

Women on Stage: A Study of Performing Culture in Assam

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Chapter 4

Conclusion

The present study establishes the fact that women's entry on the performance spaces of Assam is intensely administered by the political threats to the region that have been in turn influential in defining and redefining the region and its people's identity. Areas of performance, wherein women's presences are observed in Assam cannot be restricted only to the dramatic performances of the region although the dramatic performances are a powerful mode of cultural representation. Before delving into the subject of women's entry on the performance stages of Assam, it becomes mandatory to identify and understand the ways in which the woman's question was dealt with in the context of writing, dance and movie which provide the loci for understanding their presences as well as absences in the public spaces. Conspicuously, even after the completion of more than half a century of India's independence, women's narratives of performances be it writing, dance or in cinema from Assam could hardly find mention as a part of the national representations. The vast legacy of the contributions by women of Assam made during the colonial era as activists and as writers as well as performers of various art forms have been severely excluded making the nationalist representations questionable. Women of Assam massively contributed to the Freedom Struggle for India but when it came to their representation in the national imagination, they were seriously neglected. Collection of funds for Congress, campaigns against untouchability and popularisation of Hindi as the national language were some distinctive ways in which women of Assam contributed towards the growth of nationalism. The questions of caste-based hierarchies were not so stringent in Assam and the introduction of Hindi was in actual

terms another form of political hegemony perpetuated under the guise of nationalism unawares. Such exclusions are suggestive of the implicit political hegemony that was exploitative and hypocritical where Assam and its people were used to fulfil the goals of national imagination. The hierarchy of men/women got ignored in the larger framework of national imagination and women got counted as men. Women were performing like men under such circumstances that provided significant examples of the “internal discontinuity” that institutes gender and its performance as a social construct (Butler, 271). This need realised by the nationalist agenda for the women to come out of the *home* spaces contradicted the traditionalist restrictions that required women to live within the four walls of the house. Women were required alongside men to be effective agencies protesting against British colonial domination and interestingly, this act in itself nullified the view that women’s identities can be “fixed” and hence stereotyped as only feminine and nothing beyond that. Women had to detach themselves from being too feminine, come out of the *ghar* (home) to the *bahir* (world) and protest like men did (Chatterjee 624).

Such nationalist twists provided a wider scope to understand women’s sexuality which was both feminine and masculine. It is pertinent here to recall Luce Irigaray’s views on the fluidity of sexuality which she talks about in her feminist discourses and makes one aware not to juxtapose a fixed stereotyped notion on women’s sexuality (23). To bring in such realisations among women, education was necessary as it played a crucial role in making the women aware of their ontological as well as epistemological possibilities. Concerns advocating education in women were expressed by nationalist reformers like Hem Barua and Gunabhiram Barua but then they could not completely liberate themselves from the traditional anxiety of women becoming too independent with Western education and forsaking their filial

responsibilities as a consequence. The example of Swarnalata's education at home and Gunabhiram Barua's hesitation to send her to the missionary school for acquiring education was a proof of the anxiety of the reformers in Assam and were antithetical to the ways in which women's education was looked at by the missionaries (Misra 1563). Under such circumstances where the Western-educated men could not liberate from the anxieties of traditionalism it was beyond scope for the other people in Assam to look at the questions of women's emancipation positively. The introduction of companionate marriage based on the Victorian ideals embraced by social reformers like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and Gunabhiram Barua were a failure as they never gave equal space to women in terms of sharing intellectual pursuits (Mahanta 11). The above instances clearly indicate that although the men were enlightened with Western ideals of reformation they could not liberate themselves from the traditional ways of looking at women. Rakhee Kalita Moral also considers such attempts to be just a mimicry and an aspiration towards Victorian gentility (16). According to Aparna Mahanta, the main objective of women's education, for most people in the nineteenth century, was to groom them to be good housewives – the 'companionate wife' and the objective of educating women and emancipating them was again for the betterment of the husband and the family (96).

Education in women became a privileged aspect where only the upper-class women could read and write and advocate reading and writing later to the women in the lower classes which too was challenging. Examples of the women's journals *Ghar Jeuti*, *Lekhika Aideur Jonaki Baat*, *Ardh Akaash*, *Sancheta*, *Sataari* were evidences of such openings that welcomed women from towns and villages to hold pen and write (Chaudhuri 158). However, writing by women on the flipside also strengthened the polarised attitude of the society towards women as good and bad

which was found applicable in the context of women performing as writers and actors respectively. The educated upper-class women like Hemanta Kumari Devi Bordoloi, poetess Nalinibala Devi, Bijuli Phukan, Sumitra Bhattacharya, Kiranmayee Agarwalla, Rajabala Das and others strived to mobilise women of all classes, especially the lower and working classes that also was rooted in the class-based hegemonic structure of the society. Ironically, the upper-class educated women became the agents of disseminating ideas of nationhood among the rural women who were not privileged to acquire education.

Undoubtedly, the movement for independence brought together women from all classes and communities which was evident from the formations of Assam Chatra Sammilan (Assam Student Association), the Assam Sahitya Sabha (Assam Literary Society) and finally the Assam Mahila Samiti (Assam Women's Association) in 1926 who joined the National Movement and participated in meetings, organized processions and boycotted schools, courts and offices (Puzari & Mazane 3). Community formation of women have been one of the strongest ways in which women could gather courage to overcome the *home/world* dichotomy as was evident during the national movement and the establishment of *namghors*.

The context of women on the performances spaces of Assam should be analysed as powerful narratives of identity assertion both of the women and the region. The women of Assam have been as severely neglected as the region from the national imagination. The first negotiation that the women had to do was with the chastity and purity questions like anywhere else in India.

Sankaradeva's gendered propagation of Vaishnavism was based on the consideration that women cannot gain anything from spiritual enlightenment as their lives had to be controlled by the men and also because they were biologically impure.

