INTRODUCTION

The discourse on nation building in India emerged in the late nineteenth century through a dialectic that developed between the process of colonial state-formation and the politics of the Independence movement. In the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the British Imperial rulers geared up their efforts to consolidate a pan Indian territorial state and acquire political legitimacy for their rule so that they can sustain their occupation and rule in India. They advanced the argument that an entity like India governed by social codes and customary laws needed the rule of the law to be administered by the impersonal authority of the state. It was in opposition to such claims of the British that the discourse on nation building, found articulation in the movement for India’s independence.

Given the broader context of India during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Assam could never occupy a central position in the dominant nationalist discourse because of a number of factors. Sudipta Kaviraj defines nationalist discourse as the “intellectual process through which the conception of an Indian nation is gradually formed” (Kaviraj 1994: 301). He poses the vital question of what should be the relation between the two strata of identities – the national and the regional. In the context of Assam, the language question played an important role, particularly after the advent of the British. Historians and scholars writing in similar contexts have viewed the advent of the British in different ways. The Raj appeared on the scene in the guise of saviors of the people who were suffering under the chaos, lawlessness and oppression that had persisted since the 1770’s starting with the Moamaria civil war and culminating in the Burmese
occupation of the Assam plains. After the expulsion of the Burmese from Assam, the British tried to instill confidence in the Assamese mind by introducing several reform measures and abolishing some of the cruel practices of the previous regime. Even Maniram Dewan (1806-1858) in his memorandum to Mills speaks approvingly of these steps taken by the British. Gunabhiram Barua (1834-1894) also refers to the new and liberal form of justice established by the British in place of the crude and primitive modes of the Ahom rule (in Misra 1987: 32).

The British government won the confidence of the common people in the initial phase by undertaking welfare measures like a stable system of revenue collection, the improvement of the communication system, the establishment of schools, and the freeing of the slaves of the nobles and high officials (Misra 1987: 33). It is evident from the comments made by Maniram Dewan and Anandaram Dhekial Phukan (1829-1859) that the British rule proved to be a boon to the people in the initial stages. Hemchandra Barua (1835-96) was another prominent figure who extended his support to the British rule with the hope that Assam would be relieved of its immediate trouble. This tendency echoes and reaffirms the position taken initially by the All-India Congress Party in supporting the British and working with them for the benefit of the country.

However, when for political and economic convenience Assam was placed under the Bengal Presidency from 1826 to 1873, the threat to Assam’s identity became manifest in a tangible form. A large number of Bengali clerks came to work in the newly established government offices. For convenience sake, the British enforced Bengali as the official language and as the medium of instruction
in the vernacular schools of Assam. Bengali remained the official language and medium of instruction for a period of 38 years from 1836 (Misra 1987: 151). In an article titled “Bengali”\(^1\) in *Assam Bandhu*, the writer notes the impact of Assamese-Bengali clash thus:

During the Moamaria Rebellion, Captain Welsh came to Asom with his troop of *Hindustani\(^2\)* sepoys. Along with them Bengalis also came to Asom. After chasing away the Maans\(^3\) when British government took over the administration of Asom, more Bengalis came to our country. The situation was such that even though there was British rule ordinary people used to say that in our *desh* it was the reign of the Bengalis…. English manners and customs are distanced from ours whereas Bengali customs are somewhat similar. That is why it became easily adaptable…. Courts and other offices had Bengali officers. Schoolteacher was a Bengali. The language in schools was Bengali…. British administrative work involves reading and writing. Our people did not receive such education earlier. One who does all work and imparts education become the leaders of a society…Bengalis, too, in this way became leaders of our society (*Assam Bandhu*: 95-100)\(^4\).

It is thus evident that Assam was engaged in an unfortunate struggle for identity and even existence for nearly half a century in the initial period of British rule. The benefit that might have come from the new political and commercial contacts or the spirit of questioning that might have arisen from the spiritual impact of Christianity were somewhat clouded by a distance created by the problem of language.

The British neglect of this crucial aspect indicates that they were disregarding the cultural strength of the Assamese people. What was needed
perhaps was that they “recognize the equal value of different cultures… not only let them survive, but acknowledge their worth” (Taylor 1994: 64). The struggle to regain the status of the language was instrumental in bringing about unity among the different segments of the Assamese society and in strengthening the Assamese national consciousness (Misra 2001: 17-18). This may be argued as the beginning of a sub national imagination, which in the years to come took a major form of resistance. People of Assam undertook writing and publishing in their native tongue to free themselves and their language from foreign domination by returning to the “upward paths of their own culture which in turn is nourished by the living reality of its environment” (Cabral 1994: 56). It becomes an important nationalist moment, which is not merely restricted to anti-colonial consciousness. An “imagined community” was formed in this manner, one that banked upon a common linguistic marker. The emergence of such a community was evident in the magazines published between the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century in Assam. These magazines allowed polyphony of voices to co-exist and contribute towards the formation of a jati or nation, which was apart and at the same time, was separate from the pan Indian state that was also trying to come into existence. Some of the magazines that were published were Orunodoi (1846-1854), Assam Bilashini (1871-1883), Assam Mihir (1872-73), Assam Darpan (1874-75), Chandrodoi (1876), Assam News (1882-85), Assam Bandhu (1885-86), Mou (1886-87), and Jonaki (1889-1903), Ghar Jeuti (1927-1931). It is to be noted that apart from Orunodoi and Assam Bilashini, the other magazines were published for very short durations. However, the continuity in the appearance of these magazines one after the other contributed to the growth of the Assamese language
and literature as well as to the growth of national awareness. The development of
the print media contributed to the spread of literacy and the arousal of popular
support “with the masses discovering a new glory in the print elevation of language
they had humbly spoken all along” (Anderson 1983: 80).

