unconsciously strengthen the patriarchal nature of nationalist movements.

4.5 Bhupen Hazarika's *Notun Purush*: Literary Imagination of Assamese Nationalistic Masculinity

Hazarika's music has a remarkable resonance with the national narrative of the Assamese. Using his songs one can construct an unofficial history of the Assamese nationality-its hopes, aspirations and disappointments. (Baruah, 1994).

These words from Sanjeev Baruah about the artistic and literary creation of Dr Bhupen Hazarika signify the importance of his works for anyone revisiting the post-independence nationalist history of Assam. Dr Bhupen Hazarika is most probably the most celebrated public figure in contemporary Assam. Widely known as *Xudhakontho* (nectar-throated), Dr Hazarika was an Indian playback singer, lyricist, musician, poet and filmmaker. Different academic scholars have revisited his works considering his social and philosophical mission (Dutta, 2013), as an unofficial history of Assamese nationalism (Baruah, 1994) and as an instrument for self-expression and mass communication (Medhi, 2013). The creations and philosophy of Dr Hazarika is an amalgamation of different ideologies throughout his life; it is a combination of leftist and socialist ideology, support for Assamese nationalist movements (sometimes accused of being chauvinistic) and right-wing politics. But, what makes him special in our study of masculinity and nationalism is the way he portrayed and imagined Assamese nationalism. What I want to argue here is that Dr Hazarika's imagination and portrayal of Assamese nationalism is

‘masculine’. The term masculine here doesn’t refer to the man’s questions; rather it reflects the ‘masculine traits- sacrifice, courage, of the worshiper of ‘Mother Assam’. It also includes four different ‘masculine’ motifs- *notun purush*, Lachit Borphukan, Saraighat and the river Brahmaputra or Luit. Based on his texts and academic writing on his works, this sub-chapter investigates how the nationalist philosophy of Dr Hazarika was always portrayed through a masculine frame, a frame that establishes the masculine nature of Assamese nationalism.

“The idea of the nation as mother is a familiar motif in nationalist narratives. The motif appears constantly in Hazarika’s music” (Baruah, 1994). It is interesting how Bhupen Hazarika imagined the ideal Assamese man as a worshiper of ‘Mother Assam’. For Baruah “The territory of Assam is imbued with the significance of the body of the mother. The river Luit (The Brahmaputra) becomes the flow of motherly affection and the river’s eventual merging into ‘the sea of peace and into the great unity’-evokes the Hindu cultural notions of Life’s unity with the great soul” (Baruah, 1994). Throughout his entire life, Dr Bhupen Hazarika had been in search of an Assamese “New Man” or “*notun purux*”, a figure which symbolizes the sparkle of the new Assamese young brigade who has been constantly raising their voices against the socio-economic oppression by the Indian nation-state and the pervasive threat from the outsiders.

As Sanjeev Baruah argues, “Bhupen Hazarika’s literature on Assamese nationalism is an unofficial history of the Assamese nationality” (Baruah, 1994); these pieces of literature also reflect how a masculine nature has been constantly reflected in different demands and manifestations of nationalist questions in Assam. For instance, the image of ‘*notun purush*’ with urge and expectation from young men certainly bears similarity to the idea of a war hero in the battlefield like Shivaji for the Marathas of Maharashtra and Lachit for the Assamese. But, unlike, these models of war masculinity selected from the historical past, ‘*notun purush*’ is a manifestation of the contemporary movements of late twentieth century. It celebrates the contemporary notions of sacrifice and courage to save the motherland through student protestors of different movements and the ULFA. The most significant motif of the image of *notun purush* is that of martyrhood. It is regardless to say that martyrhood has been an important theme of nationalistic masculinity across the globe. The sacrifice of life by the young Assamese man has been a strong motif of Dr Hazarika’s song in his projection of ‘*notun purush*’. Sanjeev Baruah writes

A song about the violence of the 1983 elections seeks to build a collective Assamese connection to a 'martyr' of 1983-by evoking the ties of family and of a village community, the martyr becomes every parent's son, every sibling's little brother and every person's friend (Baruah, 1994).

The second aspect which supports our statement about Dr Hazarika's literature is the motif of Luit or Brahmaputra and how this obliquely manifested the masculine connotation in Assamese nationalism. In local legends, the river Luit or Brahmaputra (Son of God Brahma) is referred to in a 'masculine' manner. Dr Hazarika's metaphorical use of the river reflects the waves of anger and revolt. For instance, songs like "*Aji Brahmaputra holBahniman*" (Today, Brahmaputra has become sparkled) link the river to a common male body which has *bishal bahu* (strong shoulders) and *kubalsut* (speedy flow of water). Such romanticization of the river with a 'masculine' body provides members of the nation a sense of shared revolutionary attitude that provides the ground for motivated action.

Moreover, Lachit and Saraighat foreground how he reinforces the political use of Lachit and his bravery in Saraighat as a masculine metaphor of Assamese nationalistic struggle. Through Lachit and Saraighat, Dr Hazarika always creates a male figure and its 'ideal' attributes for the members of the community. In his song "Moi LachiteKoisu" (I am Lachit Speaking), Hazarika (written by Nogen Borah) speaks about *dhoijya* (patience), *sahas* (courage) and *dubahurbol* (physical strength) as the qualities for the Assamese new brigade in their war for identity. On the other hand, Saraighat has been the symbol of a war of identity. Lachit and Saraighat remind the obligations of the Assamese to 'Mother Assam'.