Based on such *phallogocentric* approaches, Vaishnavism in Assam can be said to have propagated the first form of massive exclusion of women from the public spaces. Women constructing their own *namghors* in the twentieth century highlights the strong repressive religious patriarchy that survived even after hundreds of years of Sankaradeva's death. Now the namghors have become the space where women feel more empowered with the strongest form of community bonding compared to the Hindu women are needed to worship in temples. Resistance towards entering the *sattras* by women social activists like Sheela Barthakur and Anima Guha with the help of the law breaking the longstanding ban on women from entering the holy places could be read as apt instances where the personal becomes the political. J Leslie had observed similar exclusions of women from sacred spaces that they need to follow while menstruating as their menstrual blood is regarded impure and dangerous resulting from Indra's curse which must be severely restricted from the sacred spaces (17). In Assam, such exclusionary practices demands extreme isolation of the girl bringing in humiliation for the woman both which perpetuated by women reiterates the masculine hegemony and establishes the fact that women are biologically inferior to men.

Women's forceful exclusion was evident as performers as well as in the form of audience in Assam. Absent women from the public spaces indicated the good, chaste, moral woman contrary to the bad, unchaste and immoral woman symbolised by the *devadasis*. The stigma of the bad woman was further strengthened when the *devadasis* were taken out from the temple premises with the instrumentalists and allotted separate 'gandharavas' to stay and exempted from land taxes were still looked at as the bad woman (Goswami 49). The particular instance of Phulmati-a *devadasi* becoming the queen of one of the Ahom kings failing to change the attitude of the

society towards her is a proof of the fact that social ascension from the status of a *devadasi* to a queen could not remove the stigma form her. This can further be justified with the instance of Dilip Kalita's failure in preserving the dance form completely detaching it from the element of promiscuity when his sister was humiliated for presenting the dance on the stage. These two instances reveal that even the dance as a cultural form was not acceptable in the society due to its once upon a time association with promiscuity.

Examples of dance forms in Assam speak volumes about performance as a male-dominated regime. In the *deodhani nritya*, the woman is represented as a mystical being, incapable of imbibing the divine in her which is again the masculine unless she forsakes her femininity. The gyrating body of the dancer as a mad woman becomes a necessary pre-condition for the masculine god to come and dwell in her body. Such practices not only push the dancing woman to the margins but also highlight the predominance of the masculine hegemony in its primitive form simultaneously showing her as the bearer of the "lack" (Lacan). The *sattriya nritya* was another such form of dance wherein women made powerful entries not only as performers but also in their attempts at improvising the costumes and giving it a feminine appeal that was found to be worth representing by women exponent of the dance form Indira P P Bora. Whereas religious dance forms were considerably well negotiated by women, the most popular cultural form of dance the Bihu dance still manifests the erotic highlighting the woman's body as an object of desire.

Women's contribution in the cultural practices which are occult and primitive such as seen in the *deodhani nritya* thus pushed her to the margins. The female dancer like the *devadasi* is the complex subject who is in limbo as she is the visualised sexed object subject to male gaze in the public and thus has no domain that

is private. She is forever the “other” of the good woman. Although she can be considered to be the working woman for centuries but such a representation situates her identity as “fractured” and “multiple”(Rutherford 54).

Sankaradeva’s exclusion of women from the performing spaces and the substitution of the women’s roles with men on the stage through cross-dressing problematises the idea of the masculine. By enhancing cross-dressing on his stages, Sankaradeva only compelled men to act as women regardless of their will that reveals the fact that even men on the stage were treated as women who could not intervene in the playwright’s imagination and had absolutely no rights to improvise their roles. Unlike Bal Gandharva who decided and had the control of improvising his acts as a woman on the stage, these men on the stages of Assam were mere objects of appropriation of the feminine. Sankaradeva’s attempts were mostly towards the dissolution of masculine hegemony based on caste differences where the men needed to be prepared to subvert masculine hierarchies propagated under the guise of caste discriminations which is nothing but “internal hegemony” that highlight the tendency of a particular group of men to ascend the imposed hierarchy by another set of men or any institution (Demetriou 339). Characterisation of the woman as egoistic, self-centred in his play *Rukminiharana*, were mere predicaments for Krishna to win the sympathy of the audience which further generated the reductionist images of the women and were in itself exploitative. Women on Sankaradeva’s stage functioned to settle the scores between men and contributed to the elevation of masculinity and condemnation of the faulty femininity.

In *Ramnabami* Gunabhiram Barua has depicted extreme modes of patriarchal oppression on women and their sexualities. Barua attempts to highlight that widowhood and woman’s chastity are inseparable issues. Widowhood renders the

woman as a subject of gossip further rendering her as a masterless body in the society which needs protection and in the absence of protection is susceptible to sexual violence. The Tragedy for the loss of the husband gets eclipsed with the concerns around maintaining the sexual chastity and morality of the woman and as the play progresses, Barua's depiction of Nabami as a liar, having a consummate relationship with Ramchandra and becoming pregnant only depict her as an unchaste woman as the ending of the play fails to establish the objective of the playwright. Considered to be the first revolutionary play, it should have ended with the new woman emerging from Nabami but Nabami's suicide represses her liberation and her power to negotiate against the stringent patriarchal structures. Amidst all this, Gunabhiram Barua introduces the question of education, print culture but as a recluse for the parents. The fact that Phuleswari forces Nabami to read *Asamiya Lorar Mitra* (Companion of an Assamese Boy) once again enforces the fact that women need to appropriate themselves for being the right companion to men. Such construction of the widow and womanhood as gullible beings readily available for exploitation reinstates the nationalist purview that women are vulnerable and hence should be locked under the home space.

Stringent laws and restrictions on their dress, food and mobility further encloses them within the home space. Tanika Sarkar highlights how such ways of positioning the Hindu widow's body becomes a site of oppressive patriarchal practices that pulls her back to the past and confines her from modernity (42). The impracticality of looking beyond the scopes of patriarchal societal structure becomes evident with Nabami yielding to Ram later in the play which reminds of the western widow that Simone de Beauvoir analyses in her book *The Second Sex* where the widow abnegates the self and becomes submissive to love believing that it is the only possible pathway

to freedom and thus surrenders to another sovereign subject that would once again treat her as a sexual being (699).