Amidst the subtle growth of such a linguistic nationalism, women once
again became the ‘inner core’ upon which the success of the nation-in-formation
depended. As in many parts of the country, even in Assam, Assamese intelligentsia
like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua, and Hemchandra Barua
among others took up the course of women’s emancipation. The reformist-
conservatives debate regarding women’s emancipation did not really solve the
problem of the unfortunate and deplorable condition of women in the Assamese
society. Women themselves helped constitute the very cultures, which oppressed
them, by internalizing the dictates of the patriarchy. However, without generalizing
the matter further it is also necessary to place women in their cultural context and
grasp the subtle, complex ways, in which women’s experience was being sculpted
and how particular women were negotiating, subverting and yet reproducing
dominant discourses. Despite recognizing women’s socio-cultural specificities,
which both structured and were structured by their agencies, it may be contended
that there was a relatively unique place from which women could defy dominant
discourses and hold themselves apart, and it was literary.

Since women were expected to remain in the domestic sphere, the literary
genre offered them a way in which they could simultaneously conform to and
dissent against such conventions, using textuality to enter the masculinized public
sphere. Although the written medium was only available to small numbers of the high-caste elites even in Assam as in the rest of India, the outpouring of women’s writing during the time, and the propagation of their ideas by public writers and activists such as Chandraprava Saikiani and the likes of Pandita Ramabai and others like her, meant that one could assume they were able to reach a larger audience. The eventual evolution of the Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti (1926), the founding stone of which was laid by Saikiani, as an individual body working for the all round welfare of Assamese women is an appropriate example of such a condition.

The twentieth century promoted the cause of gender justice by internationalizing struggles for equality by women and other oppressed people. Women's struggles against their subordination were intertwined in varying degrees with ideologies and movements based on the values of freedom, self-determination, equality, democracy, and justice. Confined earlier by locale or limited foci, these now found expression through movements against imperialism, for national liberation and social transformation. Although in India colonial rule and the freedom struggle marked the beginning of an awakening among women, differing streams within the anti-imperialist, anti-feudal struggle posited different, even contentious images of identities for women (Sangari and Vaid 1989). However, the nationalist consensus symbolised in the Fundamental Rights Resolution of the Indian National Congress, 1931, postulated freedom, justice, dignity and equality for women as essential for nation building. The nationalist movement helped the issue of women’s education to become important. Women identified lack of education as a major reason for their oppression and humiliation.
Male reformists identified this lack as one of the most important reasons for India’s backwardness while the nationalist males identified women’s education as a means of strengthening the ‘inner core’ or the domestic sphere which needed to be protected from colonial intervention and rebuild in order to have better citizens for the prospective nation-state.

The vast literature on women’s movements in the non-western world tends to be preoccupied with the problem of development. Regardless of whether scholars within this tradition consider women as beneficiaries or victims, the scholarly literature on development generally fails to consider women as agents and activists in their own right. However, a study of women’s writing would definitely provide analysts with a different perspective with which to look at women’s movements.

At first glance, the sheer volume of social reform centering on women in nineteenth century India leads one to assume 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. However, in all these cases women are mere objects for whose emancipation ‘actions’ are being taken by the ‘progressive’ male thinkers of the time in collaboration with the colonists. This is just one side of the coin; the other side is an extended narrative of real lives, which struggled to have a worthy life amidst contradictory pressures. The first phase was a struggle to educate
themselves under unfavorable circumstances, followed by a phase of
demonstrating courage by setting up schools for girls and teaching in these schools.
These educated women sought a larger role outside the household, and this was
made available to them through the space of the community, which is outside the
domestic space and not a part of the political sphere.

Various historical processes contribute towards the reconstitution of
patriarchy in colonial India. Social changes and reform movements are governed
by various sets of politics, which need to be questioned and contested in order to
draw a feminist historiography. According to Sangari and Vaid, “a feminist
historiography rethinks historiography as a whole and discards the idea of women
as something to be framed by a context” (Sangari and Vaid 1999: 3). Such an
approach forms the base of this work which proceeds to read the ‘woman’s text’
and establish that women wrote and framed a discourse of their own – one which
reaffirms the existence of various patriarchies, accepting the division of private and
public spheres constructed in the colonial period and at the same time and more
importantly tries to locate the ‘domestic’ in the ‘national’ space.

