Women’s Community: Nurturing the ‘Domestic’ in the ‘Nation’

Women’s containment and later on mobility, which enabled her to expand ‘home’ from the domestic to the public sphere has been debated and discussed in many quarters. The rhetoric of mobility that primarily governs this chapter allows a glimpse into the kind of ‘development’ women underwent during the period of European colonial domination. The chapter intends to look at how women during the Joymati Utsavs not only could form communities or sisterhoods but also construct the space between the home and the world as a space giving them strength and enabling their participation in the nationalist movement. Joymati Utsav was a celebration in honour of Joymati, wife of Ahom prince Gadapani who succumbed to the tortures meted out to her by the soldiers of King Sulikphaa popularly known as Lora Roja, when she refused to divulge the whereabouts of her husband. Her sacrifice gave Gadapani the opportunity to end the tyrannical rule of King Sulikphaa.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section deals with the construction of the public/private distinction emphasizing the need for women to organize themselves into a community of their own for securing their own rights. The section examines the issue in the Indian as well as the Assamese context. The second section examines the available literature on Joymati Utsav concentrating on how women evoked an “imagined community” thereby registering their participation in the nationalist discourse through the medium of their writing. The
third section summarizes the concept of community, which evolves from the discussed women’s texts. The focus is not on whether women conceptualized the idea of the nation differently from the men, but on how they actively formulated their opinion and made the ‘domestic’ an integral part of the ‘nation’ otherwise associated with the ‘public’ and political.

History has always shown very little sensitivity towards the complex life worlds of women and has often underestimated or devalued the immense contributions of women to domestic, social, and economic life. Most discussions about civilizational progress, development models, the routes to economic prosperity, the search for human happiness wear the lens of patriarchal vision and measure the grasp and understanding of success by way of what the public world perceives – the framework of which is designed, ordered, and cohered with men’s definitions. In fact, critics like Joan Landes have pointed out that male politicians “by no means mastered the course of history” as a result of which women and women’s speech were removed from the public sphere (Landes 1988: 204). Of course, steps have been taken to correct this vision by various kinds of re-reading of history in order to acknowledge the otherwise devalued ‘feminine’ and ‘domestic’. As the tide of modern bourgeois subjecthood beached on the shores of native resistance, what took shape on the colonial landscape was a discourse on the rights of the community. The concept of community evoked a collectivity bound by culture, traditions, and social memories, not by economic and legal contracts between individuals (Prakash 2002: 33). The values, cohesiveness, and identity of community have been used to evoke care, neighborliness, solicitude, and even
nurture, and have thus widely been taken to provide the antidote to the brutality of the marketplace.

I

The early part of the twentieth century in Assam was marked by total and committed involvement of the Assamese middle class in nationalist and sub nationalistic politics. Pushpalata Das’ text Agnisnata Chandraprava gives an account of Chandraprava Saikiani’s (1901-1972) struggle to improve the status of women, thereby generating a discourse on women’s mobilization against the colonial state as well as the prevalent patriarchal domination. Saikiani’s whole life was a struggle and she took it as a challenge to overcome all hurdles and establish her identity as a woman of substance. The founder of Asam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti Chandraprava showed Assamese women the path to freedom through non-conformation. The rejection of conventional marriage and acceptance of motherhood outside marriage makes her life a fascinating and challenging one. She rebelled against all inequality and injustice meted out in the name of caste and gender. Like Rakhmabai, she had refused when she came of age, to accept the man she was married to as a child. Her rebellion was not merely to form a women’s movement; it took the shape of a ‘revolution’ that registered a new era in the Assamese society at the crucial point of its encounter with colonial modernity.

The initiative taken by Saikiani in organizing women into communities resulted in the formation of women’s organizations that had as its main agenda, welfare of women and their need to participate in social, and community life along
with nationalist issues. In the 1929 conference of the Assam Mahila Samiti in Golaghat, Pushapalata Das mentions a debate between a mother and daughter regarding the consequences of child marriage in order to focus on the space that this crucial issue occupied in the then Assamese society. The daughter who had the support of the audience silenced the mother’s arguments favoring child marriage. Narayani Handique was the president of that conference. Women from the villages participated on a large scale in this conference. Transportation facilities were not as advanced as they are today. In spite of that, Chandraprava Saikiani could organize thousands of Assamese women – an act which is beyond comparison (Das 1998: 11).

Ranjoo Sedou Herr in her discussion on nationalism and feminism identifies numerous kinds of often overlapping communities that contribute to the formation of one’s identity – family, neighborhood, tribe, village, city, nation, and even ‘a somewhat distant and abstract collectivity such as humanity’ (Herr 2003: 140). With all kinds of historical developments in the modern era, the beginning of which may be regarded as the Enlightenment followed by the spreading of what Gellner calls ‘high culture’ to the entire population primarily through standardized education (Gellner 1983) and print capitalism (Anderson 1991), nations have become an indispensable part of modern identity. Nations by becoming the transmitter of culture in the modern era not only determine the overall configuration of culture but also protects and preserves it through various social institutions. In fact, nations facilitate the formation and organization of many communities including women’s communities. However, critics have not failed to
register that these communities primarily have very fixed nationalist goals and expect to fulfill their feminist goals once the urgent demand of nationalist independence is attained. Faced with the threat of oppression and exploitation, women are justified in joining the nationalist effort to thwart the colonizers and aggressors. The relationship between women’s liberation and national liberation is not so easily understandable and at least two opposing views can be mentioned in this regard. Many scholars argue that in the past, women who made their specific interests subsidiary to national ones found that they were left out in the cold once the struggle was won. The idea that "women's interests" have been subordinated to national interests has been often repeated, contested, and modified by scholars like Partha Chatterjee (1989), Suruchi Thapar (1994), and Tanika Sarkar (1992) to name a few.

The attempt to reconcile the women’s movement with nationalism created many paradoxical situations, the most obvious one being the reaffirmation of patriarchy in the name of nationalism. Political activists fighting for the independence of the country were not necessarily in favor of social reform for women, or even their participation in politics, and tended to make contradictory demands on women. Geraldine Forbes tells us that the husband of a woman who was arrested sent word to the jail that she was not to return home after being released. Anyone who tried to intervene was conveniently told that it was an honor to have a wife arrested but she had not taken prior permissions to step out of the house (Forbes 2007: 121). According to Chatterjee, the strategy employed was to stress on the spiritual superiority of Indians by putting the onus on women to
preserve ‘tradition’ (Chatterjee 1999: 126-27). Such problems related to the need to preserve the purity of womankind as symbols of the Assamese community were discussed and debated in journals like Assam Bandhu and Banhi. Women had to talk, dress, eat and generally behave in a way that clearly distinguished them from Western women, certainly, but especially from the alleged obnoxiousness of Westernized Indian women (de Souza and Pereira 2002: xvii).

For women, conceptualizing a public sphere that non-coercively unifies consensus and builds a discourse in which the subjects favor rationally motivated arguments, remains outside their reality. Women’s reality, despite their presence and intervention in the public sphere, is confined largely to the private sphere or, at best, to its margins (Bhargava & Reifield 2005: 365). The nineteenth century German sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies based his theory of social development and order on the distinction between community and society. The affective non-contractual qualities that he associated with community sound like those traditionally associated with women, just as the striving, individualistic qualities that he associated with society sound like those associated with men (in Genovese 1991: 35). However, contemporary feminism has rhetorically tended to claim for and emphasize the values of community for women not as a space that generates prescription for behavior (as has been traditionally done) but as an empowering and enabling space. An important field of study in this case is the colonial period in India. The ‘woman’s question’ takes an interesting shape in the early half of the twentieth century when reformists took up the task of restructuring the Indian society on models adopted from the West. However, it has already been
established that the reformist agenda was merely a platform for the colonizers and the colonized to justify their individual causes. It was not at all empowering for the women who were merely transferred from one kind of patriarchal structure to another until women became actively involved in the movement for their emancipation.