Within the larger text of widowhood, Barua could have highlighted more intensely the playfulness of the young widows with rituals that they needed to follow as found in the example of Jayanti breaking her fast during *shivratri* which would have been more emphatic but Barua's leaves them as quiet repercussions compared to that of Nabami's. Barua's play ends with the drastic death of Nabami and Ramchandra. Ramchandra's advocacy of widow remarriage as he found in the *samahitas*, and his debate with Kamdev on widow re-marriage is was rendered meaningless in the course of the play as he gets scared to find signs of pregnancy in Nabami's body and later procrastinates his decision of marrying Nabami.

Sumanta Banerjee points out the reasons for the failure of the play during the time when it was written. The brahmin-dominated Assamese literati's suspicion of the customary laws as well as fear about modern reforms (like widow remarriage or campaign against pre-puberty marriage) that could break the barrier between the brahmins and the vast majority of the non-brahmin population in Assam made them apprehensive about the expansion of the woman's sphere and thus they alienated themselves from the message of Gunabhiram's play (Banerjee 27). This also implies how the realistic representations were curtailed by the dominant class and caste ideologies rampant in the society which was thought to be maintained and preserved by the women.

On the other hand, in Jyoti Prasad Agarwala's plays *Sonit Kunwar* (1925), *Karengar Ligiri* (1937), *Rupalim* (1960), *Lobhita* (1948) women were agencies for propagating the dominant ideology of nation-building that Agarwala wanted to communicate. Agarwala's women centred plays helped him resurrect the idea of the

nation and raise the consciousness among the masses about the glorious past of Assam (Gohain *et. al* 4). Writing about literature and cultural memory, Mihaela Irimia points at the power of the literary narrative that has its historically accumulated meanings, associations, and resonances and which can be effectively manipulated in a performance text in a modern way to facilitate subtle, indirect, and surreptitious communication to the audience (4). Agarwala's plays reflect the deliberate attempt of creating a nation with its own "narrative" emerging out of its own historicity clearly displacing the slowly dissipating Bengali imperialism. Through the reconstruction of the shared experiences, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala builds that "imagined community" that he hoped to emerge as the new nation-state simultaneously when India will be reborn into a nation and in all this, the women were the central characters from which the site of narrating identity began. Such a search for the woman in the historical narratives and later his attempts to find a real woman actor indicates the woman's power to be the muse for the man's creativity. The woman serves as the inspiration for male creativity but on the contrary, her creativity gets stunted (Rutherford 60).

Cross-dressing by Chitralekha in the play *Sonit Kunwari* contradicts cross-dressing on the stage. Chitralekha's cross-dressing empowers her and endows her better mobility and the fact that she decides to conduct the *gandharva bibah* to unite Aniruddha and Usha positions her as a threat to the King which however does not get much attention in the play compared to the duel between the King and Aniruddha later. Chitralekha becomes the radical woman but Agarwala never brings this to the notice of the King. Chitralekha helps her friend in a most unexpected way a woman could help her *sakhi*, which also highlights the strength of bonding between women. Same-sex bonding, community formation were important ways through which people

could be mobilised as was seen in the community formation of women discussed in the first chapter.

Agarwala positions his women within the conflict of the binaries that maintained the superior/inferior and rendered the world a universal battlefield. Goswami writes that Agarwala was strongly swayed by his conviction that art and culture will enable the individual. Goswami writes that Agarwala was strongly swayed by his conviction that art and culture will enable man to sit in his high and worthy pedestal and this he expresses through the character of Chitralekha (96). Agarwala's comic character Kunji Budhi from the economically lower class provides the cynicism to women's investment of time and thought towards beautifying their external appearance when the time demands them to be more focused at the nationalist project.

The class-gender divide re-appears in *Karengor Ligiri* (1937) Sewali is found within the hierarchical oppositions – ruler-ruled, privileged-underprivileged pushing her further to the margins. Both Sewali and Kanchan belonging to two different classes and communities fail to break the norms of the society. Kanchan's courage to speak is antithetical to Sewali's silence. But it is only the man who has the rights to walk out from the institution of marriage and who is never questioned. Observing closely at the role of the Queen, one can also see the other side of oppressive womanhood that not only oppresses women but also closes all possibilities for the man to know the truth which is proven when the Queen throws Sewali out of the palace without the prince knowing the actual reasons behind her disappearance. Contrasted to Sewali, Kanchan is the new woman in making but Agarwala could never make her the final new woman which expresses his fear of non-acceptance and the subsequent failure of his objective to mobilise the masses when men, as well as

women, would not accept such brave new woman standing against marital laws and customs. Therefore, Kanchan pirouettes between her fears and her desires but never ultimately trespasses the marital bond. Sewali is also treated in the same way wherein she commits suicide in the fear of the Prince taking her back to his palace and marrying her as Sewali is scared of such class-based ascension that might invite greater threats to her and her family and people. The continuum of such women could be found in *Rupalim* as well where Rupalim is portrayed as an embodiment of beauty, submissiveness, and loyalty as opposed to Itivan who is shrewd, treacherous and indomitably vengeful. Agarwala reinstates that feminine qualities are the winning attributes of a woman that can win over a man and the masculine or masculinised women are destined to be defeated. Endorsing the feminine and the masculine formed the pre-requisites for invigorating the idea of a nation. In the case of Lohita, her rape and the subsequent army brutalities leading to her ex-communication becomes the only driving force for her to join the liberation movement. Excommunicated girls relocate themselves in the war field and vengeance for the sexual offence empowers them with to overturn political systems of hegemony.

Lohita's assertion that she has no political affiliations clears the fact that nation-building was a way of restoring her lost honour. Lohita's death fighting for Indian liberation and the planting of the Indian flag on British dominated soil indomitably helps Agarwala establish his nationalist agenda. Loss of the woman's honour and threat to the nation in creation are equated ways of imagining the nation.