By doing this, these texts challenge the dominant male nationalist discourse
wherein they figured as objects and contributes to the feminization of the existing
nationalist discourse wherein they figure as active participants - not as political
workers but primarily as mothers, wives, home-makers, and, nurturers. However,
in exploring the availability of a greater egalitarianism for women in the ‘home’
and the ‘world’, these texts do not challenge the binary construction of these
spheres. These women writers write within the existing paradigm of reform and
reawakening, at times challenging and very often accepting such paradigms as given and as necessary elements for women’s mobility from the domestic to the civil/non-political space. These women through their writing participated in making rhetorical choices and inventing new subject position for the modern Assamese woman. Mrinalini Sinha in her study of the “rhetorical acts of subjects – acts that invent new subject positions in history – produce change” (Sinha 2000: 1082), in the essay titled “Mapping the Imperial Social Formation: A Modest Proposal for Feminist History” writes that:

The further point, however, is that the discourse of early Indian feminism assumed an essential unity of womanhood as a prototype for this putative “national” citizen-subject. Its most crucial ideological service to the nationalist project, indeed, lay in normalizing the liberal-bourgeoisie citizen-subject – allegedly above considerations of gender, caste, class, and community – as the normative subject of political discourse in late colonial India. The contribution of early Indian feminism in the inter-war period, then, was to invent new subject positions for the modern Indian woman as the generic Indian citizen. In so doing, it also provided ideological cover to a hegemonic nationalism compromised by gender, caste, class, and communal contradictions (Sinha 2000: 1081).

For educated and privileged women then during the years of the nationalist struggle against colonial rule, womanhood came to be closely associated with other roles that women play as mother, wife etc. and while performing these roles they ensured for themselves the subject positions of able citizens of the nation-in-
formation.
Elite men designated women as symbols of community, but did not view them as a community (Prakash 2002: 34). At different times and places, communities had a diverse set of referents – Bengalis, Malayalis, Tamils, Hindus, Muslims, Indians, etc; yet, each of these were cast in the image of the modern nation, that is, as a unity of culture, traditions, and pasts that demanded recognition of its rights as a modern political community. Simultaneously, invoking ancient solidarity and modern belonging, the colonized represented community as a traditional collectivity that was entitled to the modern rights and authority of “a people.” Given the political fact of empire, it is not surprising that the concept of a cultural community came to embrace the political. However, to understand what positioned the nation as the framework of imagining a political community, we have to take into account the functioning of modernity in the colonial setting, that is, its authority as a sign of universality and its functioning as an aspect of empire. In fact, colonial modernity affected the various regional communities in India in various ways. Studies have been conducted to analyze and judge the positive and negative ways of indigenous groups which are not always to be affected and restructured because of the wave of modernity.

Sumit Sarkar in his essay “The Woman’s Question in Nineteenth Century Bengal” (1985) throws doubt upon the very assumption that the early attempts at reform were principally guided by any ideological acceptance of liberal or rationalist values imported from the West. He suggests that the concern with the social condition of women was “far less an indicator of such ideological preference for liberalism” and more an expression of “certain acute problems of interpersonal adjustments within the family.” It was precisely this lack of concern for
independence that the “women’s question” failed to liberalize women. Women were further caught up in the web of culture, tradition, purity, motherhood, etc that projected them as shapers of the Indian nation pitted against the alien rule.

This dissertation will look at the way that notions of freedom enter into women’s debates in their struggle for the formation of both personal and national identities as citizens or rather future citizens of the proposed independent nation. It will also take into account the tensions that arise because of opposing demands made by personal and national identities – on the one hand, women had to reconstruct the private sphere and on the other they had to prove themselves capable of handling public matters efficiently without discarding the ‘domestic’. The colonial state denied citizenship to the colonized (irrespective of gender and class); women were further denied entry into the space outside their homes because of new patriarchies that were supplanting the old in colonial India. In order to match up to the liberal ideals of equality and reason, therefore, women had to undertake autonomous struggles thereby changing and transforming their “separate sphere” into a battlefield. Attempts to appropriate symbols of women’s power grew through reinterpreting myths, epics, and folktales; unearthing historical forms of women’s resistance in different parts of India; and identifying with individual fights put up by a few conscious women and turning it into a community war that could neither be dismissed nor be suppressed.

Partha Chatterjee in his essay, “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question” made the point that nationalism in the Indian context was not simply “about a political struggle for power; it related the question of political
independence of the nation to virtually every aspect of the material and spiritual life of the people” (Chatterjee 1999: 238) The ‘inner sphere’ came to be regarded as an area which was outside the purview of guidance and intervention of the colonial state; recommendations and presentations of the sacred area from where the ‘nation’ would be shaped. Unlike the revivalist nationalism of the first phase of the freedom struggle, the ‘inner’ domain was not at all a free space for the women because of all the constraints and pressures they had to face within the ‘domestic’.

However, with Gandhi’s intervention this sphere was rearticulated and reshaped to facilitate the participation of woman in the national freedom movement under conditions that would not threaten her femininity. In this scheme of things, there was the seeming absence of any autonomous struggle/resistance by women for equality and freedom. However, a subtle form of what can be regarded as ‘resistance’ actually existed in the domain of the home where women, in different parts of the country, were getting ready to register an autonomous struggle. Gandhi’s agenda gave the women an occasion to participate in the ‘outer sphere’ and this opportunity led to several other better opportunities. In order to understand and know about these struggles it would be necessary to construct a specific women’s history, which would insist on acknowledging the ‘feminine’ and ‘domestic’. In order to conceive of a women’s history one needs to derive from social history, largely defining women’s changing roles within and outside the family and the relation of these changes to ideological patterns. Placing woman’s text at the center of its analytic schema this work seeks to read through the “woman’s text” in order to encompass the complex interplay between the
macrocosm of nationalist consciousness and state formation, the microcosm of family structure and the existential experience of being female.