Partha Chatterjee’s essay titled “The Nationalist Resolution of the Woman’s Question” sought to address the sudden disappearance of ‘the woman’s question’ from the agenda of public debate towards the close of the nineteenth century. A general overview of this period shows that there was a gradual tying up of different versions of female emancipation to the idea of national liberation and regeneration with the result that early twentieth century anti-colonial nationalism subordinated such issues to the struggle for freedom. However, Chatterjee argues that the relative unimportance of ‘the woman question’ in the last decades of the nineteenth century is not to be explained by the fact that it had been censored out of the reform agenda or overtaken by the more pressing and emotive issues of political struggle” (Chatterjee 1999: 237). He goes on to say that, nationalism had in fact resolved the women’s question by creating a framework with the home/world dichotomy by means of which women were made a part of the inner core of the national culture that is the home. Nationalist struggle allowed a revision of ‘home’ and ‘world’, which also had a great influence in bringing about changes in the lives of middle class women. The predominance of this ideology finds a major place in Rabindranath Tagore’s *Gora* (1907-09). *Gora* initially makes this distinction very clear between the two spheres that needed to be maintained.
As time has two divisions day and night, so do man and woman form two parts of the society. In the natural state of society, woman is veiled like night – all her functions are private and unseen …secretly and under cover of resting, it gives back what we have spent, it helps us to sustain ourselves. But societies in an unnatural state forcibly turn day into night…If we were to drag women out into the overt world of work, then the whole covert set-up of their functioning would get destroyed. That would harm the peace and health of society because a kind of madness will prevail (Tagore 1997: 107-108).

He distinguishes between Indian and Western woman by emphasizing that women of his country would not be seen everywhere – “at home, and outside, on water and land and in the air, during meals and entertainment, at work, and at rest like the average Western English woman” (Tagore1997:106). There existed the fear that Westernization would destabilize the family and social order.

It can be argued that when Chatterjee explains the occlusion of the women’s question by ‘nationalism’s success in situating it in an inner domain of sovereignty’, far removed from the arena of political contact with the colonial state; he is merely looking at one side of the situation. It can be argued that ‘the woman’s question’ did not disappear but entered an entirely separate platform. Gora was written in 1907-09 in serialized form, which was the beginning of a period when women made attempts to participate outside the domestic sphere by engaging in activities, which Gora says, are not characteristic of women of his own country. She now refuses to be confined within the four walls of her home but makes her presence felt everywhere. Mary Wollstonecraft in A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) recognizing the issue of the public and private as a crucial
point in the history of women, men, and the state notes that women have always been excluded from ‘civil existence’. She notes that because of a confined education the female mind is weak in character and associates itself with ‘trifling employments’ which are sentimental in nature and which “would have effaced, if the understanding had been allowed to take a wider range”. She further writes:

The mighty business of female life is to please, and restrained from entering into more important concerns by political and civil oppression, sentiments become events (Wollstonecraft 1988: 183-84).

Though Wollstonecraft associates this with the view that the female mind was unable to grasp anything great, this idea may be read as providing an occasion for female experiences to become events by themselves. This last idea of sentiments becoming events is important in reading the activities of women in early twentieth century India. Women begin to participate outside the domestic sphere in a manner that allows their experiences to be matters of public importance: their personal sentiments become events that further became occasions to celebrate. If motherhood, for instance, is to be regarded as a nineteenth century male discourse, women in different parts of India by speaking about the experiences of being a mother and celebrating motherhood (which may be read as ‘sentiment’) transforms this traditional role into a role of strength (thereby making it an event) in the early twentieth century. In the case of Assam, it would be interesting to analyze the role played by women in organizing Assamese national consciousness which, no doubt, derived from the pan-Indian spirit of nationalism yet which was not just an anti-colonial endeavor but also a way of reclaiming an identity that was being denied. In this, they supported the struggle begun by male nationalists. Though women
began with their own cause to organize themselves they subordinated their demands to the demands of the community.

Women have participated in the activities of the public-political sphere in the past. They played a significant role in the French Revolution. Through the dramatic march to Versailles, participation in revolutionary clubs, societies, the press, forming the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women, (which lasted for less than five months) they managed to create quite a stir on the national political scene. The banning of all political activity by women followed the banning of the society (Landes 1988: 12). The bourgeois society reconstructed the category of the “public” in such a way that women came to be excluded from it. However, the fact that women in the past have spoken publicly on important matters and shaped public speech and manners affirms that ‘silence’ and ‘domesticity’ are not the inescapable state of womankind. This space of the ‘community’ comprised a public but not a politically structured domain (Prakash 2002: 36-37). However, it surely promised political participation in the form of citizenship at a later stage. In the context of the Indian nationalist enterprise, it was a space that allowed for nationalist awakening. This chapter seeks to trace the trajectory of the civil/community space in colonial Assam in order to locate women’s mobilization outside the domestic. It is in this space in between the domestic and the political, which provided for women a platform to organize, gather, and form opinions. Women (in colonial India), as the chapter conceives, are neither citizens of the colonial state nor are privileged shareholders of the patriarchal set-up of native society, in a way twice removed from the position they are trying to claim. Yet it is
a third space that they try to occupy through their actions and ways of understanding the world. If women accept the status of being ‘angels at home’ which in other words is an acceptance of second class status (not even citizens as the word ‘citizen’ is applicable only in case of the state) in order to assure the better functioning of the state how can the reformation project of the family and thereby the state be fulfilled?6

Elizabeth Fox Genovese in her study of women and community cites the example of nineteenth century Americans, who while “moving westward, self-consciously sought to build communities. Moreover, women contributed not merely their share of time and skills required to build them, but frequently the decisive commitment as well. Women, if anything, even more than their men, wanted churches, libraries, neat surroundings, a civilized existence grounded in responsible human networks.” (in Genovese 1991: 31). Historians of women as Fox Genovese notes have forcefully emphasized women’s contributions to the building of communities. It has become commonplace to recognize most of women’s early activities outside their own households as exercises in community building (Fox Genovese 1991: 33-54). Even in the case of colonial India, communities, defined and recognized by reformists and nationalists, figured as the immediate locus of women’s domestic confinement. Women came to be designated as symbols of community, but they were not viewed as a community into themselves. Women belonged to a community rather than forming a separate community of their own. What was central to this discourse of community was not a concern with women’s conditions and rights as women, but with their role in
signifying the rights of the community as a nation. (Prakash 2002: 34). What is interesting is that women accepted that the demands of the community were far more important than their own demands and even after beginning a nascent movement of their own, they diverted their attention to the male dominated nationalist agendas.

The desire for the modern in different spheres of existence or in “every aspect of the material and spiritual life of the people” led the elite intelligentsia to envision the nation as the framework where diverse communities could exist as a single entity. Thus, while opposing the notion of a political collectivity composed of individual subjects presided over by a state, the concept of community implied a homogenous collectivity authorized by common culture and traditions. Women were not to be individual agents, but members belonging to the community; and the community itself were to be defined according to reworked Vedic and Brahmanical traditions, expunging alien and corrupt influences. This, in brief, was the nature of cultural nationalism, which struck the hearts, and minds of the nationalists who projected India’s past and its revival as the only means of attaining nationhood and citizenship. Though women were prescribed certain rules of conduct and behaviour (as already discussed in Chapter 2), after being equipped with the tools of education and learning, they decided to write their own norms and thereby to fulfill their long cherished dreams. This chapter examines the nineteenth and early twentieth century historiography in order to explore the idea of an alternate ‘space’ for women in Assam particularly of the upper and middle class consciously or unconsciously, had carved out for themselves wherein they actively
participate in matters of social progress and nation building. Women writing in periodicals of the period evoke this alternate space as a space from where they can participate in the affairs of the emerging state. In order to do so, do these women neglect the issue of women’s rights or do they wait for some other convenient time to raise these issues? However, domesticity remains an important area, which these women do not neglect; rather they use it as a platform from where they stage their fight for emancipation, at the same time extending full support to the nationalist agenda.