Appropriating the feminine and conformation to the norms adjudicated by the patriarchal society changed after the independence. Under the shroud of modernity, playwrights like Golokeshwar Barua revisited the mythological characters of Tapaty and Lopamudra and endowed them with the ability to examine their positions in the

society. The plays *Tapaty* and *Lopamudra* portray the women in transition and their questioning of the *shastras* symbolised their new efforts of questioning the patriarchal norms that rendered them the status of an object of sexual gratification and trade. Education in women that was based on implanting masculine hegemony during the colonial era now turned to be empowering women with new introspective approaches towards the woman's question. Critical reading of the Vedas by women, as presented in the plays of Barua enabled them to examine their status and question the authorial *vedic* texts that perpetuated the masculine/feminine dichotomy.

Tapaty and Lopamudra emerge as the sceptical women who question and negotiate the women's position in the patriarchal society after mastering the scriptures. Deconstructing the caste based hierarchy; Barua positions the protagonists of his plays within the ambit of universal womanhood who could be found in tandem with economically empowered society. Negotiating their "interior colonisation" they challenge the norms which render their bodies as "sexual objects" trapped in the sexual politics rendering their bodies as sites of oppression (Millet 25). Barua's plays are a counter-attack to the "logos" that patriarchal forms of oppressed hierarchical structure perpetuate in the form of caste and gender differences. Staging such women characters in Assam, where women were not even allowed in the sacred spaces was quite challenging. The need for dealing with women's issues within the domestic sphere was more than the need for debating about women's presences in the public spaces as even in the cases of educated women they continued to remain in the inferior and neglected spaces within the family. Barua's plays reflected the woman's question in general and were not much delineated to understand the woman question within the larger compass of cultural identity and other political concerns shaping and influencing the position of women in Assam.

The written plays and the mobile theatres have tried to negotiate with the questions of cultural identity in their specific independent ways. Therefore, it becomes difficult to assemble the two together and derive a common conclusion about their presentations.

Nationalism and threat to the indigenous language and culture was perceived by Agarwala and expressed in his written plays although their stage representations were not very successful. Agarwala regretted the disavowal of the plays by Padmanath Gohain Barua by the Assamese actors during that time which was an indication of indirect displacement of Assamese cultural roots under Bengali influence. Failures were also marked in the attempts of the amateur theatre directors who, influenced by the *jatras* of Bengal, tried to internalise the form and content by attributing Assamese language, songs, bringing in Assamese artists on the stage and restructuring Assamese historical narratives for the performances. Look back at the past and refashioning history was a way to reinstate national identity in order to unify, mobilize, and legitimize nationalist resistance which was based on the invention and construction of cultural and historical from the cultural memory (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1-14).

Jatras appealed the amateur theatre directors in Assam as it did not bear the water-mark of class-based hegemony and were anti-chauvinistic unlike its elite precursors that came along with Bengali chauvinism to Assam. One very interesting sociological aspect of the Bengal *jatras* that have helped in its successful entry into Assam was the shared “archetypal cultural images” between the two regions that Mimansa Pandit finds in her research on the influence of Bengal in Assam (27). Such a finding helps to understand better the commonality amidst the coloniser/colonised dichotomy that effected the Bengal influence on Assam and also justifies for the initial luring to the *jatra* parties as irresistible. But language and

cultural settings on the stage had to be reworked if they were to effectively mobilise the masses in Assam against any kind of political or cultural hegemony be it British or Bengali.

The stages in Assam lacked the spectacle that *jatras* had. They lacked the spectacle of reality and that could be brought in only with the real woman on the stage. Entertainment preceded enlightenment in the context of mobile theatres. And at the same time, failure threatened the ego of the nationalists in Assam. Bengal's liberal approach to include women on the stages of *jatras* proved to be the major attack on the creative and constructive capabilities of the theatre directors. Cross-dressing attributed to the effect of the fictional and further suppressed the real woman by replacing them with the masks of patriarchal production (Case 318). Although such outcomes were also sensed by Braja Nath Sarma and Raghunath Chaudhuri in the context of Assamese theatre but these were not the primary reasons for bringing the women on the stage and therefore, the women who were brought in only spoke “another’s language in another’s speech” (Bakhtin 324).

Nationalism and nation-building were the main driving forces for bringing in women on the performance space that gradually replaced impersonation on the stages. Women as agencies of looking back at tradition and past glory was an innovative way of projecting nationalist ideologies not only in the written plays but also in the performance plays. But women before making their entries into the stages of Assam had to liberate themselves from their quibble selves who in the initial phases could not continue acting and hence returned to their homes only to be disgraced as women of low morality and chastity. Women’s appearances made the theatrical performances derogatory which was evident from the humiliation of the actresses later as “prostitutes” in the society and also led to the shutdown of the Kohinoor Theatre

Party. But when Surya Das launched his daughter, questions on the chastity of the women on the stages gradually were pushed at bay as the father safeguarded the daughter's presence as well as her honour and he was also from the theatre background. Although Braja Nath Sarma got a few actresses Golapi Das, Sarbeswari Das, Phuleshwari Das of Samuguri, Sailyabala Devi from Jorhat, Lavanya Das from North Guwahati and Binoda Gogoi from Nazira These actresses expressed their desire to act although they were not educated and had to be taught the skills of acting and articulation of words before finally launching them on the stages of Doomdooma in 1933 in his Kohinoor Opera Party. These instances provide enough evidence for the fact that replacing Bengali language and culture was less painful than launching women on the stages. Women belonging to respectable families were never allowed to come into acting as that would turn into a disgrace by giving them a permanent status of a public woman much like a courtesan or a prostitute as was seen in the exemplary case of Aideu Handique. Aideu Handique's ostracisation due to the fact that she addressed her on screen husband Manimugddha as "mangohor deo" which meant "the lord of my body" was considered to be an erotic expression and hence objectionable by the society. On the contrary, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala is still celebrated to be the first Assamese filmmaker. This is an appropriate instance of the construction of masculinity at the stake of femininity found in colonial Assam. It is worth bringing in here Minoti Chatterjee's "troubled question of female sexuality" when discussing about the cultural protest movement in and around 1905 in Bengali theatre that highlighted how a woman without strong family bindings made her perfect for public life and which in itself condemned her as a public woman with no morals (7). But towards the end of the seventies things changed and in other parts of India, as Anand Lal argues, the acceptability of women on stage was a major step in the progress