In many Third World contexts, nationalism is intricately connected to feminism, not only in the sense that nationalist movements often assisted in the birth of feminism, but also in that nationalists and feminists frequently collaborated in their pursuit of a common goal – national independence from a colonial power (in Herr 2003: 135). The pioneering work of Kumari Jayawardena has helped establish that “feminism was not imposed on the Third World by the West” but arose out of important material and ideological changes that affected women in the third world. At the same time she asserts that early Indian feminism lacked a proper “revolutionary feminist consciousness” (Jayawardena 1986: 107-108), primarily because of its merger with the nationalist struggle against colonial rule. Feminism in India is regarded as nationalist feminism by Mrinalini Sinha in her essay titled “Mapping the Imperial Social Formation” because of their close association and dependency. The term suggests the nature of the women’s movement in Assam and in the rest of India. Women’s emancipation and the need for an egalitarian outlook were conceived in relation to the emerging nationalist consciousness and the necessity of attaining the status of an independent nation. The four chapters in the dissertation try to locate women’s contribution to the emerging nationalist discourse through the medium of writing.

Nira Yuval-Davis, raises crucial questions about the intersection between gender and nationalism in her book *Gender and Nation* (1997). She questions studies of nations and nationalism that ignore gender relations, including those by
scholars who theorize nationalism as an extension of kinship relations. According to Yuval-Davis, to truly understand the concept of nation, one must differentiate between state institutions, civil society, and family and kinship relations—all of which contribute to identity construction and are often in conflict with one another. She also addresses the question of women’s participation in the military, asking what it means for gender relations and citizenship roles, questioning the assumption of many feminists that female military participation is a laudable goal. In addition, she scrutinizes the dichotomous categories of public/private and active/passive to which men and women are assigned. Her thoughtful analysis of the role of women in nation building is an important contribution to existing knowledge on the subject. She points out that women contribute to nationalist movements and nations through their roles as biological reproducers of the nation, in the cultural constructions of nations as well as in civil constructions of nationhood through citizenship. At the same time, her work offers an insight into the patriarchal strategies at work in the general oppression of women and the different positioning of women and men in relation to the state and power. She points out that nationalist, feminist movements do not always go hand in hand, and liberating movements, even those that include women, often do not see the liberation of women as an important goal.

Women have figured as the bearers of national cultures in both fictional and non-fictional reflections and responses from men and women writers. Elleke Boehmer in her book *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial nation* (2005) examines the relative silence of the dominant postcolonial thinkers on the subject of nationalism, and of women’s roles in nationalist movements. She
cites the cases of Ernest Gellner, Etienne Balibar, Benedict Anderson, Homi Bhabha among others who have largely overlooked the gender issue in their narratives of the nation in general and postcolonial national resistances in particular. Instead of looking at texts where women have been spoken for/about, she examines literary texts by women – novels and autobiographies in particular—which may be regarded as “central vehicles in the imaginative construction of new nations”, thereby examining the central, formative role played by gender in that construction (Boehmer 2005: 14). She writes

By conveying women’s complex give - and - take between public and private spaces, women writers use the novel as a powerful instrument with which to reshape national cultures in a way more hospitable to women’s presence (Boehmer 2005: 12).

With this in mind, the book concentrates first on identifying the images and symbols of women used to imagine the nation into being and secondly, on individual writers, both men and women and their reworking of those form-giving symbols. Thus, the book develops a method to understand gender-nation studies in different parts of the globe. Such a work is an important intervention in gender-nation studies, as it takes into consideration how women ‘theorize’ and ‘re-emblematize’ the nation in their works (Boehmer 2005: 17). Boehmer argues that women writers “radically transform the conditions of national self-identification by viewing the nation not as a static but a relational space. The nation’s value, they propose, comes not from a historically fixed, ‘authentic character but from an intersubjective exchange as to its meanings; not from stories about iconic women,
but through interlinked stories by diverse women and men participants in the nation” (Boehmer 2005: 17)

Writing definitely was a major intervention by women in the male dominated public sphere. Journals and magazines played an important role in this regard allowing women from different spheres of life to participate in an active exchange of ideas. Social reformers and cultural revivalists in the nineteenth century and nationalists in the early decades of the twentieth published journals for women in various Indian languages with a view to educating them and preparing them for the roles they expected women to play in their scheme of things. *Stree Bodh* a Gujarati journal for women was meant primarily to educate women along certain lines so that they could be companions to their husbands – men who were heavily influenced by the process of modernization. These men wanted women to accept their specific roles in the newly reformed domestic sphere and be good wives and mothers. Sonal Shukla on her study on *Stree Bodh* notes that the front page of the journal every month carried Napoleon Bonaparte’s famous message that the greatness of the country depended upon the education the mothers receive (Shukla 1991: 63). She identifies a hidden curriculum which was “not so much for raising the status of women as for the construction of an indigenous vision of Victorian women as perceived by modern Indian men” (Shukla 1991: 65). Regarding the contents of this curriculum she further writes:

Family and home were supposedly women’s area of activity and control. That is why a journal like *Stree Bodh* has articles on health, child care, and housekeeping. It ran a series ‘called the ‘Governor of The House’ with instructions on how to purchase and arrange furniture, employ servants, and use western type of utensils.
But more than any of this, StreeBodh teaches women how to be loving wives and look after the husbands who come back tired after a day's hard work. Beginning with 1857 StreeBodh had continuously published frequent articles on what a woman should do to make her husband happy (Shukla 1991: 65).