Rousseau believed, and wanted to educate/civilize us to believe that civic love is literally ingested at a mother's breast, which he proclaims the initial source of social sentiments and the necessary link between the institution of the family (the first and only natural institution), and the state. He thus shrewdly identified and designated woman as the agent of social change in the modern era (Fermon 1994: 431-442). Rousseau insisted on a certain degree of silence on the part of women that could be attained only by confining women to the interior. Regarding women’s communities, Rousseau dismissed them as unimportant. Rousseau’s attitude towards women is emblematic of the gendered composition of the oppositional bourgeoisie public sphere, which banishes women’s speech from the public realm of enlightened reason because of being ridiculous and irrational. However, women are necessary, as mothers, as nurturers of the homes, which will produce good citizens. The family Rousseau envisions has direct as well as indirect consequences for the state (in Landes 1988: 88). Such a proposition becomes
important for women who participate in a public sphere primarily through their writings and public addresses.

The example of Joymati Utsav, allows an interesting reading of Assamese society when a nascent consciousness among women could be witnessed with regard to notions of ‘race’ and ‘community’. The first celebration of Joymati Utsav was held on 6th April, 1914 on the banks of the Joysagar tank in Sibasagar. In 1923, the Utsav became an all-Assam event when the Assam Chatra Sanmilani, the students’ organization in their Nagaon conference took a resolution to organize state-wide Joymati Utsavs (Mahanta 2008: 71). The Assam Mahila Samiti established in 1926 also organized the Joymati Utsavs among women all over Assam. Joymati Utsav ensured a place for women to gather and participate in activities outside the home without abandoning this space. This is an instance of women’s mobilization for their own cause. The article by the editors on the 16th Conference of Joymati Utsav noted that gradually it was taking the shape of Assam’s national festival (spearheaded by women) moving beyond the limitations of the local (Ghar Jeuti: 475). It enabled women to form a community of their own, which can be regarded as contributing to the overall feminist consciousness among women in Assam. By the time the Joymati myth came to be established in Assamese public memory, women had already internalized the nationalist rhetoric of woman as the mothers of the nation. Aparna Mahanta traces the history of the construction of this myth to an article by Ratneshwar Mahanta on Joymati and Gadapani published in Jonaki. His intention was to portray the image of a self-
Mahanta’s contribution to the Joymati legend was to popularize a version, which was evidently shaped, whether consciously or not, to conform to his age, the nineteenth century’s conception of the ideal feminine character as exemplified by the Hindu pantheon of virtuous women amongst whom he places Joymati....By concentrating on the torture scene and death, Mahanta, makes it the point of the whole story, like the sacrifice at the heart of a religious ritual. By removing Joymati from her historical context and endowing her with elements of the divine, Mahanta succeeded in creating a cultural icon that transcends his own nineteenth century bounded, and consequently narrow vision of feminine character to become one capable of serving the quite different needs of various actors in the historical scene such as emergent nationalism or the awakening consciousness of Assamese women in the first part of the twentieth century (Mahanta 2008: 69-70).

Initially the celebrations of Joymati Utsavs did not carry an explicit nationalist message. The emphasis was on portraying the image of a chaste woman like Savitri and Damayanti. However, as these Utsavs came to be organized by the Sibsagar Mahila Samiti and other branches of the Assam Mahila Samiti, these celebrations acquired a quite different character. They became occasions not just to celebrate Joymati but rather to celebrate the spirit of Assamese womanhood that had the potential to change the course of history as is evident from Joymati’s example. Women and even men from nearby places came to attend Joymati Tithi Utsav in the premises of Joydoul organized under the aegis of Sibsagar Mahila Samiti from 1919 onwards after Kamalaya Kakoti and Kanaklata Chaliha became
joint secretaries. Aparna Mahanta notes that in Sibsagar the celebrations helped women break away the age-old convention of not participating in activities outside their homes. However, this was not so in other towns of Assam (Mahanta 2008: 72). *Ghar Jeuti*, which may be regarded as a mouthpiece of Sibsagar Mahila Sanmilani kept, records of the various Joymati Utsavs regularly thus giving wider exposure to the Joymati celebrations.

Kanaklata Chaliha in her article “Nari Jagoron” (Women’s Awakening) takes into account women’s awakening and its various forms in different countries like Sweden, Britain, Japan, Russia, apart from India. She mentions that the information is from a Bengali magazine. The writer focuses on women’s education, which would enable her to perform her duties smoothly (*Ghar Jeuti*: 6). It is through her article that Chaliha tries to create a space for further discussions on the issue of women’s organizations even for Assamese women. Such a space would be necessary for women in Assam if they are able to organize themselves.

The concept of the community in India has been contested and debated by many political theorists. N. Jayaram regards it as a forceful idea in mobilizing citizens against repressive states and in reclaiming the private sphere in social life from the all-encompassing state. Gyan Prakash regards ‘community’ (which for him was Janus faced inhabiting both tradition and modernity) as the first step towards civil society. He notes how contemporary theorists have identified community as an important arena for rethinking identity and politics. He examines the colonial genealogy of ‘community’ in India, and argues that it cannot be conceived as a space outside of modernity as theorists like Partha Chatterjee have argued with
regard to Gandhi’s advocacy of a non-modern, non-political community in India (Prakash 2002: 27-39). Gandhi spoke of India as a non-modern civilization, as a community of villages bound by disciplines of truth and nonviolence, and said that he wanted no part of the modern state. “In an ideal State,” he wrote, “there would be no political institution and therefore no political power”. In 1946, when the modern nation-state appeared imminent, he visualized the political structure as a constellation of villages organized in “ever-widening, never ending circles”. It would not be “a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom,” but an oceanic circle “whose center will be the individual always ready to perish for the village, the latter ready to perish for the circle of villages, till at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals...” The outermost circumference of this circle would not possess the power to crush the inner circle, but would strengthen it and derive strength from it (in Prakash 2002: 36). Such a vision animated Gandhi’s struggle against British rule, exercising a powerful mobilizing appeal. In fact, Gandhi’s vision of an extended community in India allowed active participation of women and that is why his influence in establishing an active civil-political life for Indian women is immense.

II

The records of the Joymati Utsav celebrations in Sibsagar and other towns of Assam are to be found in various issues of *Ghar Jeuti* from 1928 onwards. All activities were documented, with names of people who came from various places to attend them, and summaries made of discussions, speeches, and resolutions taken, etc. Most of these speeches were published in various issues of *Ghar Jeuti*. 
Select articles from the *Ghar Jeuti* are elaborately discussed. Some of these were originally speeches by women on Joymati Utsavs held at various places in the state. *Ghar Jeuti* was the first Assamese women’s magazine of its kind was started by the efforts of two women – Kamalalaya Kakoti (1894 - 1946) and Kanaklata Chaliha (1903 - 1935). The speeches as well as other articles published in this magazine reflects the attempts made by it to invite thought and attention of women to changes taking place all over India and the western world in keeping with the progress taking place in the Assamese society, the general increase in awareness and the urge for progress. These texts celebrate women’s community and try to assimilate these communities into the growing nationalist project, which facilitated the growth of such communities and vice versa. Different women at different places delivered these speeches. Public speaking requires both the ability to speak and to relate to others. It means to speak with agency, credibility, and authority - to have impact and be visible, and to take a risk. It also means to listen well and to establish a strong rapport and connection with the audience. In addition, it means to be authentic – to be confident enough to show our humanity, our frailties and our vulnerabilities along with our strengths, wisdom and knowledge. The articles that have been selected for this chapter may not be regarded as excellent pieces of writing or they may not even demonstrate high levels of scholarship. However, these definitely had the power to motivate, to urge listeners to act with immediate effect. Interestingly, these women writers have internalized patriarchal structures in such a manner that without foregoing the traditional roles set for women, they tried to advocate for a space where women could carry out all her tasks and be a part of the ‘world’ outside the threshold of the ‘home’ as well.
Joymati was the wife of the Ahom prince Gadapani. During the purge of the princes from 1679 to 1681 under King Sulikphaa (Lora Roja) instigated by Laluk Sola, Gadapani took flight. At various times he took shelter in the adjoining hills outside the Ahom kingdom. When Lora Roja’s soldiers failed to trace Gadapani, his wife Joymati Kunwari was summoned to the king’s palace and was pressurized to divulge the hiding place of her husband. When no amount of persuasion could get any response from Joymati, she was taken to Jerenga Pathar in Sivasagar district and was tied to a thorny plant and inhuman physical torture was inflicted upon her. When Gadapani came to know about her torture, he came to Jerenga Pathar in disguise and implored her to speak the truth. Nevertheless, she remained firm in her decision and did not budge an inch. She implored Gadapani with signs and signals to go away from that place or else he would be caught and put in prison, in which case, her plan of building a future stable empire with Gadapani, as king would be frustrated. After fourteen days’ of continuous torture, Joymati breathed her last. Joymati’s sacrifice bore fruit later. Laluk was murdered in November 1680 after which Gadapani gathered strength and came back from his exile in the Garo hills to oust Sulikphaa from the throne.