towards modernisation (Bhatia 36). Whereas, women's public appearances were already marked in their participation for the independence struggle and in the sphere of writing, accepting her on the stages of performance was still found difficult. The entry of women on its stages remains the most significant change that also changed the outlook of the society on the woman's question and projected the same in conspicuous ways.

Women-centric narratives were regarded as agencies to question the way society looked at women and treated them. Women's presence on the stages of mobile theatres is worth analysing as they reveal the myriad attitudes of the people of Assam acutely responding to the class and gender divide that existed in the society. The post-colonial theatres of Assam became the mimetic representations of reality. The portrayal of women in the post-colonial plays of Assam on the mobile theatre stages was manipulated by the other factors such as race, class, and/or cultural background. Gendered oppression within the garb of religion and ethnicity have been radically dealt with by the contemporary playwrights Baharul Islam and Rabijita Gogoi whose stage representations can be considered as a parallel performance to the mobile theatre performances.

Post-colonial Assam witnessed the new trends of class and culture based hegemonic oppression. Lower class woman exploited by upper-class man was the dominant theme that was portrayed repetitively in the mobile theatres in plays like *Alankar* and *Mukha*. Representation of reality was more emphasised now to delineate the attention of the people to the social evils which mostly were exploitative on women. More than the mobilisation of masses that was sought for in the colonial mobile theatre stages, the post-colonial theatre stages demanded the mimetic representation of the real world as the evil now rested within the Assamese societies.

Displaying the evil, displayed the class and gender-based dichotomy that had rooted itself in the society in the new guise. Compared to the *bahir* space where the woman was located in the colonial drama, women were now represented within the *ghar* - domestic sphere where the family unit deified the male as the sexual subject and the female as the sexual other. Women's victimisation within the institution of marriage even though she was educated reflected the social reality of the rising middle class in Assam after independence which could be witnessed in the ownership of tea-gardens, owners of businesses that proliferated after independence and which also were the descendants of the English educated youth of Assam of once upon a time colonial India.

Undeniably, women's number in acting increased but they were still the objects of the male gaze. The mobile theatre stages had become the public spaces where entertainment preceded enlightenment. It is pertinent to bring in Foucault's ideology of "power-knowledge-pleasure regime" that appropriated the woman on the stage once again in post-colonial Assam (11). The materiality of her presence on the stage could not be considered as a projection of the self even in the post-colonial plays where woman's oppression was the major subject of display. The articulation of the problems was still in the director's language that aimed at achieving the director's objective which was mostly generic and considered women a category undergoing the same victimisation and that was perilous as it perpetuated the same old notion of the woman being weak and frail. In the pretext of womanhood, there was nothing new that the stages could provide. This incident proved once again that "the theatrical space was a gender locked heritage site dominated and perpetuated not only by the directors but also by the patriarchal notions that governed the liberty of women" (Gillespie 100-130).

In the context of women performers in Assam, the woman needs to be understood within the context of various hegemonic partialities disseminated through colonial administration, independence struggle and different ethnic conflicts that have been affecting the region and mostly the significant question of its identity and that offers a breakthrough from the homogenised representations of women on the stages. This study is an attempt to deconstruct the legitimacy of “East” as the “woman” that creates the spectacle of the “natural” needing “explication, investigation, illustration, discipline, reconstitution or redemption” (Said 112). The post-colonial dramatic performances staged by the contemporary playwrights like Baharul Islam, Rabijita Gogoi and Bhagirathi Bai Kadam in Assam are self-investigative, offering the diverse approaches the region's people adapt to express their compliance/reluctance towards the question of their inclusion/exclusion in the discourse of the national imagination painstakingly represented through the women on stage.

Seminal to the question of Assamese identity as pointed out by Udayon Misra was the struggle to regain the status of the Assamese language that was thought to be uniting the various segments of the Assamese society and in strengthening the Assamese national consciousness (18). It has been observed that when Braja Nath Sarma was idealising the growth and rise of mobile theatres in Assam, he had included in his imagination of Assam the “hills and valleys” which is a very significant point to be reiterated in the context of the identity question of the region. The revolutionary theatre practitioners like Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, Braja Nath Sarma had imagined the independent post-colonial Assam without the exclusion of the hills from the valleys and therefore, their plays include them, their distinctive tribes as a part of Assam’s historical narrative. The resistance was always to external influences

as exemplified by the one against Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) later (Bhattacharyya 77).

Anxieties of exclusion of Assam from the national imagination surfaced when the newly born nation committed its grievances allowing massive infiltration from Bangladesh that led to the problems of land acquisition. This was the major grievance committed by India which isolated the region. The people of the region had been left in chaos by other external threats in the past like the Burmese invasion, British annexation, and World War II. As has been observed in the context of theatre, with great anxiety the people of the region participated in the Freedom Struggle fighting against internal colonisation addressed as Bengali chauvinism and then the British colonisation. But the unchecked flow of people from Bangladesh after independence was a new form of threat to the harmony and integrity of the people.