However, the journal lacked a vision of empowering women and enabling their participation in the sphere outside the home.

In an essay titled “Emotion, Identity, and The Female Subject: Tamil Women's Magazines in Colonial India, 1890–1940,” Mytheli Sreenivas studies women's magazines as a modern communicative space with at least two qualifications: the first - that this social space did not include all women, most readers were urban and middle class; the second - that these magazines did not exclude men. Both these qualifications apply in the case of women’s magazines in Assam. The writer suggests that “Tamil women’s magazines changed significantly over time, moving from a reformist emphasis on appropriate domesticity at the turn of the twentieth century toward a more radical critique of gender relations within the family by the 1920s and 1930s” (Sreenivas 2003: 74). Meera Velayudhan in “Changing Roles and Women’s Narratives” elucidates the significant struggles by Nambudri women to change their positions within and outside the family, invoking contests between different traditions. She notices a significant debate that emerged during 1919-1920 in the women's journal Sarada related to the concept of womanhood. Different women narrated different versions of womanhood while trying to define the qualities of an ideal woman. In another journal titled Stree Dharma, a woman writer in her article elaborated on four tasks for women: care of husband, conjugal fidelity, home management, and care of
children (Velayudhan 1994: 69). A trend within the journal and in its dominant influence was a process of image building and re-building by re-interpreting the symbolic meaning of many women characters from Hindu mythology and ancient myths (Velayudhan 1994: 72).

The last decades of the nineteenth century saw Pandita Ramabai (1858-1952), Ramabai Ranade (1862-1924), Anandibai Joshi (1865-1887), Frenana Sorabjee, Annie Jagannathan, Rukhmabai (1864-1955) and others crossing the bounds of familial and cultural restrictions of a patriarchal society and even going abroad to study (Talwar 1999: 206). They returned with a new awareness of their rights and immediately became involved in raising women’s issues in the country. Women formed independent organizations all over the country. In 1886, Swarna Kumari Devi started the Ladies Association; Pandita Ramabai started Sharda Sadan in Pune in 1892 to provide employment and education for women. Ramabai Ranade started the Hindu Ladies Social and Literary Club in 1902 and Seva Sadan in Pune in 1909 in Pune. Around the same time *Stree Bodh*, a journal about women, was released from Bombay in 1901. A similar women’s journal was founded in Madras. In Calcutta in 1905, Sumati started Mahila Samiti; 1908 saw the beginning of a Gujrati Stree Mandal in Ahmedabad and Mahila Seva Samaj was founded in Mysore in 1913. Rameshwari Nehru established the Prayag Mahila Samiti in Allahabad and began a serious journal exclusively for women called *Stree Darpan*. Bhagini Samaj was started in Pune in 1916 and played an important role in organizing women. 1914 saw the emergence of Annie Besant as a leading figure in the national movement. She started the Women’s India Association with Margaret Cousins in 1917, which brought out a journal called *Stree-Dharm*. In an
attempt to establish an all-India organization for women, the National Council of Women in India was initiated in 1925. In 1926, the Women’s India Association brought together several scattered women’s groups in the country at a convention and many of them united under the banner of the All India Women’s Conference.

Thus, like the burgeoning number of peasants and workers’ organizations all over the country, women’s own organizations too developed as part of the anti-imperialist movement. However, along with these well-known names it becomes imperative to examine names, which are not well known and not well recorded in the history of the community. In order to trace the history of the remarkable century long women’s movement in India so well connected with the anti-colonial struggles as well as other subaltern movements, the unrecorded history needs to be explored and retrieved from the archives in the form of untouched or unpublished manuscripts of women who wrote but never became established writers.

_Ghar Jeuti_ (1928-1930) 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). 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. They attempted to publish articles which reflected the need of the society of their times. Women’s education, widow remarriage, women’s liberation, and empowerment, inculcation of virtues and moral values in children, problems of
women in various parts of the globe and other such issues received attention in this magazine.

The title of this dissertation identifies two key aspects of the Indian historical and literary tradition – the formation of a nationalist discourse through the ‘woman’s text’. The nineteenth and early twentieth century shows interesting evidences of Indian women writing and expressing themselves. Women’s writing during the period in question can be read and re-read for subtle addressing of issues of their subjugation and the need for emancipation through their writings. This dissertation seeks to bring into visibility women’s active cultural and political participation in national formation through the medium of writing – the woman’s text thus symbolizing a space, which opens up the freedom of choice for women. The sphere of writing signifies a ‘freedom’ of movement, a freedom to wander, pause, proceed precisely as one desires. Women’s entry into the sphere of writing poses the question of how the nationalistic discourse would accommodate the differing notions of freedom. On the one hand, lay the desire for individual freedom, freedom from confinement, from passivity, and from ‘silence’; on the other lay the need to free one’s motherland from alien rule. The woman’s text oscillates between the ‘fantasy of freedom’ that women desired – of ‘soaring to the sky’ – and ‘the reality of woman’s confined bodies’.