The way Hazarika portrays his philosophical understanding of Assamese nationalism through the mentioned motifs and metaphors reflect a 'masculine' image in Assamese collective past and nationalism. It can be concluded that with motifs like sacrifice, courage, romanticizing powerful men's bodies, Dr Bhupen Hazarika's idea of Assamese nationalism was distinctly 'masculine'.

4.6 Bishnuprasad Rava: Cultural Icons, Masculinity and Politics of Selection and Construction



The front view of Tezpur University Auditorium, Assam (Kalaguru Bishnuprasad Rava Auditorium)

Tezpur University and Cotton College, two of the most prestigious educational institutes of Assam have named their auditoriums after the legendary figure, Bishnuprasad Rava. Established in 1901, Cotton College has been one of the most influential places for student movements in Assam; on the other hand, Tezpur University is one of the outcomes of the Assam Movement^{xxviii}. The remembrance of Bishnuprasad Rava in the respective auditoriums of these institutes symbolizes the importance of Rava in contemporary constructions of Assamese nationhood. The intention behind referring to the auditorium of two educational institutions here derives from two basic reasons. Theoretically, it emphasizes the importance of creating cultural icons for the nation and its interconnection with nationalistic masculinity and secondly it focuses on the figure of Bishnuprasad Rava as a benchmark of Assamese masculinity and the role it has played in shaping masculine images of Assamese nationalism.

In his study on nationalism, Benedict Anderson argues about the necessity of cultural icons in “the imagined community” of the nation (Anderson, 1983). It is important here to discuss how the making of a cultural icon cuts across several masculinity frames through the politics of projection and reception in Assamese “imagined community”. This study explores the image of

Bishnuprasad Rava as a national symbol, a national symbol created with the image of a father, where the youth encounter and negotiate the ideas and practices of national and cultural symbols.

Rava has contributed to Assamese literature and society in diverse areas like music, dance, painting, literature as well as political activism. He is remembered for his artistic excellence and political activism as a Marxist revolutionary.

Two of the most prominent political actors in post-independent Assam have been the Asom Sahitya Sabha (the Assam Literary Society) and All Assam Students Union (AASU). These two organizations have been influential players in the socio-cultural and political life of Assam. The Asom Sahitya Sabha has sought to promote the Assamese language, culture and literature and the AASU is a voluntary federation of the students union of schools and colleges and was at the forefront of the Assam Movement (1979-85). Both of these organizations have tried to interpret and appropriate the ideology of Bishnuprasad Rava to further their respective interests. Use of this cultural icon of Assam is evident particularly in the nationalistic discourse of such organizations (Hazarika & Nath, 2017).

This study on masculinity connection with the politics of constructing cultural icons of Assam raises two major obstacles. At first, the selection of Bishnuprasad Rava over another cultural icon, Jyotiprasad Agarwala. The writing of both the stalwart Bishnuprasad Rava and Jyotiprasad Agarwala projects a great sense of nationalistic sentiment during the great political upheavals and social instability of Assam. But defending our selection, this study tends to discuss the creation of “masculine” images through nationalistic imagination; Tomaselli and Scott argue that “semiotics is not just about the “meaning of any image or corpus of images” but about the way, images are constructed and work within systems; it is also about the way they are interpreted” (Tomaselli & Scott, 2009). Jyotiprasad Agarwala’s reception as a cultural icon in Assam conveys the image of an intellectual. His image of Rupkonwar (Prince of aesthetic) certainly refers to the ideal man who built the nation through his artistic creations. But, Bishnuprasad Rava’s image of “Pherengadao Aboi” (the father who always awakes the people) certainly refers to the father figure who is more preferable in the discussion of a nationalistic sentiment in a general atmosphere of chaos and political unrest. Our second question deals with the selection of his image in nationalist discourse over his popular image of a communist. His political activism was

greatly motivated by the ideology of Marxism. But, what makes him interesting in our discussion is the politics of re-interpreting his image for the nation-building project of the Assamese community. Among the common mass, the legends of Bishnuprasad Rava foregrounds a local “ideal manhood image”, an image that fulfils the Assamese popular manhood image with bravery, courage and wittiness we have discussed throughout the previous chapters of this thesis.

Bishnuprasad Rava was a brave man. His bravery is often justified by many narratives. Though born and brought up in a rich family, he spent his life for and amidst the poor section of society. It happened that ‘May Day’ was observed at Bhakotpara of Darrang district in 1949. The meeting was presided over by Aurobindo Ghosh, the revolutionary communist leader. Bishnu Rava delivered the inaugural speech in the meeting. The police fired on the public. Katiram Bodo died in that incident. Bishnu Rava changed his clothes and wore a head dress made out of his torn clothes. Carrying the dead body in his arms he silently left the place. The police started to search for Bishnu Rava among the public but no one could identify him because of his disguise (Hazarika & Nath, 2017).