When Anandaram Dhekial-Phukan first talked of an Assamese nation and made language the unifying symbol of its modern national consciousness he committed the greatest blunder of hegemonic oppression on the indigenous ethnic groups living in Assam since time immemorial. The traditional ease with which an average Indian identifies oneself with both the nationalisms is not found in the case of Assam. Although Assam is integrated with the rest of India economically, culturally and politically but the sub-national tendencies reflected in the non-democratic activities of the militant groups explicitly express their rebellion against the unchecked flow of people and the imposition of Assamese language all across Assam. Besides, the upper middle class and high caste governance system in Assam was concerned about the identity question further alienated the tribal or other ethnic groups living in the plains of the Brahmaputra Valley and the Barak Valley as well as those in the hilly regions of northeast and the occasional emotive appeals for tribal/non-tribal unity

within the broader fabric of the Assamese community, did little to assuage tribal fears of being outnumbered and of being dispossessed of their land by immigrants. This indicated the polished forms of practising linguistic hegemony in order to establish Assamese nationalism and nationhood. The capitalist path of development and modernization that consolidated in India after independence was the indirect reason for acute regional disparities, which simultaneously created sub-regional, sub-national and ethnic movements in the state. Assam, in fact, becomes the most deprived region and has remained the most economically depressed and politically subjugated state within the federal democratic polity of India for which scholars often call it a colonial hinterland of Independent India. Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated to establish the concepts of truth, order, and reality (Ashcroft *et. al* 53).

The second threat to the identity of the ethnic communities in Assam was from the inflow of the Bengali Muslim immigrants coming from East Pakistan after independence and their increasing land acquisitions pushing the ethnic communities further to the interiors in their own regions. When such a transition was happening after independence, the Assam government was only concentrating on assimilating the various ethnicities under Assamese language and left the large-scale immigration question unaddressed. However, the concerns regarding the immigrant Muslims from East Pakistan began only during the 1971 elections when the Assam Movement took place and attempted to drive away the foreigners from the mainland.

Baharul Islam and Rabijita Gogoi have tried to look into the problematic of the identity(s) question of the threatened ethnic as well as immigrant communities within the larger context of Assam's inclusion/exclusion nationalist discourse and investigated in their distinctive ways the atrocities of inseminating violence that the

woman's body powerfully inscribes in the form of rape, loss of child, trauma, psychological repression and becomes the site of contesting power relations. The woman's body becomes a powerful metaphor for articulating the resistance against dominant political and ideological forces that have always complicated the identity questions in Assam.

Baharul Islam's *Jatra* draws attention to the larger complexities of the state apparatus favouring large-scale immigration that left unnoticed the oppression on women within the immigrant communities and the question of women's education in immigrant Muslim societies. Held up with the debate on inclusion/exclusion of the Muslim immigrants and the greater questions of their national identity(s), the women were exploited as seen in the instances of the *maulvi* and Hannan for whom women were objects of sexual gratification and they manipulated the Quran and the *triple talaq* for the fulfilment of their lustful desires. Thus, Baharul Islam's projection of the immigrant women emphasises the woman's body as the result or effect of the process of immigration which gets "marred in the plurality of bodies" and in the larger narrative of the exodus from Bangladesh to Assam (Riley 221). Societal conditions were unfavourable for the immigrant Muslim women's formal education in schools and from the religious perspective they were prohibited from scripture reading. Quite strikingly, the controversial statements like the president of the 1996 session of the Asom Sahitya Sabha declaring that the immigrant-turned Assamese are more patriotic than the so-called "core Assamese" indicated their anxieties for assimilation within the state of Assam evolving into a search for establishing permanent identities rather than enjoying the mere status of asylum seekers.

Islam does not give any name to the protagonist of his play in *The Green Serpent* which can be interpreted as his repetitive attempts to highlight the

suppression of women's individualities and their bodies as sites of oppression. Islam looks at rape as an agency for infliction of pain not only on the girl but on her community which has posed a threat of displacement and loss of identity for the Bodo community living in the northern bank of Brahmaputra, Karbi Anglong, and North Cachar Hill districts. The end of the play establishes that it is only "resentment" that forces the Bodo boy to rape the girl as he fails to recollect her as his victim. Islam once again looks at the question of women's education but now in the form of respite that might help the victim reconstruct her *self* to a certain extent in a different place (Nietzsche 43). Islam's subtle concern raised in favour of women's education is in stark contrast to the colonial discourse on women's education initiated by reformers like Gunabhiram Barua who could not completely detach themselves from the rigid structures of traditionalism and conservatism.

Islam's plays radically intervene and investigate the horrendous living conditions under which the immigrant Muslim communities survive within the periphery of Assam. Their women are the doubly oppressed gendered-communal other. The playwright uses the imagery of rape both within and outside the community to reiterate the forgotten violence committed to the community and their women exposing the inhumane practices within the broader debate of global human rights.

Contrary to the privileged mainstream Muslim communities who under the influence of the local Hindu social customs have appropriated their customary laws benefitting the women in their community, as noted by Meeta Deka, the living conditions of the immigrant Muslim women are vulnerable that also throws light on the mainstream/immigrant dichotomous existence of the Muslim communities of Assam (61).

Baharul Islam's plays provide an important dialogue with the on-going debate on illegal Muslim immigrants in Assam and offer constructive thinking towards the issue. Islam voices out against the wrongs committed to "lives of people" before going into the debate of driving out immigrant Muslims from Assam, the so-called "Bangladeshi khedua" (*chase the Bangladeshis*) episode ongoing in Assam. Identifying this anti-Muslim debate as a political strategy, Islam says that immigration is not out of choice but out of the need to survive. Islam's words also implicate his quest for identity as was evident from his response on the aspect of "alienation" within the mainstream society (Islam). Islam's subtle revelation that he was denied land rights can be traced to the alienation of immigrant Muslims in mainstream Assamese society and the fact that he has made recent appearances in negative as well as positive roles can be interpreted as attempts of negotiation from the peripheries. Islam defines difference through performativity of gender as well as race. The instance of denial of land rights in Guwahati and the simultaneous negligence of his expertise in the field of drama has semblance with the way Patricia J Williams explains the consideration of her identity as "unreliable, untrustworthy, hostile, angry, powerless, irrational..." and not reshaped with her academic proficiency (99).