Joymati knew that her husband was the only person who could end the Sulikphaa-Laluk rule of terror. For her love and supreme sacrifice for her husband and the country, folk accounts refer to her as a Sati. Gadapani, who took the Tai name Supaatphaa and Hindu name Gadadhar Singha (1681-1696) brought peace and prosperity back to the country after becoming the king in August 1681. The first act of his reign was the dispatch of an army against Mansur Khan at
Guwahati. After the decisive victory at the famous battle of Itakhuli the Ahoms recaptured Guwahati from the Mughals in August 1682. River Manas became once more the western boundary of Assam and it remained as such until the occupation of the country by the British in the year 1826. Though Joymati Kunwari belonged to a royal family, her open declaration of non-violent revolt against the tyrannical ruler is nothing short of a symbol of self-sacrifice, passive resistance, kindness, friendship etc. in addition to her devoted service to her husband and family. A couple of writers other than Ratneshwar Mahanta reproduced Joymati’s story during the course of the early twentieth century. Padmanath Gohain Barua wrote a play titled Joymati in 1900. Lakshminath Bezbaruah’s Joymati Kunwari was published in 1915. All these literary representations along with Joymati Utsavs celebrations allowed the figure of Joymati to be used as a “potent cultural and literary symbol in the social and political life of the Assamese people in the nationalist movement”. (Mahanta 2008: 87)

Birbala Barua in her speech “Sati Joymati” turns toward the pages of history to identify women who had through their courage, intelligence, and skill, carved spaces for themselves thereby making a conscious attempt on the part of these women to unravel the glories of ancient Assamese past (Ghar Jeuti: 473). In order to form a community (the term that the writer uses is jati) such a construction of the past against an oriental attempt to classify ancient Indian history as irrelevant was a nationalist agenda from the later half of the nineteenth century. Giribala Barua in her speech on the 15th Conference of Joymati Utsav in 1928 addresses all women who have gathered in Joydoul– to celebrate the spirit of
resistance exhibited by ‘Sati Rajrani Joymati Kunwari’. She sees this celebration as offering a platform, which will induce new ways of self-learning in the minds of young women who will be a part of it every year (Ghar Jeuti: 464-465). Similarly, Punyaprabha Das during the same Utsav regards that a nation’s progress depends on her women, which is evident from actual events and written histories in the life of the nation. “Joymati sacrificed her life and when after her death her husband became the king a period of peace and progress was ushered in.” She cites the example of Napolean Bonaparte who once said that the strength of the French nation lies in her mothers. She recalls Joymati’s bold step taken against the king in not divulging her husband’s whereabouts and in not even thinking about her sons whom she left with her friend while walking out of her home with the king’s soldiers (Ghar Jeuti: 469). Participation in the Joymati Utsavs enabled women to form a community of their own thereby contributing to the overall feminist consciousness among women in Assam. Joymati Utsavs not only enabled the formation of communities or sisterhoods but also construct the space between the home and the world as a source of strength, encouraging their participation in the nationalist movement. Identifying a similar trend among the women in Bengal during the early years of the last century Bharati Ray in her article “Women of Bengal: Transformation in Ideas and Ideals, 1900-1947” (1991) captures that period in history when, as a response to multiple factors, there were major alterations in the perceptions and aspirations of women thus:

And yet they had begun the struggle. A nascent ‘feminist’ consciousness was emerging among them; they revealed a growing awareness of gender asymmetry
and initiated moves to counter it. They left a legacy for the latter day women to work upon for a society free from gender discriminations (Ray 1991: 21)

Early attempts at reforming the conditions under which Indian women lived were largely conducted by men who were the key players in the emergence of ‘the woman question’ within the Indian nationalist struggle. Nineteenth century India is marked by the rising social reform movement which took within its fold the middle class and which was concerned with rescuing women from the clutches of a Hindu patriarchal society. However, by the late nineteenth century wives, sisters, daughters, and others affected by campaigns such as that for women’s education, had themselves joined in movements. By the early twentieth century, women’s own autonomous organizations began to be formed. These organizations in their early years of formation enabled women’s participation outside the domestic sphere empowering them in a way, otherwise denied. In Assam, the Assam Mahila Samiti, which later came to be known as Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti, was formed in 1926.

Giribala Barua in her speech on the 15th Conference of Joymati Utsav in 1928 interpreted Joymati and her life story as an example for women to follow and equip themselves with all tools necessary to lead a meaningful life. Barua of course does not challenge the traditional roles meant for men and women and urges that knowledge acquired on household chores, herbal medicines, agriculture, etc. will enable her to manage the domestic sphere properly thereby leaving the men free for work outside. She extends this to the larger context of the nation saying
that: “This education is essential for our country now as it will enable women to allow their men folk to work outside the homes by taking care of the domestic sphere entirely. Otherwise it will be difficult to run families properly if only one person is burdened with all work” (Ghar Jeuti: 464). Without challenging the traditional role of women, she talks about progressive women in other developed countries whom her women hearers should take as examples. Progress of the nation depends on such steps to be taken by women. Women should be educated not only in reading and in writing (which is just one part of education) but primarily should have the ability to cook, weave, etc (Ghar Jeuti: 464-465).

It is possible to speculate that women like her, who were so directly caught in the cross currents of the Indo British encounter, suffered profound conflict caused by the collision of recently acquired ‘new woman’ convictions with established ideologies, growing nationalistic concerns, and equally significant fear of losing link with what is traditionally one’s own. Weaving was (and still is) an essential part of the lives of Assamese women and this is a point which is taken up by many men and women in their writings and speeches including Giribala Barua, thereby asserting the need to preserve the integrity of the composite Assamese culture even as it comes into contact with ideas of modernity and change. Gandhi in one of his addresses to women writes thus:

But the main burden of spinning must, as of old, fall on your shoulders. Two hundred years ago, the women of India spun not only for home demand but also
for foreign lands. They spun not merely coarse counts but the finest that the world
has ever spun. No machine has yet reached the fine-ness of the yarn spun by our
ancestors. If, then, we are to cope with the demand for khadi during the two
months and afterwards, you must form spinning-clubs, institute spinning
competitions and flood the Indian market with hand-spun yarn. For this purpose,
some of you have to become experts in spinning, carding and adjusting the
spinning-wheels. This means ceaseless toil. You will not look upon spinning as a
means of livelihood. (Gandhi CW: 78).

By then, he had already become a national and political figure whose thoughts and
ideas about specific political strategies in specific contexts flowed from ideas that
were very remote from politics. The image of Gandhi as a man of the masses and a
communicator par excellence is important in developing the idea of civil society
and the role played by women in it. Women in Assam reacted positively (as is
evident from articles in Ghar Jeuti) to Gandhi’s commitments to self-reliance,
swadeshi, charkha, boycott of foreign goods, communal harmony, removal of
untouchability which became interwoven in the freedom movement in a manner
which allowed women to participate and contribute. The early twentieth century
saw a major upheaval in various parts of the country including Assam, in the form
of women delivering speeches in public platforms during various occasions
thereby registering a legitimate participation in various spheres of the emerging
civil society.

Kaumudi Dutta in an interesting article titled “Bharatiya Narir Adarsha”
(Values of Indian Women) tries to assess women’s position in India and blames
women themselves for their pathetic situation. Citing the examples of legendary
women like Sultana Rezia, Phuleshwari Kunwari, Mulagabharu among others, she writes that women have proved their worth as and when necessary and have proved that humankind cannot progress by making their women “handicapped.” Just as water and soil combine to produce crops, so also men and women unite to form India and the world’s human strength. She associates the rise of nationalist consciousness with the birth of women’s awakening in India. In this regard, she writes:

> When the eyes of Indians opened to realize their shackled and enslaved condition, Indian women also opened their eyes to their subordinate position in the social structure. When men tried to improve their qualifications in order to actively participate in the country’s freedom, women also desired to take part and therefore tried hard to improve themselves in this regard. This entire phenomenon taking the shape of women’s movement became a matter of concern for India and the Indians (*Banhi*: 175).

The writer aptly sums up the whole history of women’s emancipation focusing on the need for better companions as wives for progressive men, as one of the reasons for the changes that ushered into the Indian society during the nineteenth century. Further, she makes it clear that merely by stepping into the men’s world a woman cannot attain success. “One cannot achieve success by watering the branches and leaves of a tree instead of its roots. Likewise, instead of developing her own self within her workplace if a woman goes on to acquire men’s knowledge in order to help him in his workplace, no one will benefit”. In fact, only by achieving dexterity in her own workplace that is her predetermined sphere, can she prove her worth.
Regarding woman’s sphere of work, she, citing the example of Mulagabharu, writes that the Ahom queen equipped her husband with all strength, courage, enthusiasm and sent him to the battlefield to face the enemy. Only after he was killed, did she come out into the battlefield to seek revenge. Without rejecting the conventional notion of “separate sphere” for men and women, the writer cleverly puts the onus on the women, pointing out that one of the values of Indian women is that they choose when and where they need to step out of the threshold of their homes. Otherwise, they remain contented in their own ‘domestic sphere’. The writer urges that the new nation is dependent solely on her women and the domestic sphere as it is in this space, that mothers will raise able sons, who would determine the future of the nation. She finds women leaving this space and preparing to occupy the male domain unnecessary except under very urgent circumstances (Banhi: 175-176).

Women’s community represented by these Mahila Samitis focused on organizing women at various levels. Hemaprava Das the founder of Dibrugarh Mahila Samiti (1915) in her presidential address of Sibsagar Joymati Utsav (1931) focused on Assamese weaving skills of women by which they could ensure economic self-sufficiency. She pointed out how Dibrugarh Mahila Samiti has explored this avenue and has sold woven materials worth Rs.1000/- yearly. In this manner, they have provided the weavers with a platform, which they can utilize for their benefit. At the same time, they have ensured the maximum use of Swadeshi hand woven clothes, which Gandhi has always insisted upon as being the first primary step towards patriotic and anti British feelings. Hemaprava Das believes
that easy availability of hand woven clothes will ensure love for one’s own nation among young girls, which according to her has already begun (Ghar Jeuti: 1138).

She further states:

In order to translate one’s vows into real actions, perseverance is required….many of us begin various projects. However, on facing hurdles we leave them incomplete which is a sign of a lack of determination (Ghar Jeuti: 1139).

She cites the example of Mahatma Gandhi who with his firm resolution has become internationally acclaimed. She urges on the necessity to use sacrifice as a medium by which women can become efficient workers. However, towards the end, the speaker loses focus and her speech does not really give us a glimpse into what kind of community she advocates for women. Instead of focusing on women, she takes into consideration both men and women thereby diverting from her initial focus on Assamese women’s enterprises.

Most of these speakers use sacrifice as an inherent quality in women. However, how empowering sacrifice is for women especially during the period in question is not analyzed by any of them. Joymati is placed on a pedestal particularly for her sacrifice, which indicates her deep love for her husband at one level and her country at another. The revival of the Joymati cult during the first half of the twentieth century in Assam was necessary to build the proper atmosphere for women’s active participation in the freedom movement. Such revival is both liberating and constricting. The sati was an adored nationalist symbol, her figure representing the moment of climax in expositions of Hindu nationalism (Sarkar 2001: 42). Joymati is a sati who gives the highest proof of her
devotion and chastity not by sitting on her dead husband’s funeral pyre but by
tolerating the tortures on her body inflicted by Lora Roja’s men.

Once women were out in the open, nothing or no one could stop them from
marching ahead. That subtle beginning was very necessary for them to achieve
something big. Assamese women were familiar with the achievements of women
like Sarojini Naidu and Muthulakshmi Reddy⁶ among others. (Ghar Jeuti: 583).
Chandraprava Saikiani stating at the 16th conference of the Joymati Utsav praised
the efforts of the Sibsagar Mahila Samiti in organizing this Conference every year.
She even pointed out that Mahila Samitis in Assam are very new, as men usually
do not allow women to form and participate in organizations of this kind. She
maintains that the efforts of the Sibsagar Women’s Association are exemplary. In
this context, Saikiani’s life itself is exemplary in the sense that from 1921 onwards
she devoted herself whole-heartedly to the fight for freedom, justice, and welfare
of general people. She also ensured that this individual fight becomes a mass
phenomenon by including willing women and urging them to commit themselves
to this struggle. Her care for the Dalit movement that was raising its head in
different parts of the country is reflected in her poems composed on the Dalits. One
such poem, which the biographer reproduces in Agnisnata Chandraprava, urges
everyone to shed their caste prejudices and embrace the Dalits as their own
brother. It is evident thus that her contribution is extremely important not only in
organizing the ‘women’ as community but also in giving voice to the otherwise
unheard and unrecognized ‘subaltern’ groups.
The wide-ranging activities undertaken by the Samiti compel us to redefine and widen the meaning of the public domain that could include all activities that ensures citizenship in the future after the achievement of the nationalist goal. Family planning, mother-child welfare, encouraging handloom and handicrafts, prohibition of liquor and opium, establishing co-operative societies, homes for the helpless and the aged, libraries, schools, spinning-weaving centers, jute industries, knitting schools etc. were some of the initial activities undertaken. All such activities reveal that launching of a women’s movement protecting women’s individual or group rights was not the sole aim of the samiti. It was more an attempt to organize one section of the society in order to enable them to participate actively as a community by themselves.

Swarnalata Saikia draws a trajectory of women’s organizations all over the world in her series of articles titled “Mahila Samitit Aaixokolor Kartabya” (Women’s duties in Mahila Samitis). She states that the formation of women’s organizations is not new to Assam as from the days of Sankardev onwards women have participated in the affairs of the ‘namghar’ or ‘kirtan ghar’ in their localities (Ghar Jeuti: 868). Such Vaishnavite women known as ‘bhakatanis’ have tremendous organizational skills, and they do not require the help of their men-folk, in performing their duties. According to the writer, these women were capable even of going on pilgrimages in groups of forty or fifty and could manage everything on their own. These women assembled for their spiritual uplift surrendering themselves to the mercy of the Almighty and such Vaishnavite women’s congregations were very common in sixteenth century Assam and even
now they exist allowing women to participate in affairs – both spiritual and social – outside their homes in ‘namghars’. Such participation allows these women to broaden their horizon, share their knowledge and their varied experiences, and contribute meaningfully toward their society and nation. From the time of Sankardev, onwards women have participated in nam kirtans (Ghar Jeuti: 869).