The articles and speeches identified and analyzed in the study provide a unique opportunity to examine women’s role options in relation to the macrocosmic structure of social structure. However, as in so many other works involving nineteenth century women, how far do they address women’s actual
behavior and feelings is a matter to be explored. They may be regarded as depiction of women’s voices deployed to formulate notions of citizenship and statehood at the end of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The texts selected from these two eras are from different Assamese periodicals, which depict different spheres of women’s struggle and articulation grapple with definitions of national spaces. All these various voices contribute towards the formation of public and private identities of women. Some of them may be regarded as depiction of women’s voices deployed to formulate notions of citizenship and statehood at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. In addition, some others reiterate the patriarchal notion of ‘separate spheres’ seeking to restrict women’s movement to the ‘inner sphere’ and at the same time desiring women’s participation in the public sphere from the space of the home. Of course, a limitation of the approach adopted in this work will be its focus on the educated and privileged section of the society who was growing in number at the turn of the century ignoring the voices of the underprivileged.

II

The period under consideration in this dissertation is a significant one. Elaborating on the nature of the colonial period in her work *The Frail Hero and Virile History: Gender and the Politics of Culture in Colonial Bengal*, Indira Chowdhury writes that the period that she studies is marked by a search for indigenous cultural forms that could contest colonial notions and provide the resource for a modern political identity: traditional icons had to be reinterpreted in the light of enlightenment notions so that they could meet the demands of
sovereignty and nationhood (Chowdhury: 2001: 4). In her study, Chowdhury discussed the origins of the Hindu Mela, annually organized by the Tagores from 1867 to 1850, which became an important intervention in authorizing a legitimate national identity. Both in discursive and performative terms, the Hindu Mela furnished as if in a microcosm, the frail hero with a choice of icons that could arm him with a more potent self-image. During the course of her study she examines prescriptive literature for women both by middle class men and women, “making little distinction between them,” as prescriptive texts often use the same idiom” (Chowdhury 2001: 87). She asserts that at its various phases nationalist discourse, primarily articulated by men, focused on cultural as well as nationalist arguments that defended the superiority of Hindu womanhood, ignoring women’s experiences. As Susie Tharu has pointed out in a related context, the figure of Savitri represents for writers drawn to the myth, “the very sexual refinement, the purity, held, as always, in the virtue of women that the British insisted Hindu society lacked. And the Satyavan she must redeem through this feat of reculturalization is India itself.” (Tharu 1999: 260) Colonial arguments converted women’s experience into abstract components of ‘culture’ over which the opposing patriarchies – ‘colonial’ and ‘Indian’ – confronted each other. Women were thus constructed as embodying ideals to be emulated rather than ‘equal’ participants who fashioned their own identities (Chowdhury 2001: 160).

Tanika Sarkar in Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation focuses on women’s changing roles in the development of Hindu cultural nationalism, largely in nineteenth century Bengal. She argues that a woman (particularly a Hindu woman) at various phases of her life becomes a “complicit subject of patriarchy” (Sarkar 2001: 21).
She writes in chapter 7 of her book: “We saw in the previous chapter that the nineteenth century in colonial Bengal was not a time when individual rights existed within her home” (Sarkar 2001: 227). She summarizes the entire social reform movement and argues that reforms meant for women were sham in that they did nothing for the creation of an independent and autonomous female individual. She insists that a woman as a ‘right-bearing’ individual was always inferior to the community as a ‘culture-bearing’ entity. She identifies women’s writings between the 1860’s and the 1890’s which no longer regards the Hindu home as a refuge or a loving space as cultural nationalists claimed but as a torture chamber where instead of a “nubile youthful body” of a loving wife lay the “broken” and ravaged “body of a mere child”.

Recent studies of women in the Indian National Movement have performed the much-needed task of enumerating and naming the women involved in national politics from various regions. Since we are operating in the field of nationalist ideology and its critique, vigilance is necessary. In an analysis such as this one, where the voices of some women do emerge, recuperation of a nationalist middle-class or elite subject is inevitable. Every discourse operates through powers of selective inclusion and exclusion; nationalist discourse cannot be an exception to this. In this regard, Kamala Visweswaran writes thus:

Thus I am aware that advancing a middle-class woman’s ‘counter subjectivity’ displaces lower class subjects in the same way that the masculinized male subjectivity of nationalism displaces female subjects. The very anonymity of lower-class women is in some sense only possible through the entry of middle-
class women into nationalist historiography through the selected acts of writing and speech (Visweswaran 1997: 89).

Lower class women might have other ways – other than writing and speech – to participate in the nationalist discourse. At the same time, the question remains if they indeed felt the necessity of entering this discourse when they were surrounded by other problems.

In the form of the Women’s Indian Association (WIA, founded in 1917) and the All-India Women’s Conference (AIWC, founded in 1927), the women’s movement transformed the terms of debate on the “woman question” by making (middle-class) women agents of reform. Organizations such as the WIA and AIWC changed what it meant to create a community of women by developing ideologies and structures whereby women qua women could fight for change. The communicative space of the magazines was deeply affected by these attempts to organize women politically.