Dramatic performances in Assam are endowed with the various waves of dialogic plausibility to reconcile with the sub-nationalist tendencies that demand sovereignty and autonomy of power as is also evident from Rabijita Gogoi's attempts to define identity(s) in a constructive way by reconstruction of the folk narratives of the ethnic communities. Reconstructing history had also been an important aspect of Brecht's dramatic presentations to project the suppressed identities of a people (Mumford 7). Diverting the youth from getting influenced by non-democratic activities, Gogoi unaware places herself as a playwright in the binarism of the

privileged/underprivileged. Gogoi detests the apathetic approach of the state apparatuses that could not any longer resolve the identity conflicts and resurrects drama as an effective tool of reconciliation. The historical narratives stand as metaphors of “social representation” that project “social identities” (Howarth 697-698) and Gogoi’s dramatic performances are peace initiatives opposing the non-democratic ways of identity assertion through violence, mass killings, murders, and rapes. Gogoi’s appreciation of the tribal women’s freedom of mobility and hence their empowerment indirectly surfaces the comparison that she intends to make with the economic status of women in Assam.

In both her plays, *Mrityur Dath Saanh* and *Rangpherpi Rangbe*, Gogoi’s use of motherhood reflects the mobility and freedom of the tribal woman which had influenced her to create her plays. Gogoi sees the woman as power incumbent who can also bring in transformation in the present political scenario. It is apt to refer here to Jasodhara Bagchi’s consideration of motherhood as a powerful agency to show the multilayered contradictions which uphold human existence (50-79). Image of the mother as silent and inefficient in controlling the son and her naivete and ignorance reiterate the metaphor of the silenced mother India and stands in stark contrast with the mothers Brecht portrays in his *Mother Courage* or *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* who go the extent of endangering their children for the sake of wealth.

In *Memsahib Prithvi*, the woman is presented as the mother for nature who is the real preserver and sustainer of nature which had also been equally wronged by men as they have wronged women. Women have always been nurturing, preserving nature the way she had been maintaining her family and taking care of her familial responsibilities. This has been also considered in the ethnographic studies where the bigger responsibilities shared by women in nurturing men and land have been

appreciated (Blunt & Rose 178). The river symbolises the past connect within the play that never fades from the collective memory of its people as is reiterated in their mythological tales and other folk narratives. The Afghan woman opposed to the Queen questions the safety and preservation of the natural resources and logically negotiate against their exploitation. The threat to natural resources in ethnic regions in the northeast becomes a threat to the community as they live a symbiotic relationship in northeast India (Ali 4). Gogoi's attempts should however not be considered as an attempt to discover and present the subaltern as she finds a deep sense of rootedness in the ethnic garbs of the region has grown in that milieu and therefore, *her* radical approach towards the process of relational identity formation of the ethnic communities with respect to the mainstream Assamese societies in the Brahmaputra Valley. Gogoi is more pragmatic in her approaches to resolving the identity conflicts and does not probe into the good or bad of nationalism which is a monolithic phenomenon.

There is a parallel that can be made between the attempts of the revolutionaries like Jyoti Prasad Agarwala in colonial drama and by Rabijita Gogoi in post-colonial drama of Assam that can be explained through Vivian Patraka's analysis of the performative power of the Holocaust museums that helps in spectators to repeatedly remind and remember the effect of the Holocaust (90). Patraka's analysis that the Holocaust museums are the narratives of genocide and it's after effect that is re-inscribed to invoke the prolonging remembrance of the event on the spectators, is the same technical weapon appropriated by the reconstruction of the narratives from history by Agarwala and Gogoi although at a different time and a different space however with similar objectives of engraving their lost identities and reasserting them.

Patraka arbitrates the image of the Holocaust and its associated narratives that need not be intended to conserve or preserve the specific event.

Economic and political wrongs like the concentration of development in the post-independence era concentrated only in the plains; the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985 were the major reasons for tribal alienation besides the threat to their land by the immigrant Muslims. But the Assam Accord was viewed as a move aimed at protecting the identity only of the Assamese-speaking people, while totally ignoring and overlooking the grave dangers that were being posed to tribal identity.

Bhagirathi Bai Kadam's linguistic and cultural differences made her confront similar challenges in Assam and therefore, the playwright and director with her own capacity analyses the various hegemonic tendencies of gender and ethnic divide found in Assam. The contextualisation of *Julius Caesar* in 2011 (after the bloody 30th October of 2008 attacks in Guwahati leading to the death of many indigenous Assamese which I also witnessed closely) in the conflict-ridden Nagaland of northeast India, the admixture of the cultural attires of Nagaland and Assam symbolises the will for dialogic resolutions rather than bloodshed. Costumes, according to Barbieri, embody histories, states of being, and previously unimagined futures and articulate infinitely complex human nature (22). Bhagirathi's perspective that violence and its associated fears and anxiety are same for everyone underpins the bloodshed culture that has for long troubled the region demanding autonomies and sovereignties.

Bhagirathi has negotiated her way in the stages of Assam by challenging the question of linguistic identity and also for being the wife of the Baharul Islam who belonged to the family of the middle-class Muslim that migrated to Assam from Bangladesh much before 1971.

Rabijita Gogoi and Bhagirathi Bai Kadam, claim for restoration of the unique identities of all ethnicities in northeast India without allowing their uniqueness to be suppressed by the mainstream political hegemony of Assamisation. The analyses of Rabijita Gogoi and Bhagirathi Bai Kadam's plays made herein reveal the discrete and unique contexts under which the women become the sufferers. The internal cultural and linguistic differences between mainstream Assamese people and the various ethnic communities leading to atrocious treatment of women calls for a different reading, writing and cataloguing much before being considered as a mere variant of women's experiences in the Third World.