Bishnu Rava, along with 13 of his comrades, once traveled to Burhi Khowang in order to attend a state level summit of the Revolutionary Communist Party. In Jorhat district, there was strict patrolling of the military to check the activities of the communist revolutionaries. Bishnuprasad Rava was in a military dress and while passing through the security check-gate the military-men saluted him, thinking him to be a military officer. On the way their car broke down and they had to walk bare-foot from the Teok area of Jorhat district. They pretended to be members of a groom’s marriage party and so the police did not catch them. It is expected that a cultural icon would have qualities of bravery, courage apart from love and compassion. All these stories justify Bishnuprasad Rava as a courageous and heroic personality and at the same time cement his position as an iconic figure in social life of Assam (Hazarika & Nath, 2017).

Such popular perception of Bishnuprasad Rava makes him a perfect male figure during an age where Assamese people desperately needed icons to cope with their threats. Popular narratives about him, connection with the common mass and a very ordinary lifestyle reflect the image of a man who suits the parameters of Assamese ‘*dangoriya*’ masculinity emerging from Assamese folk consciousness. His figure is a combination of heroic personhood and a protective father.

Popular acceptance of him certainly refers to a father figure who protects his people. In the biographical novel ‘Pherengadao’, Medini Choudhuri writes in the preface

“Sangrami yuvak yuvatiye morom aru shrad dhare shilpi gorakir nam thoisil “Pherengadao Abou” buli. Pherengadau mane Fehu sorai. Ei bidh choraiye ukho gosor daolot bohe aru xundor suriya matere puwadholphat diyar agotei xui thoka manuhor dintur babe hocheton kori tule.” (Choudhuri, 1993).

(The rebellious youths refer to him as “*Pherengadao Abou*”. Pherengadao refers to the bird which awakes sleeping people in the morning, *Abou* literary means grandfather)

It is impossible to separate the law of the father (or the rule of the father) from masculinity. In Assamese nationalistic consciousness, Bishnuprasad Rava is popularly accepted as the father of the oppressed people to fight against the sense of ‘fear’ created by different economic and political questions.

4.7 ULFA’s Armed Rebellion: Militarization of Assamese Sub-Nationalism and Assamese Military Masculinity

The organization called ULFA was formed with the motto

“Mor aai nai, pita nai aru nai kunu paribarik bandhon, ajire pora moi axom jananir xantan, Axom dexar muktir hoke pran pajyanta diboloi moi prastut.” (Das, 1993)

(I have no filial obligations, nor am I attached to any conjugal allegiance. At this holy hour, I hereby avow to renounce even my life for the liberty of my motherland.”

United Liberation Front of Assam was formed in the *bakori* (courtyard) of *Ranghar* on 7th April in 1979. This first oath pronounced by ULFA leaders certainly resembles with the nature of military nationalistic masculinity based on sacrifice for mother nation by following the stereotypical standard of the wartime hero, who put 'freedom' before family and loved ones." (Segal, 1990) (Sarmah & Nath, 2022).

This study conceptualizes how the armed rebellion of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) reveals the militaristic imagination of Assamese nationalistic masculinity. It focuses on two major aspects, the ‘masculine’ nature of ULFA’s armed rebellion and how it expanded the imagination of war-hero masculinity to real war against Assam’s enemies. It is important to

foreground how militarized masculinities are constructed, mobilized and transformed through the armed rebellion of ULFA to contextualize the historical and geographical questions of Assamese identity. This study focuses on tracing the 'masculine' nature of ULFA's armed rebellion through three major canons: the interconnection of patriarchy and nationalism, militarization of nationalism and forging a separate identity from the Indian nation.

The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) is an armed organization of Assam with their demand for a separate sovereign nation-state of Assam through an armed struggle. It was formed by twenty young Assamese men (apart from a not very young gentleman) on 7th April 1979 (Das, 1993). Through the ULFA, the Assamese shifted their nationalistic gear to the contemporary battlefield against the socio-political and economic marginalization of the Indian nation-state.

"Contentious Politics", according to Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, results from the sustained interaction between authority groups and people who conduct collective authority in the name of "a populace whose interlocutors declare it to be unjustly suffering harm or threatened with such harm" (Baruah, 2009). Sanjib Baruah described the ULFA's ideology as 'contentious politics', saying that it represents a continuum with other non-violent social movements, political parties and interest groups (Baruah, 2012). The ULFA's rise to popularity relied on the sense of the Assamese being a suppressed voice over the ages, a belief that is deeply ingrained in Assam's psyche (Mahanta, 2013). This sense of being suppressed and exploited ensured that there was resistance to it when it was carried forward under the leadership of different men in different phases of history to save the motherland and to save the "son of the soil". This sense of being exploited was probably not without reasons, many critics have commented on the ULFA's instrumental violence (Mahanta, 2013), the ethos of self-determination (Gohain, 2007), anti-India, anti-Delhi stand (Mahanta, 2013) which according to them are the outcomes of the age-old questions of Assamese nationalism such as fear of the outsider (Guha, 1984), economic negligence (Misra, 1980), or floating migration from outside (Phukon, 1996).

Historically, ULFA has been recognized as committed to egalitarian, socialist pursuits. In such historical formation of ULFA's image, it needs a close study to locate the patriarchal nature of the organization; let us focus on two aspects, the organizational structure and ideology. As a

struggle that is ‘masculine’ in nature, ULFA certainly establishes the age-old connection between war and patriarchy from its reflection of strong patriarchal politics in the internal structure of the organization. From the outset, ULFA has been under the leadership of male cadres (Pranati Deka only been the women cadre in the top brass) (Rajkonwar, 2013), the organization was itself formed with no female cadre with the armed outfit.

The lack of women representatives in the Executive Council of ULFA ensured that the status quo of male patronage remained unchallenged within the organization. No amendment was made even in the 1984 council to include women in the top brass. Only years later, in 1996, the post of Cultural Secretary was inducted within the organization, and subsequently, Pranati Deka was admitted to the post (Rajkonwar, 2013) which draws our attention to how the ULFA’s quest for freedom significantly reinforced masculine prerogatives. The women cadres were deemed unfit to perform any combative roles. The main functions of the women cadres were in the fields of communication, transportation, offering medical aid, and networking for the release of the arrested leaders (Mahanta, 2013).

An Assamese autobiographical novel *Issa-Anissa SwotteuKisuKotha* (Though Hesitant, A Few Things that I have to Say) (2013) by a former woman cadre of ULFA, KaberiKacahariRajkonwar offers a detailed account of the patriarchal nature of ULFA in their organizational function and ideology.

Women participation in ULFA’s organizational function was fundamentally limited and full of sustained prejudice about the desirability and effectiveness of women as armed fighters. There was inadequate maintenance of hygiene and poor bathing facilities for the women cadres. Moreover, there was a constant gaze on the women cadres as potentially capable of evoking sexual excitement of male cadres. Even, statements like “Now, these beautiful girls will corrupt our boys in the camp” were made inside the training camps.

Parag Das in his book *Swadhinotar Prastab* (1993) mentions the ceremonial commemorations of three historical (legendary) figures-Lachit Borphukan^{xxix}, Chilarai^{xxx} and Joymoti^{xxxi} by Asom Chatra Sanmilan (Das, 1993). Such portrayal of ULFA’s nationalistic ideology refers to the organization as providing old wine in a new bottle to the masses using masculine images of Assam’s nationalist ideology. It re-establishes the century-old gendered projection of ‘man in the real war and woman as an icon of nationalist sacrifice.

In his study on Manhood and nationalism, Nagel (2010) refers to patriarchal politics of nationalism as

The intimate historical and modern connection between manhood and nationhood are established through the construction of patriotic manhood and exalted motherhood as icons of nationalist ideology; through the designation of gendered 'places' for men and women in national politics; through the domination of masculine interests and ideology in nationalist movements; through the interplay between masculine micro cultures and nationalist ideology; through sexualized militarism including the construction of simultaneously over-sexed and under-sexed 'enemy' men (rapists and wimps) and promiscuous 'enemy' women (sluts and whores) (Nagel, 2010).

ULFA's patriarchal policy certainly worked in a very silent manner; it allowed the women in combat roles; but, through creating gendered places of training and camps, ideologically establishing nationalism as a male bastion, constructing sexuality of women as diverting elements for male combats, ULFA re-established Assamese nationalism as 'masculine'.

Masculinities are the products of certain times, processes and events which constantly influence their 'nature' (Connell, 1995). The notions of crisis when framed as a specific historical event influences changes in men's practices and performances of gender roles (Wojnicka, 2021). ULFA's history is related to one of the darkest periods in the recent history of Assam. Militarization and resultant state aggression has been one of the most notable features of the ULFA's influential years. It is necessary to study how the emergence of ULFA and the reciprocal aggression of the Indian state military gave rise to new forms of function, mechanism and manifestation of Assamese masculinity. The age of ULFA's insurgency and the counterinsurgency of Indian military forces have (re)negotiated the frame of Assamese masculinity. It created a new crisis of masculinity and impacted the societal and cultural structure.

Discussing about the dark days of ULFA's time, Sanjib Baruah (1994) refers to the Asia Watch report on military operation in Assam

The Indian Army has conducted massive search-and-arrest operations in thousands of villages in Assam. Many victims of abuses committed during these operations are civilians, often relatives or neighbors or young men suspected of militant sympathies. Villagers have been threatened, harassed, raped, assaulted and killed by soldiers

attempting to frighten them into identifying, suspected militants. Arbitrary arrest and lengthy detention of young men picked up in these periodic sweeps, or at random from their homes and from public places are common, and detainees of the armed forces are regularly subjected to severe beating and torture. Death in custody has occurred as the result of torture, and in alleged encounters and escape attempts.

Asia Watch Report on Assam April 18, 1993 entitled “No End in Sight: Human Rights Violations in Assam (Excerpts)” reported

The hallmark of the Indian Army’s counterinsurgency efforts in Assam is the ‘cordon and search operation’, involving massive raids and house-to-house searches in thousands of villages. The primary targets of these raids are young men suspected of militant sympathies, but their neighbors and family members also fall victim to army violence. During search operations, civilians are routinely subjected to threats, harassment and assaults. Rapes of family members are common. The primary goal of these raids appears to be to frighten villagers into identifying suspected militants. Once identified, suspects are detained in army facilities, and subjected to severe mistreatment. It should be noted that Asia Watch has documented similar abuses during operations in Punjab and Kashmir; and Amnesty International reported abuses of the same sort in Manipur in 1990 (Nath, 2013).

This age of militarization for more than a decade has undergone a process of ‘normalization of threat and terror for the Assamese. It establishes a two-fold crisis for men. Firstly, their ‘masculine’ identity becomes the prime suspects of the military force and secondly, their identity of being the “protector” of the women of the clan becomes vulnerable. It is important in this regard how atrocities by the Indian military force challenges their “virility” and throws into danger their idea of the males being the “guard” of the family honour.