The writer mentions about Mahila Samitis in Bengal, Punjab, etc. where women have learned to form communities and work towards the welfare of their less privileged sisters. The primary aim of most of these organizations is the spread of female education, which remains their ultimate goal. She also mentions that in most of these states men and women together strive towards the formation of such Mahila Samitis. Female Juvenile Society, Bengal Ladies Association, Sarojini Nari Mangal Samiti are some of the names of organizations in Bengal, which she mentions. The Brahmo Samaj and the Missionaries played a major role in women’s awakening in Bengal (Ghar Jeuti: 869). Apart from this, setting up of co-operative societies, which support minor weavers, peasants etc. are a major task, which Mahila Samitis in Assam should take up according to the writer. In this manner, women, instead of remaining restricted to household chores, will be able to participate in public affairs without entering the political sphere.

Joymati Utsav, which may be regarded as a sentiment through which women glorified Joymati’s resistance, sacrifice, and personal suffering, becomes a major event enabling women to come out and be a part of it. It subverts the elite-nationalist thought and at the same time provides for a historical opportunity for the political appropriation of women in a non-political space between the ‘home’
and the ‘world’. In 1925, at the venue of the Assam Sahitya Sabha’s Nowgong
Conference in Raha, women demonstrated their first united protest against the
conservatism of the Assamese society. This (more or less) organized resistance has
significant value in giving shape to a better future. A separate enclosed space had
been kept for women participants, as was the custom. It demonstrated how male-
led social reform movements were preoccupied with legislating and regulating the
sexuality of middle class women, and selectively encouraging women’s entry into
the public sphere, by instituting modes of surveillance that in turn controlled
women’s entry into the community and (among other things) politics. However, at
Chandraprava Saikiani’s clarion call to women to do away with the physical
barrier and sit along-side men - “Is your self-respect not hurt in being a prisoner
inside a cage? Why don’t you destroy the cage and come out like a lioness?” (Das
1998: 9) - women broke down the barrier and marched forward to occupy the
space that they were being denied. What Gora had said regarding Indian women
that they are not to be seen outside the threshold of their homes, is reversed here as
women had started making efforts to be seen outside their homes. The space that
was previously provided for the women in Raha needs to be seen as still being part
of the home/private outside which women need not be visible. The moment when
they chose to break down that barrier and take their seats along with the men was
the moment of women’s entry into the public space. Chandraprava Saikiani’s
efforts at mobilizing women, in the manner Gandhi wanted it done, was rewarded
in this conference. Saikiani herself was highly motivated by Gandhi during his first
visit to Assam in 1921. This visit to Tezpur proved to be highly influential in
instilling his three famous and powerful’s’ in the hearts and minds of Assamese
women: satyagraha, swadeshi, and sisterhood. In her presidential address in Sibsagar Joymati Utsav in the year 1931, Hemaprava Das equals Joymati’s self sacrifice with Gandhi’s sacrifice and strong will power (Ghar Jeuti: 195-98). In fact, the constant use of the term self sacrifice reminds one of Gandhi’s philosophies – passive resistance in the form of Satyagraha. Gandhi regarded the satyagrahi as one who has to lead an exemplary life, to set examples to others by his/her actions without imposing those actions on anybody, thereby doing away with criticism, contempt, hostility and eventual violence. If others do not follow their lead, they will be disappointed. In Gandhian terms, the satyagrahis need to regard this disappointment as partly being their own fault and mend their ways by inventing other means of setting an example (Bilgrami 2003: 4162).

Gandhi negates violence and regards nurturing (primarily a womanly feature) as a principle that is far more important. His strong attachment to the charkha or the spinning wheel, the use of which would make India self-sufficient is also related to the idea of nurture, touch, and craft based ideal of work as against the machine-based one. This is also an aspect of the transformation – epistemological – between male and female ways of doing work or thinking about themselves, looking at the work. Through this, Gandhi gives public visibility to all these qualities that have always been regarded as ‘feminine’. This image of the satyagrahi and the symbol of the spinning wheel are closely connected to the concept of sisterhood propounded by Gandhi in an important address to women of India in the form of a letter written to Young India on 11 August 1921:
The economic and the moral salvation of India thus rest mainly with you. The future of India lies on your knees, for you will nurture the future generation. You can bring up the children of India to become simple, god fearing and brave men and women, or you can coddle them to be weaklings unfit to brave the storms of life and used to foreign finery, which they would find it difficult in after life to discard.

The next few weeks will show of what stuff the women of India are made. I have not the shadow of a doubt as to your choice. The destiny of India is far safer in your hands than in the hands of a Government that has so exploited India’s resources that she has lost faith in herself. At every one of women’s meetings, I have asked for your blessings for the national effort, and I have done so in the belief that you are pure, simple, and godly enough to give them with effect. You can ensure the fruitfulness of your blessings by giving up your foreign cloth and during your spare hours ceaselessly spinning for the nation (Gandhi CW: 78).

This was Gandhi’s call to women to organize and form communities, which would in turn contribute to the strengthening of the national civil society that Gandhi was trying to form through his ‘constructive programme’ that he chiefly advocated in the Belgaum Conference in 1924. His constructive programme included his fasts for specific reasons (a powerful means by which he could pose as an exemplar within public visibility), suspension of all boycotts except the foreign cloth boycott etc. The emerging civil society grew because of the European encounter followed by a modernizing process but there is an equally strong necessity to preserve
indigenous Indian society from an out and out influence of modern civilization as it emerged in the West. In *Hind Swaraj* (1908), Gandhi attacks the very notions of modernity and progress and subverts the central claim made on behalf of those notions, namely their correspondence with a new organization of society in which the productive capacities of human labour are multiplied several times, creating increased wealth. Gandhi understood very clearly that ever-increased mechanization and heavy industrialization would disrupt the existing harmony of an agrarian society like India.

Partha Chatterjee regards this as Gandhi’s thoroughgoing critique against the constitutive features of civil society in his essay “Gandhi and the Critique of Civil Society” (Chatterjee 1984). However, it can be argued that by setting certain standards for education and social life Gandhi was creating a space for maximum civic participation wherein could be generated an idea of ‘swaraj’. His critique of civilization contained within it a desire to preserve the essence of India. Instead of looking at his critique of Western civilization as a total moral critique of the fundamental aspects of civil society, it would be useful to view this very critique of Western civilization as enabling the creation of a civil/community space which suits the need of an ethnic society like that of Assam in the early twentieth century. The articles discussed here see the need to preserve the harmony between woman and Nature, her ‘true self’ and other women. Gandhi’s ideology of the need to preserve a primarily agrarian society and reacting in this manner to the alien economic, political, and cultural institutions imposed on it by colonial rule provided an intervention in the historical development of elite nationalist thought
in India by allowing women and other subaltern classes like the peasantry a space to organize and contribute. Gandhi’s intention was primarily to open up the possibility for achieving perhaps the most important historical task for a successful national revolution, which could take within its fold different parts of the country, and different groups and classes of people.