The postcolonial mobile theatre stages, however, destabilise the old agenda of adhering to the indigenous culture and restoring of Assamese language as they are flooded experiments on reconstructing mainstream Hollywood and Bollywood movies; elaborate stage settings to increase their USP; inclusion of film artists and most importantly have also improvised item songs to attract the attention of the crowd. As mentioned earlier, in the context of mobile theatres even in present times, entertainment precedes enlightenment. Such transitions have happened over a slow period of time. On a close reading into the attempts on adaptation, it can be observed that the *Assamised transculturation* of the Shakespearean plays and its indigenisation became mere captivating stories of romance for the rural folks who have never read or heard of Shakespeare. The adaptation of Shakespeare's plays like *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Romeo Juliet* offer, renewed intervention rewriting the characters, the narrative, the context, and/or the genre of the canonical script and provides another means of interrogating the cultural legacy of imperialism. Providing entertainment on the surface level and destabilising the power hierarchies on the other can be marked as the attempts to decolonising the stage (Ashcroft *et al* 117).

However, such destabilisation of power promulgated the image of the urban upper class with its rich grandeur that is far removed from the crude and rustic realities in which the rural folks live re-establishing the class-based dichotomy. Selecting the Western models also showed them prospective economic benefits needed to maintain and sustain the theatre companies against the upcoming Bollywood movies as revealed by the proprietor of Kohinoor Theatre told to IANS who attempted to take the dramatic versions of *Titanic* and *Jurassic Park* to remote villages across the state even before the movies arrived on Assamese screen from Hollywood leaving barely any chance for the movies to provide the entertainment prior to their theatrical performances (Lahkar).

The successive attempts of replacing the Bengali culture and language from the mobile theatre stages have now become submissive to the grip of globalisation. The objectives of mobilising the masses have changed to the reach out for masses for gaining publicity and economic benefit. Getting connected with the ethnic communities has, however, become a secondary objective of the theatre companies. Quite strikingly, contradictory to the resistances of the ethnic communities shown through armed conflicts by their non-democratic organisations towards the mainstream Assamese political and cultural hegemony, the theatre artists have witnessed a very different response towards the theatre presentations of the mobile theatres as revealed during the interview with Rajeev Goswami.

Another important aspect to look at in the changing trend of the mobile theatres is the belittling presentation of the woman's body through itemised songs. The item songs have almost become an inevitable part for the promotion of the theatre as Assam has become the hub of more than fifty theatre parties travelling across the region in and around the same time starting every year in August and ending in April.

Bodies of the dancing women on the stage produce antagonistic narratives on women's sexuality far removed from the nationalist discourses on the moral chastity of women who were restricted from even being the audiences of theatrical performances. The theatrical dance performance is redirected to provoke fascination and anxiety and projects the untethered people of the region symbolised by the desire for the untamed femininity (Nijhawan 99). It is pertinent to use here the relationship between imperialism and sexuality that Philips observes in his analysis of sexualities, in the context of *bhramyaman theatres* (Philips 136-153). After 1961, women were seen increasingly entering the field of acting on the stages of mobile theatre. This was a revolution expressed through the contestations of the "private/public" sphere in the field of performance. But the woman's body now has become a site of pleasure represented by the woman's body dancing to the item songs for the promotion of the dancing body of the woman.

On the contrary, a look back into the narratives of the individual actors who have spent almost their entire life on the stages of performance also reveals their remarkable journeys on the stage. Chetana Das, mostly known for her comic roles and a renowned comedian for decades entered the stage when she was only four years old. Her being trained as a comic character by the few noted personalities like Narahari Burha Bhakat, Jagesh Bharali, Gakul Pathak, Akhay Mishra, Ratna Ojha as revealed during the interview highlights the construction of the comedian in the actor from a very early age. The same can also be interpreted as a significant closure to the scope in experimenting with her acting skills in other roles and can be read as an imposed limitation brought in by such an appropriation of the comedian in her. The coincidence of her entry on the stage in the same year when women entered the mobile theatres spaces becomes less insignificant as she never explored the stages of

mobile theatres. The list of awards that she received from the various organisations by the people of Assam living across the country show her growing recognition with the growing number of years she had spent on the drama stages of Assam and critical examination of these awards also reveals that they were all directed to the achievements of the woman as an actor on stage. Das had always presented the naïve and simple rustic characters which as was evident was a matter of choice for her but however could not detach the comedian that she was constructed as over the years. This points to the decision making the ability of the woman on the stage and also obliterates the rigid masculine construction of the woman on stage for restricted few women actors. Das's involvement with the theatrical world brought her husband on the stage too as she reveals in the interview but that leaves a wide gap raising questions on what made her husband join the stage. Was it purely influential? Or was it that he was insecure about Das working on?

Rina Bora the veteran stage actress who had also acted on the mobile theatre stages as well as acts for television serials recalled the encouragement by her directors who helped her learning the acting skills by dialogue appropriation and presentations on the stage. It is pertinent to note here that she emerged as a lead actor later from a dancer on the sets of drama. Bora states her “looks” were appropriate for many characters that the men imagined in their women protagonists and from the marginal positions of a dancer she was made the lead actor in the plays *Narttaki* and *Urvashi*.

Looks became the deciding factor of presentation on the stage as even then the feminine, the beautiful woman on stage was the pre-requisite to become the heroine. Compared to Rina Bora, Chetana Das did not have such appealing qualities but her ability to perform the comic character helped her create a unique space for

herself on the drama stages. Thus, Bora's looks and Das's celebration in the society as a comedian became the deciding factors of their performances.

Nonetheless, their docile agreement with the fact that they were taught the stage technicalities and appropriated into the characters they would perform was an evidence for the fact that women's contribution to the stage was only towards the construction of masculine narratives of performance. Bora's happiness in recollecting her role of an English daughter-in-law in the play *Soru Buwari* shows the simplicity with which they improvised the director's imagination without intervening them (Mukherjee 4).

The theatre is thus treated as a space for contesting the powerful through the powerless the masculine through the feminine. It is apt here to mention how Hellenne Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins consider the compliance of women with patriarchal authority a myth and focuses on reviewing and renewing debate about women's roles within post-colonial cultures (121).

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