To be free, to be modern, to develop is to get out of a situation of confinement. The modern West’s understanding of liberty relies upon a narrative of mobility, of openness and dynamism (Pritchard 2000: 49). However, how far is this model of the Enlightenment applicable to the mobility and progress of women? Has this model truly enabled the movement of women from a state of subordination to a state of empowerment? Answers to these questions lie in an assessment of colonial modernity in the broader Indian context. Saurabh Dube in his discussion of colonial modernity writes thus:
Now, this Janus-faced neologism highlights the acute enmeshments of determinations of colony and formations of modernity, particularly when colonial modernities are regarded as a broad rubric that indicates historical processes and critical perspectives, entailing particular locations of enunciation, interrogating the disembodied view-from-nowhere that becomes the palpable view-for-everywhere. Precisely for this reason, however, colonial modernities indicate both a contentious theoretical terrain and a contending analytical arena. In addition, it is exactly such contention that can turn this concept metaphor into an enabling resource for dialogue and debate (Dube 2002: 199).

He identifies two questions that immediately confront anyone speaking of modernity or modernities – “is the reference to an overarching ideology that accompanied the work of capital, the expansion of empire, and the fabrication of colonialism over the last five hundred years? Or are modernities also to be understood as particular historical processes predicated upon distinct but wide-ranging intersections of the metropole and the margins, upon discrete yet critical encounters between the colonizer and the colonized?” This has always been a contestable arena in the Indian context. In fact, it may be argued that colonial modernity is a phenomenon that is initially defined by projects of power (in the Indian context it is the British imperial power), and gradually molded by provisions of progress (the various connotations that was conferred by reformists and nationalists) for the greater good of the nation-in-formation.

Colonial modernity required women to behave in a certain manner for which changes at different levels of the native way of life and thinking became imperative. The domestic sphere and the field of education were affected most in
this regard, and this has been discussed in detail in two separate chapters of the thesis. Re-analysis of these two areas by select upper class and middle class women facilitated women’s large-scale participation in the non-political space outside the home. The emerging civil society had to restructure itself in order to accommodate women and their distinct voices in their various activities. Women’s agency, therefore, was determined by their own efforts and not by the colonial state, or by the reformist movement, or even by the emerging nationalist discourse which till then privileged only male voices and male agency. The ‘woman’s text’ makes use of the domestic space and its inhabitants to commemorate a certain version of traditional culture at a time when culture was believed to be both in crisis and in peril. Though they attempted to emancipate themselves yet they could not deny the task of shaping the new nation from the domestic space, which required a revamping of that space. The nationalist enterprise became more important than their own personal gains, which took a secondary seat till the attainment of freedom.

In Assam as in the rest of India the nationalist movement with the image of Gandhi as the leader of the masses influenced the Assamese people urging them to become active participants in the movement. Nalinibala Devi in her autobiography Eri Aha Dinbur remarks that men, women, and children (including her five year old son Putuli) participated in various activities of the Congress and agitations launched by them. Dipti Sarma’s book Assamese Women in Freedom Struggle (1993) gives details of various women who participated in the freedom struggle in a number of ways. She gives a long list of names of women who took up organizational and publicity work among the rural women to educate them about
the movement. However, this record lacks theoretical information on how the issue of nation, nationalism, and freedom were dealt with by the Assamese women folk.

Tillotama Misra’s book *Literature and Society in Assam* (1987) attempts to look at those trends in the Assamese literature (1826-1926) resulting from the social and cultural impact of the phenomenon popularly regarded as Indian Renaissance. The book tries to explore the introduction of the ‘modern’ into Assamese literature when the ‘predominantly religious content was replaced by or blended with a secular one’. Aparna Mahanta’s book *Journey of Assamese Women* (2008) dealing with the period between 1836 and 1937 gives an insight into the otherwise unexplored world of Assamese women’s achievements at various levels of the newly formed civil society. Beginning with the history of women’s education in Assam, Mahanta engages herself in exploring Assamese women’s progress into the ‘new’ world that was taking shape as a result of new ideas traveling from one corner of the world to the other in the form of the printing press, newspapers, magazines and periodicals, books, and people (like the Baptist Missionaries, Pandita Ramabai, Mahatma Gandhi and others like them). She draws the picture of a changing world in which women were learning, writing, publishing, organizing, and participating. Hers is a significant contribution made in this area.

Guptajit Pathak’s *Assamese Women in Indian Independence Movement* gives (2008) a broad overview of Assamese women’s political orientations during the various phases of the freedom struggle. He traces the legacy of Assamese women in the political sphere starting from Mula Gabharu⁶, and Joymati Kunwari.
However, there is a lack of critical analysis of the terms like public/political sphere, nation etc., and the book does not provide an insight into the lives of these women – the various influences, and, inspirations in their lives. Nor does it try to offer a discourse on Assamese women’s contributions to the spirit of nationalism.