If nations and nationalities are ‘imagined communities’ so is Gandhi’s sense of the ‘social space’, which is capable of transforming a people into a collectivity with imagined ties of shared suffering and kinship. The image of Joymati, the suffering woman, binds these women together in this newly created space. 1926 saw the formation of the Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti by Chandraprava Saikiani. However, even before the formation of this organization, various women’s organizations were being formed through the efforts of a few educated and privileged women who wanted to create environments where girls could receive education and participate in social affairs. Examples of these are Dibrugarh Mahila Samiti in 1915 by Dr. Tillotama Raichoudhury and Hemaprava Das; Nowgong Mahila Samiti in 1917 by Chandraprava Saikiani; Mahila Sanmilani by Taraprasad Chaliha with the support of sister Kamalalaya and wife Kanaklata Chaliha in Sibsagar. On the need to establish women’s organizations Ratnakumari Rajkhowani on Jorhat Mahila Samiti Day says in her essay titled “Mahila Samitir Aboshyokota” (Importance of Mahila Samiti) that such organizations could contribute towards female education. She finds the condition of Assamese women within the four walls of their homes very stagnant, and urges women to gather strength in the form of education, and to march forward (Ghar
A sense of sisterhood can be traced in this article. Regarding these efforts made by women in various parts of Assam, Pushpalata Das in her biography on one of the leading figures Chandraprava Saikiani writes:

The numerous sanmilanis and sabhas-samitis that were formed and organized between 1927 to 1934 enabled Assamese women to cut across the heavy fog of darkness and come out into the bright world outside ....It was around this time that the foundation for education of women was laid throughout Assam. Whatever progress we see in this field in Assam today is a result of that very women’s awakening (Das 1998: 54).

In the presidential speech delivered in Baligaon Milan Mandir Joymati Utsav (the first of its kind in Baligaon) in the year 1931 Narayani Handique, says:

Joymati was born in this mortal world with all qualities like kindness, devotion towards her husband, patience etc....Her action not only proves her devotion towards her husband but also displays love for her motherland and her own people whom she loved as much as her two sons. (Ghar Jeuti: 1136)

She further spoke of the need to work for the welfare of the nation. Her appeal to young girls was:

Do not forget your duties and do not be afraid of hard work. All of you are bound to step into domestic lives in the near future. You are like Lakshmi. The welfare of the nation depends on you. Plead with your parents to give you the minimum education. Learn to read and write. At the same time, do not forget that the greatest skill that
you can learn is the skill to run your household smoothly (Ghar Jeuti: 1136).

These dictates, it may be argued, do not merely echo the prescriptions of the nationalist discourse that wanted the women to behave in a particular manner. Rather an agrarian economy could progress by these means. Gandhi in Hind Swaraj wrote about his own reservations regarding the impact of Western education on Indians. According to him, it ignores completely the ethical aspect of education and the need to integrate the individual within the collectively shared moral values of the community and instead cultivates “the pretension of learning many sciences” (Gandhi 1938: 75-80). At the same time, it needs to be noted that the writer participates in the “discourse of advice” that marked the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, the kind of education advocated by Narayani Handique for other women preserves the ethical aspect of education and will enable these women to be confined in their homes but to be a participant in the social space outside their homes. In a way even while accepting these traditional roles, these women will be able to transform these roles in the manner Joymati did.

Hemaprava Das in her presidential address at the Sibsagar Joymati Utsav in the year 1931 demonstrates Joymati’s love not just for her husband but for her fellow citizens as well. Love, she says, leads us away from violence and selfishness. These qualities give peace to our minds. Selflessness, she says, is a very important quality that will take our country
to new heights of excellence. Love for our country should not remain in words but our actions should demonstrate it. Recalling the great work that peasants were doing for the country, she said that others should help the peasants and work for their welfare especially in the lean season when they do not have their regular work to do. She says:

The number of peasants in our country is large. We owe our leisure time to the hard work that they do for us...If we neglect the peasants our country will suffer (Ghar Jeuti: 1138).

She said that they could help them by buying hand-woven materials from these women. She mentioned the efforts made by Dibrugarh Mahila Samiti that was engaged in selling hand woven dress materials and taking initiatives in selling the finished products by women of that region. By doing this, they could not only help the poor women but also contribute towards spreading love for swadeshi goods for which Gandhi was working. By 1928, khadi had acquired added importance as a powerful weapon in the programme of boycott of foreign cloth, which was to serve as the effective sanction behind the national demand and which Gandhi was determined to bring about with the assistance of mills. Weaving and swadeshi thereby become shared strengths and resources based on which women bond with other women. Women’s bonding is not only the essence of sisterhood but is also necessary for women’s empowerment.
Therefore, women’s entry into the civil/public space through their activities and their writing led to a major intervention in the already established and ever expanding nationalist discourse which (is primarily) male dominated and patriarchal in its outlook (as has already been established in the previous chapters). Even though there is, as has been often argued in recent criticisms, a limitation to the freedom that these women can claim for themselves, what is important is the formation of the collective spirit, which ensured better protection of their rights and privileges. Collectivity seen from this perspective allowed these women to break out of their walls of silence and permitted them to forge a common language with which to express their hostility to the constraints of their lives (Genovese 1991: 14).

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, sisterhood helped women to identify the decisive features of their social, economic, and political vulnerability and to build foundations for their potential strength. Segregation of space and control over the visibility of women were forms of patriarchal control, which emphasized the need to channel and contain women’s sexual practices. History justifies and acknowledges the assumption that the British colonial state encouraged female emancipation. Conventional history narrates an incremental process of social enlightenment: widow immolation was banned in 1829, widow remarriage became legal in 1856, female infanticide was prohibited in 1870, and the age of consent for consummation of marriage was raised from eight to twelve years in 1892, and so on. Progressive thinking on the status of women introduced by British rule appeared to have triumphed over Indian orthodoxy. Careful feminist
scrutiny over the past decade, however, presents a muddier picture: one of collusion between British and Indian patriarchal forces, particularly when it came to women's sexual lives. Feminist historians have raised the theoretical question of why colonial social legislation centered on women's sexual practices. They have probed beliefs underlying both the practices reformed and reformist impulses, such as the notion that marriage at an early age signaled sexual depravity and that the sexual "rapacity" of the widow warranted her remarriage. Social reform thus can be read as an instance of how female emancipation remains merely a myth that never turns into reality. What really happens is actually a consonance between Victorian sexual puritanism, Indian nationalist revivalism, and liberal reformism that leads to the formation of new patriarchies and a new sexual order. Much has been written about the discourses of domesticity produced by reforming male elites in the context of colonial India – most famously by Partha Chatterjee, who argued that the nationalist “resolution of the ‘woman question’” was to affirm the domain of the [Indian] home as the redemptive spiritual space that could resist the materialist values and incursions of a Western, colonizing culture.

Dakheshwari Brahmani in her article “Stree Shikkha Aru Samajik Unnati” (Women’s Education and Social Progress) reminds the Assamese society and its lawmakers of two sins they have committed – the sin of submitting to foreign domination and the associated one of submitting its women to a state of subjection. She writes:
Man-woman is two sections of a society with one soul. The downfall of one section will invariably lead to the downfall of the other section….If womankind is not raised everything else would be futile (Ghar Jeuti: 896).

All efforts of forming a community and a nation would be wasted without women attaining the basic rights to education, to movement among others. She asserts that without women’s full-fledged participation in the newly created public space, a nation cannot progress and be liberated. Women can raise themselves from the state of subjugation; men can merely extend a helping hand (Ghar Jeuti: 897).

Dibyalata Barua in “Jagaronot Atmanirvarata” (The Necessity of Self Reliance for Awakening) affirms that women are now involved in the formation of what may be regarded as an imagined community. She accepts women’s participation in affairs of the world as the need of the hour. She insists on the overall development of women kind only after which they can stand against all injustices meted out to them. An interesting proposition emerges from Barua’s writing – with the augmentation of self-respect and patriotism, women will get back their lost rights. Thus, it may be accepted that women did not drop the issue of their equal status and opportunities but it was integrated into the nationalist agenda. Only in a free land will they be able to regain their lost status. She thereby problematizes the question of women’s awakening and national awakening as well as the awakening of the Assamese community. (Ghar Jeuti: 948).

Another text that needs to be mentioned is *Eri Aha Dinbur* by Nalinibala Devi wherein she highlights women’s active participation in the Congress. Nalinibala Devi’s life was both inspired and shaped by her father Nabin Chandra
Bordoloi. Her father’s Uzanbazar home to which she returned after her husband’s death played a significant role in shaping her poetic self and determining the course of her life along with instilling in her a nationalist fervor, which allowed her to contribute significantly to the nationalist discourse that was emerging in the early part of twentieth century Assam. Their home, being the first Congress office, facilitated her active participation in the freedom struggle even while remaining within the threshold of her home. The ‘world’ (public sphere) had entered her ‘home’ (private sphere) and she could enjoy privileges of both the worlds. Her home became the site where all her desires and wishes could find expression. Her encounter with national leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jamnalal Bajaj, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose among others opened up a whole new horizon before her where different notions of freedom emerged from these different voices.

In course of time, on her father’s advice she concentrated more on her poetry than on politics, as the latter was not the proper life that Nabin Chandra Bordoloi had dreamt for his widowed daughter. However, in her autobiography she mentions the names of various women belonging to prominent Assamese families – like Hemantakumari Devi, Dharmada Devi, Snehalata Bhattacharya, Girija Devi - who participated in the freedom struggle in various ways. She herself served as the president of the Kamrup Mahila Samiti in the year 1931. Even before that in the year 1919, she along with her uncle Probodh Chandra Bordoloi and Snehalata Bhattacharya (daughter of Kamalakanta Bhattacharya) tried to establish a girls’ school in the Uzanbazar area of Guwahati. The mission failed after a period
of six months due to financial constraints. In her autobiography, she writes a great deal on the Sarda Act of 1929, which fixed the marriageable age for girls at fourteen years and its impact on the conservative section of the Assamese society, which was not ready to comply with the decision.

Even though she never challenged the prescribed norms for women within a patriarchal set-up or rebelled against women’s fate, she definitely carved a space for women like her in the social and literary arena. Nalinibala Devi with her compelling presence placed Assamese women firmly in the history of Assamese literature and language. Not only that, she contributed significantly to the emerging nationalist discourse through her poems as well as through her autobiography, *Eri Aha Dinbur*, which is not merely an account of her life but is a document which successfully retrieves and reconstructs history placing Assamese nationalism as a variant of the pan Indian nationalism. Whether it be *Agnisnata Chandraprava* or *Eri Aha Dinbur*, it is important not merely to classify these works with generic labels such as biography or autobiography but to also note their contributions to the understanding of patriarchy, sexuality and against this a nascent ‘feminist’ consciousness in the realm of the colonial state.

Joymati Utsav enabled women to occupy a space between the ‘home’ and the ‘world’ and organize themselves as a community, which can be regarded as an initial step taken towards ensuring a space for women in the emerging civil society. Joymati through her actions almost becomes an ‘exemplar’ (in Bilgrami’s terms) and Joymati Utsav becomes an occasion during which her passive suffering (which she transforms into resistance) is
given public visibility. Where women succeeded in creating community, they succeeded in creating a sense of belonging and bonding in contrast to the ruthless pursuit of individual self-interest. In this respect, community might better be understood as the opposite of individualism. Ray and Korteweg identifies two approaches under which women mobilize, the first one being structural and universal conditions like urbanization, industrialization, and education that leads to an increase in women’s mobilization. They further write:

In the second approach to the preconditions of mobilization, women’s abilities to form collective identities and articulate their interests are shaped by political, local, and historically contingent processes. This approach is exemplified by the editors of a recent volume about feminist organizations who note, "feminist organizations are outcomes of situationally and historically specific processes. In each time and place, feminism reflects its history and prior developments, as well as present opportunities and constraints (Ray and Korteweg 1999: 53).

In general, the second approach then can better explain women’s mobilization against repressive military regimes, participation in colonial struggles or struggles for socialism, and their support of fundamentalist politics. This approach helps to identify specific constellations of factors, sometimes called "political opportunity structures" in the dominant literature on social movements that enable or thwart mobilizing even as close
In these texts, women address other women trying to build a civil/non-political solidarity based on common interests and goals. They aim at not just one goal – emancipation for themselves but also advance support toward the attainment of swaraj and consequently, the formation of nation-state. The very fact that such a bonding developed around the celebration of the spirit of womanhood – Joymati symbolizing the inner strength, which every woman possesses in some form or the other – signifies that these women bonded with other women based on “shared strengths and resources”. “It is this type of bonding that is the essence of Sisterhood” (hooks 1997: 487). For women to bond with other women basing such bonding on shared victimization is psychologically demoralizing (hooks 1997: 487). Such a bonding definitely leads to a feminine perspective on the nation. In spite of Rokeya Sakhawat’s utopian land of female sovereignty (which is a practical impossibility), the woman’s nation is a historical impossibility. However, as Boehmer rightly puts it:

The power of the collective, of women in solidarity, community or colloquy with one another hints at defining the nation differently – not as something always male but as acclaiming the real India as a “feminised land” (Boehmer 2005: 209).

Notes
The translations of original Assamese texts both primary and secondary are mine.

Das presents Chandraprova Saikiani as a woman of extraordinary qualities. From her childhood she had an urge to know more, learn more and she was ready to go through any circumstances in order to receive quality education. She and her younger sister could attend school chiefly because of the efforts of their parents Gangapriya and Ratiram Majumdar. On realizing that pursuance of higher education would not be possible for her she decided to start a school of her own. However, she was not destined to be a schoolteacher because when school inspector Nilakanta Barua came to visit her school he at once recognized the talent that could be explored in this young girl. He helped her and her younger sister to join Nowgaon’s Mission school where we get the first instance of revolutionary (‘bidrohini’) image. The biographer writes:

Chandraprava managed to unite the girls of Normal school to raise their voice against the injustice meted out to a fellow student. The girls also forced the warden to take back her insulting words on Indian girls that they live in houses worse than godowns. She emerged as the winner in her life’s first fight (Das 1998: 4).

The case of Rakhmabai had traumatized the Maharashtrian society in 1884. Rakhmabai was married at eleven but continued to live with her family according to local custom and received education. On reaching adulthood, she refused to go back to her husband and disagreed to consummate the marriage as she found him incompatible. It came to be regarded that Rakhmabai had a right to deny consummation of a marriage, which took place as a contract signed by her parents.

In this regard I am reminded of Rousseau’s political program for the reform of politics through a reform of the household, the family, and gender roles. He shows that the domestic role of women is a structural precondition for a ‘modern’ society. Rousseau urged on the proper utilization of the sentimental nature and nurturing capacity of women on whom men’s way of thinking largely depends. Of course it is left for readers to decide whether he advocated women’s sentimental and serving nature or whether he focuses on the need to contain women within the ‘home’ and deny her access to the ‘public’ and ‘collective’. (Fermon 1994: 431-442)

This phrase has been borrowed from Partha Chatterjee. While drawing a trajectory of the nationalist discourse in India he identifies the separation of the domain of culture into these two spheres – the material and the spiritual – as the moment of
resolution. The resolution comes with the realization that in the spiritual sphere East is always superior to the West and that is why the cultural nationalists aimed their efforts at strengthening the spiritual essence of the national culture with women being its representation (Chatterjee 1999: 634)

6 Muthulakshmi Reddy was the first woman to study medicine in Madras, the first woman to be a member of the Madras Legislature, the first Alderwoman in the Madras Corporation and the first Deputy President of the Madras Legislative Council. She piloted social and reform movements including the Sarda Act, which increased the marriageable age for boys and girls.

6 In an article discussing Sankardev’s social principles, the writer emphasizes that Sankardev had shown tremendous devotion and respect to women. He recommended liberal education for all and advocated liberal social principles where women also could enjoy a few privileges (Ghar Jeuti: 1127). According to the writer the Assamese social structure from the days of Sankardev, and as a result of his teachings and recommendations was very much improved and ahead of his time (Ghar Jeuti: 1125-28). However, the article does not mention any specific programme that Srimanta Sankardev had undertaken to emancipate women and merely makes a vague reference to certain social principles without specifying any.

Works Cited