The threat of rape and other forms of sexual violence becomes a prominent feature during the armed rebellion days. Women from different rural areas became the victim of the sexual violence of the Indian military force. Although most of them didn’t publicly speak about what happened to them, several incidents have lightened up (Nath, 2013) the brutality of the times. In such situations where women became more vulnerable to military aggression, the men’s position of

being the ‘protector’ of their women was challenged. Men were forced to become concerned about their daughters, wives and other female members in the family.

About those dark days, one of our informants^{xxxiii} narrated to us that when the military camps were established in the nearby areas, he used to ask his family to switch off all the lights of his *varanda* in the evening; they were anxious about their two daughters, they had to live with the constant threat of the military that if they noticed his daughters, they might enter their home at night. In the daytime also, he had to control the movements of his daughters.

Such act of controlling women’s movement by their family members was very new for Assam. Assam has been considered as a comparatively liberal place for women in comparison to the other regions of India. There are numerous examples from folklore to the historical narratives indicating that Assam had traditionally been a liberal place for women. But, such narratives of controlling women’s movement indicate the changing pattern of the societal and cultural mechanism in the manifestation of the patriarchal nature of the society as a whole and the functioning of fatherhood masculinity. Another important aspect of changing masculinities encompasses how such atrocities forced a reassertion of the idea of ‘sacrifice’ associated with Assamese nationalistic masculinity. Ritual mourning and the celebration of the martyrdom of lost lives was visible in the public discourses. Men from the most affected areas (subjected to military violence) were often projected as making real sacrifices for the nation. It becomes common in contemporary times to glorify the life sacrifice of the local people in the atrocities of the Indian military force. For instance, the glorification of Kakopathar, which is an area in Tinsukia district of Assam in the contemporary nationalistic discourse carries a larger connotation of how the idea of sacrifice for the nation has been gradually changing its nature in recent times.

Popular Assamese news daily published a report on such atrocities on August 9, 1997

The people of the Kakopathar area of District Tinsukia are spending their time in deep fear due to the fact that Indian soldiers have been going inside the villages, searching houses without any reason and arresting people without any formal charges. The reports of villagers being tortured by the military have been published many times in newspapers. Although the civil administration of the district has been made aware of the

harassment, the number of intimidating incidents has not gone down. The army operation started on the day of Bohag Bihu this year. The people are completely distraught and fed up and recently they came out in large numbers to lodge their protest with the civil administration. On the 30th of July, thousands of people of the Kakopathar region, came out with posters and festoons, to protest the arrest by the military and a contingent of women police, of a nurse named Khiroda Moraan of village Uawan, and the arrest of Horen Moraan, the son of Umesh Moran of village Haokhaati. At the time of arresting these two individuals, the Indian soldiers beat many others in the neighborhoods. So, on July 30th, the public came out in large numbers and sat on Highway 52 in protest. At night, a few hundred people were camped outside the Kakopathar police station. They had lighted their camp with lamps and "torches" (*jur*). At this point, a group of soldiers jumped on the people who were camped out and beaten savagely without any discrimination. Even an 80 year old woman has been hospitalized after being hit with barrel of a gun. On the 2nd of August, the army and the police had organized a meeting in the village of Tongola and invited the people to attend. Of those who came to attend, Bubu Barua (23), August Barua (22), Ranjit Saikia (22), Jayanta Dohutiya (25), Bubu Seleng (20), Nirmal Kosari (30), Binod Urang (21) were questioned about the ULFA and beaten during interrogation. On the 7th of August, the forces arrested Tumodhar Moran (32) and Ranjan Moran (14) of village Sunjaan at dawn. Their whereabouts are not known at the time of writing this report. (Translated by Jugal Kalita) (Staff Reporters, 1997).

Nine years later, the Indian army killed at least ten people in open firing at the peaceful protestors in the same area. According to the report, the Indian Army opened fire on a group of people protesting against the custodial death of a villager who was arrested by the army. Such incidents have spread strong sentiments about the people of these affected areas across Assam. In August 2017, during a political meeting, Jiten Dutta, an ex-ULFA leader declared that as a person from Kakopathar^{xxxiii} he is familiar with both the art of killing and of laying down his life for his nation. His reference to Kakopathar reflects how men from the worst-affected districts (those who had been subjected to military atrocities) were frequently portrayed as making genuine sacrifices for the country and using Kakopathar, he started a new brand of nationalistic

masculine image. This new meaning of sacrifice is embedded in discourses of competing masculinities. It is new to a site like Assam to glorify and cherish the sacrifices made by ordinary masses of Kakopathar who were killed in state violence, a new meaning added in the discourse of war masculinity where the “martial” heroism of Lachit Borphukan with his physical bravery against the mighty Mughals has been celebrated since long.

Reeling under poverty and unemployment (Mahanta, 2013), imposition of the draconian law of AFSPA by the Indian government, the constant threat of being arrested and encountered, challenges to their role of ‘protector’, the militarization of ULFA’s darkest days have brought a certain amount of changes in manifestation and function of Assamese masculinity through the last decades of the twentieth century.

On the other hand, the duty of the ULFA members was broadened with the two-fold duty towards their motherland and to protect their women from war atrocities. Parag Das, remembering Bhanimai Dutta, along with Raju Baruah, wrote:

*“Bharatiya sena bahinir usorot jibon aru jauban herua bhagni Raju Baruah aru Bhanimai
Duttar xeujiya smritit”* (Das, 2014)

(In the memory of Raju Barua and Bhanimai Dutta who lost their life and chastity in the hands of
the Indian Army)

Such roles are a new inclusion to the ‘masculine’ image of ULFA, which has been largely based upon the image that was an admixture of modern and traditional elements. ULFA was inspired by ideas that were historically deeply imprinted in the collective psyche of Assamese masculinity that not only exuded aggression and strength, but also formed linkage to the several previous demands for independence in the annals of Assam’s history.

Another important aspect of decoding ULFA’s armed rebellion through the canons of masculinity seeks our attention towards forging a separate identity by ULFA to the Indian nation-state. The extension of the image of “*dangoriya*” (an Assamese man maintaining a dignified position) has been a central focus of Assamese nationalism (Sarmah, 2021). It is important to see the mechanism adopted by ULFA to carry forward the age-old quest of creating a unique and separate identity of Assamese man from the Indian man. It foregrounds the image of a warlord who is different from the Indian armed force. ULFA as rebellion, militant

controllers of their destiny reflect the image of the non-passive oppressed who counters the Pan-Indian popular imagination of being a warrior-tribe???. The machismo models of ULFA have been of someone who reflects striking fortitude, status and achievement, also exemplary endurance, and aggression. He would be someone who regulates his emotionality while exuding power, dominance, and control. There is the forging of a separate identity from the Indian army man; it is interesting how ULFA focused on creating cultural meanings in their warrior image.

For instance, the moustache was also one of the ULFA's several signifiers of masculine traits. Traditionally moustache has been associated with the masculinity of Indian males. In our study on folklore and masculinity, we tried to understand the significance of moustache for the Assamese men. Prem Chowdhry has written about the symbolism of moustache in North Indian masculinity (Chowdhry, 2015). Apart from its folkloric connection, the moustache has been a political symbol of manliness. Leon Trosky's famous statement "for young people, 'Lenin's beard becomes a very important element. It seems to symbolize maturity, manliness and the fighting spirit." (Getlen, 2015). This reflects how moustache carries a certain amount of importance in the socialist revolutions. Moreover, it has been a symbol of class inclusiveness, martial manliness, Magyar supremacy, anti-monarchist liberalism, public service, and masculine privilege. (Maxwell, 2015), it underlies a political significance (Puck, 2015). Fashioning a preferably thick, walrus-like moustache that solely covered the upper lip of the ULFA leaders symbolically challenged the Indian idea of wearing a long, waxed and curled at a the-end moustache.

The other aspect which metaphorically symbolizes ULFA's quest for a separate cultural construction of separate appearance is the use of masculine symbols like the motorcycle. Lee Gutkind mentions "The motorcycle is obviously a sexual symbol. It is what we call a phallic locomotor symbol. It's an extension of one's body, a power between one's legs" (Gutkind, 2014). What is interesting about ULFA's image is most of them rode on RX100 motorbikes. In fact, at one point of time, the Yamaha RX100 was almost like an iconic image of the ULFA's military nationalism. One of our informants^{xxxiv} during our fieldwork mentioned in a lighter vein,

"Ajirporakeibosor man agoloike RX100 loiahile Chabua t kunu police a narakhai"

(Only till a few years back, police personnel would not even dare to check any man riding a Yamaha RX100 in the Chabua area of the Tinsukia district.)

As a masculine symbol, RX100 implied some of the very important culture-specific connotations of what constituted the idea of ‘Assamese-ness’. The motorbike is in any case a conventionally accepted symbol of masculinity and phallic symbolism. What is more interesting about the Yamaha RX100 and the ULFA for us is that it is an extension of one’s body which is smaller in size, can be easily ridden and controlled even by a man of short stature. It is noteworthy that unlike the craze for any bikes with an imposing design like Royal Enfield, Bullet or Rajdoot350, the RX100 carried a man of average built, with a “local” look (Baruah, 2013) (Misra, 2000), an untamed rebel, and a symbolic association with someone from the Northeast of India.

Masculinities of the North-eastern state have been greatly influenced by a warrior past and are reproduced in folklore, museums, tourism and local histories (McDuie-Ra, 2013). Furthermore, men’s participation in the armed struggle (McDuie-Ra, 2013) and glorification of the warrior past enhance the South-East Asian connection (Mahanta, 2013) in the construction of a separate masculine identity from the Indian man. This is reflected in the writings of Parag Kumar Das who finds that the Assamese are closer to their ‘Mongolian brothers’, rather than part of the ‘Indian socio-cultural ethos’. In his book *SwadhinotarPrasatbh (A Plea for Freedom)*, Das differentiated the Assamese as a separate nation with the point that Assamese always have been ethnically different from the rest of India (Das, 1993). The political construction of ULFA’s males through physical appearances and their day to day lifestyle strongly reflects their demand of being separated from the Indian nation-state.

4.8 *Oti-Axamiyagiri*: Assamese Cyber Nationalism and Masculine Metaphors

The last few decades have prepared the world for a new mechanism of discursive formation: one that exists on the shimmering surface of our mobile screens. Society has been changing rapidly; the internet has re-imagined the old ideas like nationalism on a superficial level. “In its current figuration, the Internet does more than Network the globe: it creates a metaphorical world in which we conduct our lives” (Nunes, 1995). Social media sites more importantly provide the site for re-imagining the public sphere where people create and re-mould the discourses about their lives and the current world. This part of the thesis foregrounds how Assamese nationalistic masculine identity works in the cyberspaces of social media sites, it emphasizes the particular

term “*Axamiyagiri*” and the masculine connotations of cyber imagination of Assamese nationalism centred on it.

It is common nowadays among the Assamese to refer to *Axamiyagiri* as the symbol of Assamese nationalism through different statuses, comments and reactions on social media sites. It refers to a brand of masculinity that emerged from an ultra-nationalist stage of Assamese nationalism historically built around fear, and the sense of economic, cultural and political negligence by the Indian nation-state. The word becomes the new emblem of Assamese nationalism with enormous mass support in the cyber platform like Facebook, a projection of the suppressed fear of Assamese people of becoming marginalized in their land.

The second decade of the twenty-first century Assam has seen the rise of different political events like Bharatiya Janata Party’s formation of a government for the first time, the implementation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC), the implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 and the huge public protest against the Act. Amidst such a political scenario, the “Oti-Axamiyagiri” discourse gathered momentum in 2017.

The North East Today, an online daily published a report on August 24 2017,

On August 2017, in Nagaon town an incident occurred at Nagaon Panigaon Chariali under Nagaon police station in which some youths, including a tractor dealer and a BJP leader, allegedly physically assaulted a surrendered ULFA cadre, Moon Bora and wounded him severely”.

After the incident, The Sentinel (online version) published another report on August 24, 2017,

Thousands of people of various organizations like AASU, AJYCP*¹ and others rushed to Nagaon Sadar police station and staged demonstration demanding immediate release of the nabbed SULFA cadre. During the demonstration, the general secretary of ULFA, Anup Chetia along with other central leaders rushed to Nagaon Sadar police station and lodged an FIR against the attackers in the police station and sought immediate arrest of

¹AASU refers to the All Assam Students Union.

AJYCP refers to the Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuba Chatra Parishad.

the culprits who were directly or indirectly involved in the incident. The ULFA team later even visited the Superintendent of Police, DevarajUpadhyay and demanded immediate arrest of the attackers within 48 hours and also warned that if NagaonPolice failed to arrest of them, then any follow-up incident could take place and the Nagaon Police would be responsible for that.

This protest then took a dramatic new turn. The *AsomiyaPratidin* published a report on 26 August 2017 about a public gathering arranged by the ULFA in Neherubali, Nagaon on the previous day. The report stated “JitenDutta, an ex-ULFA leader with thousands of followers declared that as a person from Kakopathar² he is familiar with both the art of killing and of laying down his life for his nation”. In another public gathering arranged by *AxamiyaGana Mancha* in Amguri, JitenDutta appealed to the Assamese people to wear their nationalism on their sleeves, to project their *OtiAxamiya* (Exaggerated sense of Assamese-ness) identity as a symbol of unity. This statement came in the wake of the Nagaon Rupahihat incident on September 17, 2017 where the cultural symbol of Assam, the “gamosa”, was burnt in an internal conflict between two groups of NSUI (as published in *The Telegraph’s* online version on 19th September, 2017) and the issue attracted huge media attention as it was considered to be an insult to the Assamese nation and identity.

This issue successfully renewed the fire of volatile but dormant Assamese nationalism. The threat of the minority people suddenly became more real and counter statements from the leaders of the minority gradually were subjected to close scrutiny. MrAzizur Rahman announced in a press meet that exaggerated *Asomiyagiri* is reprehensible. Meanwhile, the AAMSU president later commented in a news debate on *Pratidin Times* on 2nd November 2017 that they would not accept the updating of NRC in Assam. Such statements led to a rise in the passionate wave of Assamese Nationalism, leading to an overflow of emotions in social media when supporters of Jiten Dutta started to cover their Facebook profile picture with the slogan

“AikhnAxom Hoi Bhai, IyatOtiAxamiyagiriSoliboi”

²Kakopathar Killings carries the memory of killing at least 10 people by Indian Army during 2006 at a peaceful protest. This place in Tinsukia district of Assam was also believed as one of the main stations of ULFA during their active days.

(Trans. This is Assam brother; Exaggerated Axamiyagiri is here to stay).

Suddenly, the term *Oti-Axamiyagiri* became an identity for the Assamese on social media platforms. The word *Axamiyagiri* (the blatant display of pride in being an Assamese, often used for bullying of the non-Assamese) refers to the expression of being Assamese or *Axamiya* and the projection of *Axamiya* identity through different identity symbols. Thus, Jiten Dutta's *OtiAxamiyagiri* is the reflection of many cultural stories of the projection of Assamese linguistic nationalism. It refers to the ideological construction of a nationalistic Assamese man who practices Assamese culture, worships mother Assam and is ready to sacrifice for the nation and Assamese people. The use of *Axamiyagiri* in today's context reflects the perceived need for forcefully asserting Assamese identity to cope with the threat from outsiders and "dangerous" cultural and linguistic immigration. The term *OtiAxamiya* as a part of the masculine discourse cuts across several institutional discourses.

This new form of projecting the *Axamiya* or Assamese identity has created a new sphere of Assamese nationalistic masculinity, masculinity which is hyper-real and hybrid. Such projection leads to form the symbol of masculinity which has emanated from the historical past, centred on the ethnic identity, but layered with the contemporary flow of the cybernetic world. In a way, social media platforms successfully dissociated the nature of Assamese nationalistic masculinity from its original context and placed new meanings of the new trends of the world. It centred on the digital construction of the idealized image of Jiten Dutta in a contextually adaptive sense of self (*Axamiyagiri*).

Jiten Dutta's social media image in contemporary and futuristic construction of the Assamese self with the insecurity at the possibility of being thrown out of their own land cannot be regarded as singularly responsible for the new form of masculinity discourse in the social media; rather, it can be considered as a new shape of the age-old questions of Assamese nationalism. Todd W. Reeser (2010) defines masculinity as a multi-origin project

..... there is no single or simple origin to masculinity, and that it cannot be isolated as beginning in a single place or at a single point. Rather, it is constantly created and challenged in numerous ways.....not only is there no single creator of masculinity, but there is no originary form of masculinity either. There is no single model that everyone turns to in order to define masculinity and to imitate it when they want to be or to act masculine. There are only innumerable copies of masculinities floating around in culture,

copies that can never be brought back to an originary masculinity that invented them. Even if one takes what seems to be an origin of some key definition of masculinity, upon examination it cannot be considered the sole origin of that brand of masculinity since other copies of that origin end up taking over the definition.

This new form of Assamese “masculine” intervention can be regarded as an awakening of the proverbial sleeping lion. But, what makes it most interesting is how this construction of Assamese nationalistic masculinity carries some of the most important aspects of masculinity in cyberspace. The form itself suggests a pre-military nature of masculinities, a situation where the discursive formation of threat is being appropriated by different groups even if there were very few actual incidents of physical violation. Dutta’s image certainly reflects a military nature, his association with the rebellious group of ULFA and statements make him a perfect model for an ideal military man what Segal (1990) refers “old wartime hero, who put ‘freedom’ before family and loved ones”. But, his projection in a virtual world makes him a virtual hero, an image that warns the enemies.

During the second decade of the 21st century, the virtual experience and digital identity certainly becomes a new way of negotiating identities, bodies and relationship. Dutta’s “masculine” intervention gathered meaning with this changing nature of the world. Facebook generated profile picture frames with the tagline *AikhonAxom hoi bhai, iyatOtiAxamiyagirisoliboi* becomes a new sphere where the youth Assamese interpret the on-going political and social circumstances; but, the social media mechanism compels them to merely end up with just supporting the fixed and framed Assamese nationalism. Such, inclusion of pre-fixed frames in profile pictures has taken away the freedom of expressing the personal comments about the issue; thus, this clearly takes away social media from its recognition as a “Public Sphere”.

This creates a hyper reality in terms of Assamese nationalism where the consumers are unable to distinguish their love of their state from the construction of Assamese nationalism based on Jiten Dutta’s statement and image in the postmodern space of social media. This frames social media as a space of identity formation which works as hypertelia (Baudrillard) in real materialistic world, also as social media becomes a simulated territory with immense importance in establishing norms in the physical world too. As, “Baudrillard referring to Roland Barthes, discussed how easily motion can be transformed into a visual experience”(Nunes, 1995), the same can be defined to explain how with the help of media representations, certain incidents (the

Nagaon Incident of the beating of a SULFA man) transform into a cyber-experience of projecting nationalistic masculinity; and vis-a-vis, through social media, it becomes a new form of marker of masculine and nationalistic identity.

Young men learn to code-switch or they use different signifiers depending on the social context, based on the cybernetic world. With the rising popularity of social media in the 21st century, the symbols like *Axamiyagiri* with the immense importance created by the discursive formation in social media, becomes the base of the “zero sum game” between the two groups in the spectrum. The zero sum game in this case represents an importance of symbolic representation of real Assamese identity. Social media created new version of Assamese masculinity through creations and alterations of the masculine image guided by the ‘son of the soil’ discourse and controlled by cyber platforms like Facebook not only reflects the on-going debate and discourse of the Assamese, but it has also given a new shape to the image of masculine idols.

Now, the term ‘*Oti-Axamiya*’ has established itself in the cyber space as the benchmark for defining both the self as well as the other in Assam. Using of social media images like *Axamiyagiriby* “nationalistic” groups like ULFA, AASU to ‘reinforce and reinterpret their dominant position’ and minority groups like AAMSU to ‘project and reinterpret their marginalized position’ certainly re-introduced the political discourses of Assamese nationalism of the 1980s under the guidance of student’s organizations about four decades ago, when the Assam Movement, led by the AASU and some nationalist groups was at its peak.

The hyper reality of cyber space certainly provides the space for polarized debate about the alleged masculine culture of violence some young men brought with them from their place of origin to a different place (Hark and Villa, 2017). Today, this new form of cyber nationalism reflects the process of mobilization of youths who are prompted to action by the virtual world of social media where the dominant ideologies are created and shaped by the media-created ‘incidents’ without necessarily having any direct connection with them and, the creation of a hybrid masculine sphere of Assamese cyber masculinities.