Another book that needs to be mentioned here is *Asomiya Nari: Aitijya aru Uttaran (Assamese Women: Tradition and Evolution)* that is a compilation of essays by various writers discussing different aspects of the changing lives of Assamese women. In his introduction Shivnath Barman points out that unlike similar works, which limits Assamese women’s contribution to fields like education, literature, and politics, this work takes into account other important achievements by Assamese women. *Asomiya Nari* gives a glimpse of Assamese women’s contributions in other areas like sports, business and includes essays on women in the tribal belts of Assam and Assamese Muslim women. In the first essay titled “Aitijya Aru Asomiya Nari” by Prasenjit Chowdhury, the writer at the end of his analysis accepts that Assamese women are made the “carriers of culture” in order to preserve the integrity of the race. This as discussed above, is merely a variant of patriarchy at work. The other essays also depict the existence of a selective tradition where women can work and perform thereby legitimizing their involvement in the world outside the threshold of the home (both in political and non-political spheres). However, most of the essays remain mere factual glimpses at the lives of select women, very informative but lacking a theoretical analysis of the various structures at work in defining and designing the lives of these women.
This dissertation tries to address the gaps that are there in the previous studies on colonial period with a special reference to women’s role and agency in the Assamese context. It identifies the very significant role played by the ‘woman’s text’ in forwarding a woman-specific nationalist discourse which privileged the ‘domestic’ – that sacred space where women performed various roles specific to her nature – thereby allowing these women to participate and perform at the ‘civil/non-political’ space from where the ‘nation’ would emerge in the near future. Such studies are important to allow the emergence of a woman-centric nationalist discourse, which would privilege women’s forms of agency and ways of understanding key notions like freedom, home, nation, etc. There is urgency in this task, for “[i]f nationalism is not transformed by an analysis of gender power, the nation-state will remain a repository of male hopes, male aspirations, and male privilege” (McClintock 1995: 385–86).

III

The thesis is divided into four chapters. The first chapter identifies the complex relationship between women’s politics and the politics of nationalism narrowing it to a detailed discussion of the context of Indian nationalism and women’s role within it. It tries to recognize the gendered forms of nationalist projects and masculinist definitions of the body politic and the national citizen
thereby diminishing the role of women in relation to the nation. Definitions and
discussions of nationalism by male writers and theorists are marked either by
women’s absence or in roles fixed by male agenda primarily as cultural carriers.
The focus of the chapter is on cultural nationalism and an attempt has been made to
locate women’s changing roles in the Indian nationalist project.

The second chapter examines the theory of writing through which women
contribute to nationalism and the formation of the nation state at the same time
ensuring their own self-definition. It seeks to provide an alternate reading of the
‘woman’s text’ as a medium through which women participated in the nationalist
project drawing their subject positions based on their relation with the nation-in-
formation. In this manner, the chapter argues that women identified themselves as
citizens of the emerging nation state declining their position of dependency.

The third chapter deals with the much-contested issue of education as a part
of the conditions of colonial modernity. It takes into account the role of education
in enabling women to participate as active agents and actors. The chapter
concentrates upon select women’s texts in order to assess the manner in which
women writers deal with this crucial aspect of modernity. The texts by Assamese
women on various aspects of education can be read as documentary evidences of
the prevalent thought, and the aspirations that these women cherished at a time
when the entire country was ablaze with ideologies of ‘freedom’ and ‘swaraj’. It
begins by questioning the accepted nationalist notion that women too had to be
educated in order to be fit to raise future citizens. Did women internalize the
prescriptions written for them or did they question and oppose them? What kind of
education did women desire and advocate for themselves? These are some of the questions that the chapter seeks to address. Through the answers to these questions, the chapter seeks to interpret women’s conception of ‘nation’ and ‘nationalism’ and to identify the discourse generated through their thinking and writings.

The fourth chapter looks at how women during the Joymati Utsavs were not only able to form communities or sisterhoods but also constructed the space between the home and the world as a source of giving them strength, enabling their participation in the nationalist movement. 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 regarded as ‘public’. This chapter examines those women’s texts of the early twentieth century which explore the idea of an alternate ‘space’ for women in Assam, particularly upper and middle class, which they had consciously or unconsciously carved out for themselves wherein they actively participated in matters of social progress and nation building.

Notes:

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

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1 In the original text, the initials ‘Aa.Bo’ referred to the writer’s name. In his introduction to the reprint of Assam Bandhu, Dr. Nagen Saikia states that this referred to Assam Bandhu and editor Gunabhiram Barua wrote it.

2 The use of the word ‘Hindustani’ is to be noted. This is used to refer to someone who is an outsider just like the British.
The Assamese people referred to the Burmese army who invaded Assam as Maans.

In order to avoid the confusion related to multiple editors and authors, references within the chapter contains only page numbers of Assam Bandhu compiled and edited by Dr. Nagen Saikia, published in 2003.

In Gender and Caste edited by Anupama Rao, an attempt has been made to explore the relationship between sexed subjectivity and caste thereby bringing into visibility new discourses about caste and gender allowing the historical formation of the caste-marked female subject.

Mula Gabharu was the wife of Phrasengmung Borgohain. After his death in the battle between the Ahoms and the Muslims in 1527, Mula Gabharu decided to go to the battlefield. When Turbak the Muslim invader came to Assam once again in 1532, she along with five other women led the Ahom army against the Muslim invaders. According to popular belief, Mula Gabharu was unable to weave the ‘Kabaz Kapur’ i.e. the ‘amulet cloth’ that had to be woven in one night for her husband before his going to the battlefield.

Works Cited:


