CHAPTER IV

BRAHMAPUTRA IN

MYTHOLOGY AND LEGENDS
4.1 Introducing Myth

Myths are traditional sacred narratives. Indian literature is abound with myths which tell stories of the natural or social phenomena involving supernatural beings. The stories date back to antiquity. The study of myths gains importance because it addresses fundamental and difficult questions that human beings ask: who and what am I, where did I come from, why am I here, how should I live, what is the right thing to do, what is the universe, how did it all begin? Myths are stories that are peopled by great men and women; by forces of good and evil; by animals, large and small; by trees, the sea and the wind; and by giants, gods and other supernatural beings.

Myth is a broad term to denote folk narrative usually of unknown origin. It ostensibly relates events in the form of a story to explain some practice, belief or natural phenomena. A myth contains the story that is preserved in popular memory and that helps to bring to life some deep stratum buried in the depth of human spirit. (Bierlein, 1994). They were specially associated with religious rites. But in course of time myth becomes separated from the rites and start floating independently in oral tradition to splinter into magic tales, popular ballads, nursery rhymes and other folklore genres. The continuing importance of myths has opened up newer and newer fields to connect them with our understanding of the world that surround us.

Mythology, the study of myths, receives various treatments since the Romantic movement of the early 19th century. The approach to myths
ranges from comparative philology of the 19th century to the ethnological discoveries of the 20th century. The study of mythology in Folklore is a recent development. Richard M Dorson in his article Mythology and Folklore (1973) states that Burton Feldman and Robert D Richardson, Jr's *The Rise of Modern Mythology 1680-1860* is a milestone in the study of myth from folklore perspectives. It is stated in the book that the folklore approach to myth started with the works of Brother Grimm.

The study of myth was at the centre of emergence of Folklore as a discipline. From Grimm Brothers onwards myth was a convergent point of discussion. Grimm Brothers were followed by Max Muller and Andrew Lang. Later on James Frazer took interest in myth and magic. Consequently, myth ritual theory was developed. Later Bascom did considerable work on the study of myths. According to Bascom, myths are accepted on faith, they are taught to be believed and they can be cited as authority in answer to ignorance, doubt and disbelief. Stories including the myths are the fundamental constituents of memory, knowledge and communication. Myths are constructed around the natural phenomena that surround us. To connect myths with identity owes its origin to the search for the root of any human group.

4.1.1 Defining Myth

It is difficult to define myth satisfactorily. The least controversial view is that it is a traditional story. A single definition of myth is never adequate. Etymologically, the word ‘myth’ is derived from the Greek word ‘mythos’. The word possesses a range of meaning from ‘word’ through ‘saying’ and ‘story’ to ‘fiction’. As observed by Fritz Graf (1993) a myth is a tale as indicated by the etymology of the word: for the early Greeks a *mythos* was a ‘word’ or ‘story’ ‘logos’ and ‘epos’; a *mythologos*, a storyteller.
Dictionary of English Folklore by Jacqueline Simpson and Steve Roud (2000) defines myth as stories about divine beings, generally arranged in a coherent system; they are revered as true and sacred; they are endorsed by rulers and priests, and closely linked to religion. Etymologically, the word ‘myth’ owes its origin to the word ‘mythus’, from Greek mythos meaning "speech, thought, story, myth, anything delivered by word of mouth" of unknown origin.

The modern use of the term ‘myth’, referring to Oxford English Dictionary, starts around the middle of the 19th century and appears in the context of writing on Greek Legend. Purely being a fictitious narrative myth usually involves supernatural persons, actions and events and embodying some popular idea concerning natural and historical phenomena. The use of the term ‘myth’ differs in different disciplines like Anthropology, History etc. The following definitions are taken into consideration before concentrating on the connection of myths and selfhood formation.

Roland Barthes (1956) recognised on a tri-dimensional pattern on myths. For myth is a peculiar semiological system with the signifier, the signified and the sign.

Bascom (1965) defines myth as prose narratives which, in the society in which they are told, are considered to be truthful account of what happened in the past. Bascom’s definition is a considered classic definition in the study of mythology.

Alan Dundes (1984) defines myth as a sacred narrative that explains how the world and humanity came to be in their present form.

Ricoeur (1913-2005) defines myth with a social imagination which functions by virtue of a dialectic between ‘ideology’ and ‘utopia.'
Laurence Coup (2005) considers myth as the language within which archaic humanity narrates its awareness of the discrepancy between sacred time and profane time and in which it projects their reconciliation.

For Malinowski (1926) myth functions for social cohesion and for Levi Strauss it reveals a way of thinking in which universal structures were present. They wanted to present myth as a superior mode of cosmic understanding. As put by Robert E Segal for Levi Strauss myth is the epitome of primitive thinking (). Myths help to define human experience of the environment, however exaggerated the stories may be.

It was Max Muller who thought that mythology stems as a result of the absence of near absence of abstract noun or neuter gender in the ancient language. (Seagal, 2004:20). Thereby myths capture the imagination of the common people. They associate such narratives with their memory and tradition. Anthony D Smith (ref A in myth copy) presents his views in connection with the nationalism and myth, memory etc.:

What gives nationalism its power are the myths, memories, traditions and symbols of ethnic heritage and the ways in which a popular living past has been and can be rediscovered and reconstituted in each generation as the nation becomes more inclusive and as its members cope with new challenges. (1999:9)

A myth is a peculiar kind of story which does not coincide with a particular text or genre. Opinions are also found regarding the connection of myth with rites. Jane Harrison argued that it would be convenient if the use of the word ‘myth’ could be confined to such sequences, such stories as are involved in rites.(1963b:331). Myth transcends text and time transmitting from one generation to the other without anyone knowing who created them. Here lies the traditionality of myths. Moreover, the cultural relevance of myth varies with the social context in which it is narrated.
Another noteworthy observation is made by Don Cupitt. Laurence Coupe quotes Don Cupitt:

... a myth is typically a traditional sacred story of anonymous authorship and archetypal or universal significance which is recounted in certain community and is often linked with a ritual... it is set outside historical time in primal or eschatological time or in the supernatural world...that the superhuman beings are imagined in anthropomorphic ways, although their powers are more than human and often the story is not naturalistic but has the fractured, disorderly logic of dreams. (2009:6)

4.1.2 Symbolic Meaning of Myth

Myths communicate through symbols. Eric Csapo (2005) refers to Freud’s glossary of ‘universal symbols’ in the psychological analysis of myths. Accordingly, emergence of water body is a symbol for birth. A nation known differently through the different periods of history is formed on this land with powerful migratory waves.

It is obvious that in the ancient world people invested natural phenomena with the same qualities they knew in themselves. What is understood as science now was considered miracle by the ancients. They felt awe in the different natural happenings. These phenomena are readily expressed by science now. But the ancients for whom these were only mysteries used human experience and imaginations to solve the mystification. Nature was revealed to them as symbols. They consider it always as God’s will. The ancients weren’t consciously creating Nature myths. They were not trying to build allegories and metaphors. They were simply affirming their beliefs that all forms of natural phenomena acted by will. Myths show the way others have worked at reconciling the opposite forces at work in human experience. That the river Brahmaputra has traversed a long way from its birth place is not easily comprehensible. At
the same time, people on its bank have witnessed how the river has revered as holy by the numerous races on its bank. The sense of purity and divinity is attached to the river owes its origin to the myths.

As me mentioned above one of the most obvious functions of myth is the explanation of fact whether natural or cultural. Myths as explanation of the cosmos and how to live are parallel to science in many ways. Jacob A Arlow (1961) comments significantly:

Mythmakers take their place alongside the poets and the prophets of the community. They give words and forms to the ubiquitous fantasy wishes of mankind. They present ready-made and communally acceptable versions of wishes which heretofore were expressed in guilt laden private fantasies” (p. 378)

Yet because of their differences from science, they often appear insignificant, whimsical, useless or primitive to contemporary people. The decline of the myths is lamented because they provide moral guidance and comfort that helps enrich life. Additionally myths continue to intrigue us because of their rich symbolic, metaphorical and narrative appeal. In the recent years myth is studied to reconcile the paradox of life. From the middle of the 19th century efforts were made to understand the mythologies of the nation.

4.1.3 Timelessness

The role of the narratives of the myths is like a mediator between reality and ideal. The time of the myth is before the beginning of the present rendering of time concept. The collective memory that holds the fact that in spite of the historical as well as socio-political changes that have passed over the land of Assam the core feeling of being the blissful inhabitants on the bank of the Brahmaputra remains intact as it solved the mysterious queries regarding the origin and birth of the river. The
timelessness aspect of myth can be abstracted by removing the diachronic factor from the narratives. Such studies lead to the apprehension of conceiving myths diachronically. It is important to note that the diachronic element is a factor that makes it possible to tell the myth. It is only a technical expedition in the process of conveying the message of which it forms no integral part. Though the myths are based on totally different concept of time factor they relate the paradigmatic events and conditions in a symbolic way. Hence, myths, the timeless stories can be told in different forms because they are symbolic. Pattanaik observes:

An expression of myth becomes sacred when it is of anonymous origin, a revelation or a communication from a nonhuman source. No one knows who first composed the story of Brahma, who drew the first Swastika, who planned Yagna, the Vedic fire sacrifice. This gives myth a sense of timelessness and transfers it into a natural phenomena perceived by the wise rather than an artificial construction of human. (2003:15)

Myth transcends text and time transmitting from one generation to the other without anyone knowing who created them. Here lies the traditionality of myths. Moreover, the cultural relevance of myth varies with the social context in which it is narrated. Another noteworthy observation is made by Don Cupitt. Laurence Coupe quotes Don Cupitt:

... a myth is typically a traditional sacred story of anonymous authorship and archetypal or universal significance which is recounted in certain community and is often linked with a ritual... it is set outside historical time in primal or eschatological time or in the supernatural world...that the superhuman beings are imagined in anthropomorphic ways, although their powers are more than human and often the story is not naturalistic but has the fractured, disorderly logic of dreams. (2009:6)
4.1.4 Cultural Cohesion through Myth

The primary function of myth is to transmit a traditional culture-specific understanding of the world. Myth narrates to us what might have happened before written history. It is a glue to hold past, present and future. Myth is a pattern of belief that gives meaning to life. It enables individuals and societies to adapt to their respective environment with dignity and love. Different mythologists sorted out the functions of myth in various ways. The meaning of the word myth and the effect that myths themselves have had on society has been hypothesized and expounded upon by many individuals from some of the most respected theorists to the most humble field worker. It has been observed that many mythological schools of thought have developed from these early quests for the true meaning of myth and how the narratives that different societies held. Those sacred narratives may have contributed to the form and function of the different cultures that make up a particular society. Malinowski (1926)'s idea of the function is as follows:

The really important thing about the myth is its character of a retrospective, ever-present, live actuality. It is to the native neither a fictitious story, nor an account of a dead past; it is a statement of a bigger reality still partially alive. It is alive in that its precedent, its law, its moral, still rule the social life of the natives. (p. 127)

Every group has different ideas about their own identity, their position in society and nature, and how the universe came into being. This is what is meant by ‘world view’ by Alan Dundes (1975:226). The world view is concealed in folklore, especially in myths and rituals. It leads to the formulation of cultural cohesion which can also be termed as the precondition for social integration. As termed by Ricoeur (1967) myth is synonymous with social imagination. World view lies hidden in different groups in different genres.
Mythologies have been analyzed by comparing everything from language development, psychological aspects of the human subconscious, and environmental and historical factors that may have led to the origin of the myth. Some believe that the true meaning of various myths can only be discovered by considering the myth in the specific aspects of the different contexts, under which it was developed; that the most significant aspect of myth is the narrative and its effects on the populace rather than the actual truth of the story; because it partakes both the temporary dimensions of language i.e. diachronic and synchronic.

The most dominating function of myth is psychological. When Alan Dundes (1987) says that ‘the content of folklore ... ... is largely unconscious it is suggested that folklore aspect represent id, not ego, for the most part. The hidden feelings of an individual finds reflected in the ‘collective consciousness’ through the myths. Collective consciousness refers to an intellectual position strikingly similar to the psychic unity. (Dundes, 1987).

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) considering myth as symbolic communication put forward the idea that psychoanalytical perspective on myth is unavoidable. Myths were increasingly seen as expression of needs in the human psyche. He is mainly interested in myths as the expression of sexual anxiety and conflict.

For Carl Jung (1857-1961) Myth making is one of the ways the unconscious part of our psyche expresses itself, a way in which the collective unconscious strives to become conscious. Such thoughts give rise to archetypal patterns. Because Jung believes that an individual possesses three layers of consciousness viz. conscious, unconscious and collective consciousness. Out of which collective consciousness reflects the highest potentialities of personhood. Jung believed that the collective
unconscious expressed itself in certain archetypes for its "memory structure." The archetypes are the building blocks of myths in a society. The archetypal patterns or images are universal motifs that come from collective consciousness and are the basic content of religions and mythologies. They emerge in individuals through dreams and visions. The collective consciousness is inherited not acquired. This makes myth so important to Jung. Jung saw myths and its meaning within the individual psyche. According to him man is on a quest towards self realisation. Myth functions as a clue to process. It emerged from the unconscious and contained archaic truth about our existence. Because for him primitive mentality experiences myth which are the origin revelations of pre-conscious psyche. Jung’s interpretation of self directs to search for self. One of the myths on the Brahmaputra is analysed in the light of Jungian model of the analysis of myths.

The contribution of Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) projects the social function of myths. While concentrating on the social phenomena of myth Malinowski writes that the myths come into play when rites, ceremony or social or moral rules demand justification. He considers myth as a social phenomenon. They explain phenomena of the physical world. Myths are meant to express, enhance and codify beliefs. When people share a mythology or a body of myths, the cohesiveness of the society is explicit because they have a common purpose in life. Though myths are interpreted with different levels of meanings it ultimately suggests an attachment with the group. These include the approach as a belief system, as disguised history, as disguised philosophy or allegory, as fables illustrating moral truth, as allegories of natural events, as pre-scientific explanation, as charters of custom, institution or beliefs, as religious power or metaphor for the unknown, as expression of religious rituals, as example
of psychological archetype, as story, as embodying irreconcilable structural conflict in social system etc.

Bronislaw Malinowski argues that myth is not symbolic but a direct expression of its subject matter. Malinowski’s approach to myth is consistent with the notion of a symbolic ordering of the world which cuts across many aspects of natural, social and supernatural reality. Branislaw Malinowski is considered a functionalist because he insisted that myths serve as charters for social action. Many other myth scholars also discuss this aspect of myths. Anthropologist and folklorist Paul Radin considers myth distinctive because of its function and implications as determined by certain individual society members. The myth-makers then explain symbolically how to live. The explanatory theme often is so completely dominant that everything else becomes subordinated to it. Myths serve to explain and encourage worldview and good action within society. Many other theorists of myth concur that it has a functional dimension. Myth is a way of making meaning.

It was Joseph Campbell (1991) who deliberates four functions of mythology, firstly, mystical i.e. to evoke the individual a sense of grateful, affirmative awe before monstrous mystery that is existence; the secondly, cosmological, i.e. to present an image of the universe eliciting the experience of awe. The third function termed as sociological tells of a mythological order which validates and maintains a sociological system. The fourth function according to Campbell is psychological. One of the remarkable statements given by Campbell in his seminal book ‘The Power of Myth’ (1991) is that ‘myths are clues to the spiritual potentialities of human life’. The myth carries individuals through different stages of life and the social order that he lives in. Campbell puts importance in ‘experience of meaning’. He writes, ‘Myth helps you to put your minds in
touch with the experience of being alive. It tells you what the experience is’ (p.5). The myths on the Brahmaputra reinforce the idea of spirituality.

For Claude Levi Strauss (1908-2009) all mythology is dialectic in its attempt to make cognitive sense out of the chaotic data provided by nature. He believed that there is some order in the universe and the universe is not a chaos. Myth functions like a language with the differentiation between langue (meaning language) and parole (meaning speech) and it is made up of constituent units also known as mythemes. According to him, the study of the various versions of myths only provides a general pattern or sequence. He sought meaning in both structures and content of the myths. The nature-culture contrast is invariably. In order to exemplify the concept the value of time and temporal sequence in mythic narrative cannot be ignored. Timelessness is what myths themselves signify. The very idea of the timelessness of myth satisfies human finitude. The issue of human finitude gives urgency to the sense of meaning. J.F. Bierle in his *Living Myths: How Myths Gives Meaning to Human Experience* observes:

> Myths can act to invest our lives- our existence with meaning. They give us our identity in the cosmos or perspectives of our place in the entirety of our things. (1999: 6) (Ballantine Publishing Group/United Staes)

In the process of meaning making about the difficulties and sorrows of life myths provide models of transcendence. The myths remind us well that our existence and its meaning are with, in and through others. The process of becoming cannot take place in isolation. Dr. Kishore Jadav (1998) commented on how myths relate paradigmatic events, conditions and deeds of gods or superhuman beings that are outside the ordinary human life and yet basic to it.
Myth mirrors social memory. Myth conveys knowledge accrued over generations. And hence it is socially important. The way it is told signifies sharing a sense of collective importance. William G Dotty in *Myth a Handbook* (2004:3) opines that myths serve as stand-in for serious truths. Doty also opines:

> We find reflected in the study of myths many issues of what a culture considers to be appropriate behaviours and models of selfhood as well as models of social and political ways of existing. Considering myth as purely imaginative or creative projection of social well being, therefore short-circuits important mythical potentials for social evolution and individual and cultural development. (2004:3)

Percy S. Cohen quotes Malinowski on the validity and credulity of myth:

> ... myths are not really not errors; they are certainly not like the errors in which Science abounds: for they always contain references to some objects and events which could possibly exist and occur.... They are not errors, for their truth, for those who accept them, is preserved for eternity.

Myth occupies a major dimension in the interpretation of oral literature. The value of myth derives from its quality of performance which binds past, present and future together. Oral literature runs through the blood of the folk. “Myth originally meant speech or word. (page- 9/ Myth/ Laurence Coupe). Though the word ‘myth’ is thought as stories, they can also broadly be taken as belief or credo. Myths are also thought to be connected with rituals. Jane Harrison (1963 :331) ( Themis: A Study of Social Origin of Greek Religion, 2nd edition, Cambridge/ 1st ed 1912) who argued that myths are connected with rites, urged that ‘it would be convenient if the use of the word myth could be confined to such sequence, such stories as are involved in rites.
The study of mythologies reflects the ways our society has answered such questions. We find reflected in the study of myths many issues of what a culture considers to be appropriate behavior and models of selfhood as well as models of social and political ways of existing.

4.1.5 Construction of Selfhood and Identity through Myth

The study of mythologies reflects the ways the societies have answered questions about life and the cosmos. Myth defines communities and connects them to their territory both temporally and spatially. The space and the time travelled by the myths on the Brahmaputra assert people’s belief which is reflected through the rituals performed on its bank during specific days of the year. Hence, exploration of the myth is a journey from unfamiliar to familiar issues related to life. Issues connected with existence as well as identity are found to be reflected in various myths. Scholars of different disciplines recognise cultural stories across time and have studied how such stories are surrounded with social stipulations. Laurence Coupe (1997) quoting Warner (1994) asserts that myth offers a lens which can be used to see human identity in its social and cultural context. The purpose of the myths is to situate and thereby to legitimate those stories in a given socio-cultural context. It points to an approach where the members of a community view their identity through common interpretation of the community’s past. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence O Ranger in their seminal book *The Invention of Tradition* (2003) place special focus on how myths and symbols play into a community’s perception of its identity and past.

While analyzing myth as telling identities here is an attempt to analyse myth as discourse that can be employed in the construction of communal identity. David Me Crome has argued the study of communal
identity is more often concerned with the manner in which identities are forged and reproduced across time and space and in what way does a national identity maintains temporal continuity, exerting its fierce gravitational pull from generation to generation. Memory, rather collective memory helps to functions as a link to capture the imagination of people in continuing the temporal aspect of identity (1998). The ability of adaptability and association is the key factor to connect an individual or a community to its heritage and injecting the sense of belonging. Identity being a pluralistic concept encompasses heredity, habits, cultural practices, occupation, experience in different social context, memories, relationship with other members of the society etc. Phenomenological accounts can never be denied in determining identity of people living in this world. To quote the famous archaeologist Clair Lyons (2000) it is through artworks, religious icons, monuments, literary manuscripts, traditional myths and rituals hold the power to create a profound sense of belonging.

Eric Caspo writes 'Mythology was an especially important figure in the discourse of self and other. It is rightly asserted that the study of mythology explores the mental powers of men of different races, in terms of agility, rationality, the capacity to rise above superstitions, see truth, give direction, provide leaders. It was Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) who provides strong justification in favour of the study of myth. Herder had in fact anticipating in asserting the historical unity of all mankind. According to him the historical study of poetry, language, and folk mythology is the key to the reconstruction and recovery of the national psyche in its origin and pure form.

In order to make an attempt to project the concept of identity, culture plays an important role in the development and functioning of the psyche. Folk narratives being the umbrella term to include myth play an
important role in all cultures. They encompass all genres of oral literature initially and written ones later. They are the more potent means of transmitting perception, values and attitudes from generation to generation. This journey proves to be a discourse to translate a sense of affiliation among the members of the same group. Identity takes shape in the stories we tell about ourselves. They are narratives that we construct as we orient our present choices and actions in the light of our imagined futures and versions of our own past that fits with these projects. Narrative has become a favored concept among the practitioners of human science who study collectivities. The stories that the individuals create often strike variations upon a repertoire of socially available narratives that in turn legitimate the community and guarantee its existence.

4.1.6 Communicative Aspect

All societies of the world create myth and keep it alive by retelling it through both orality and written records. Myth transmits a traditional culture specific understanding of the world. When Eric Caspo visualises myth as a function of social ideology in narrative form the focus is on the communicative aspect of myth. The communication is found to have taken place through three avenues viz. Narratives, Symbols and rituals establishing relationship between three aspects viz. macrocosm (universe), mesocosm (society) and microcosm (human). Binding the people of a community with one line of thinking through common symbols, narrative and rituals attains great concern in the study of Indian Mythology. Devdutt Pattanaik in his book *Indian Mythology: Tales, Symbols And Rituals From The Heart Of The Subcontinent* (2003) discussed in detail the use of symbols, narratives and rituals as exploration of the common identifying factors of a society.
This very concept connects myth with the selfhood of the people who share a common geo-physical setting. A culture's mythology is a powerful tool for psychology, casting light on the culture's shared unconscious. There is no better way to understand a culture deeply than to know and appreciate its mythos, its stories, and its dreams. Myth carries with it a promise of another mode of existence entirely, to be realized beyond the concerned socio-cultural milieu. The implication of hierarchy and horizon through myths generates the sense of sharing some values and ideas of a social life. The myths on the Brahmaputra store values attached to the dignity of Assamese life as being nourished by the descendents of a divine power i.e. the Brahma. D.W. Winnicott (1896-1971), an English psychiatrist and psychoanalyst stresses that myths propagate a world with personal meaning out of elements from the external world to deal with much wider world. Winnicott justifies that just as a child clings to a physical object for example a teddy bear to create a safe world that enables the child to explore with confidence the outside world. In the same way the adult recognizes that the myth is not reality yet adheres to it as if it were. Myth as make-belief serves as a guide to the world rather than as depiction of the world.

To most people myths are stories passed orally from one person to another, from generation to generation. Manoj Das in his *Myths, Legends, Concepts and Literary Antiquities of India* (2009) rightly mentions that the myths, of course, had to go through both subtle and gross reorientations to suit different levels of understanding. Mythology is an important figure in the discourse of self and other.

... to generation, telling of some hero or of some God, some formulation of an abstract idea such as creation. Some of these became written records and so survive for us to know them and such is their power that, despite disappearance of their culture that gave
rise to them, modern literature abounds with illusions and direct references to those marvellous tales, many of which are still endlessly retold.(2007:7)

4.2. River Based Mythology, Epic and Puran

The flow of the rivers has amazed people from time immemorial. Innumerable folk narratives are found to have existed around the rivers of the world. India is no exception. The Ganges, the Godavari, the Saraswati, the Mahanadi, the Yamuna and many other Indian rivers are celebrated in mythology. In this connection the physical geographer Nick Middleton’s (1960-), comment is worth mentioning. He states that rivers have influenced innumerable aspects of culture through the ages, generating both myths and hydro-energy. Flow, freedom and change are the essence of a river. Embracing the essential mysteries of nature, rivers can embody the pursuit of wisdom. People on its bank love to make meaning out of their acquaintance with the rivers. Stories are created, myths are formed. Riverine mythologies tell about sincere veneration towards the rivers by the people on its bank.

4.2.1 Myths on the Brhmaputra

Ancient Indian texts Puranas record mythical stories around the birth of many Indian rivers including the Brahmaputra. These myths signify the sense of divinity attached to the rivers. Moreover, legends as well as folktales are also found concerned around the different aspects of the river. As observed by Tiziana Baldizzone and Gianni Baldizzone (2002) the Brahmaputra is a river “with many stories to tell: stories about the men who came to search for and discover this river. About armies who crossed. About pilgrims who purified themselves in its waters. About the gods who quarrelled on its banks. About savage tribes and tea pioneers. About the ashes of the dead...” Such oral narratives make meaning for the
community in which they survive. All cultures and religions have sacred stories that the common sense of people of other cultures recognise as peculiar with the particular culture. Carl Jung considered myth as well as other narratives to be the products of collective consciousness.

The chapter explores the traditional narratives like myths and legends connected with the Brahmaputra. The connection between the study of myth and the identity of Assamese is validated by the urge to know about the mysterious queries of the past which is supported by the study of myth. A study into ancient Hindu scriptures reveals that the holiness attached with the river owes its origin to the mythological stories attached with the river. Among them the prominent are the ones found in Kalika Purana. Legends around the river are also found to have existed in a few history books on Assam. Kalika Purana, one of the 18 puranas of ancient Hindu religious text, records mythical stories regarding the birth of the Brahmaputra River. Kalika Purana is a historical document where elaborate descriptions are found about the hills, mountains and the rivers of the North eastern part of India. Mythological stories other than those of the Kalika Purana are also found to have existed in some other texts. The association of the myth with the name of the river justifies the belief that has been fascinating the minds of people in India from time immemorial. It is noteworthy that myth and legend do not seem to wither under the impact of the modern life. Myths and legends always tend to search for the unknown.

The myths of the Brahmaputra are studied to explore how the narrative about our past contributes in constructing selfhood of the Assamese people. The Brahmaputra is the life line for the dwellers of its bank. Hence, the projection of the river in ancient religious discourse bears meaningful connotation in the consequent days. Myth becomes a link for the perception of the past and the understanding of the present. Myths thus
signify how man adjusts with the natural environment exploring the creative activities of past and present. Past reflected in memory and future in imagination oscillates to construct an identity of the self. Oral tradition plays major role in the process of oscillation which significantly reinforces the collective identification of the narratives.

Collective identification requires collective memory. Collective memory is framed socially. Sharing memories of particular happenings or events of the past gives rise to the feelings of belonging to a particular space. As such memory is anchored in common experience. Every individual memory constitutes itself in communication with others. Communicating oral history in the form of oral narratives helps the members to recognise the commonality among themselves. The memory communicates and establishes a link among the members of the concerned group. The study of myths communicates the thought and ideas about the formation of the world as perceived in the earlier period. Whether the perspective provided by the myths is scientifically explainable or not is also an important area to be studied. The same will be analysed in connection to the myths on the Brahmaputra.

While searching for myths in connection to the Brahmaputra it is found that explanation for the origin of the natural elements like rivers and mountains is found in the form of folk narratives in many Indian texts especially in the Puranas. The narratives describe tales where communication takes place between gods and humans. The symbolic value of the narratives projects the primitive understanding about the formation of the world. The riverine mythology assumed anthropomorphic forms, historical associations and a complex intellectual and cultural process. Hence, rivers being ubiquitous and highly visible draw the attention of the imagination of people since time immemorial.

Rivers are ubiquitous and highly visible. The people living on the banks of the rivers want to claim the ownership in order to establish a
relationship with the river. Therefore, human form is given to the rivers. Association is made with legendary stories. Colourful stories of riverine mythologies assumed anthropomorphic forms, historical associations and a complex intellectual and cultural process sustain the visual and spiritual impact of the rivers. Myths are, in the words of Laurence Coupe, ‘founding narratives’ those essential structures of thought which cannot be credited to any individual but rather belong to the whole community.

The myths connected with the birth of the Brahmaputra narrate the story of its birth, the notion of holiness and the origin of the inhabitation on the bank of the river. Parker and Stanton (2003) while delineating the purpose of myths in their seminal book Mythologies: Myths, Legends and Fantasies observe:

Some myths are etiological explaining the range of phenomena in the world. ... ... How did this river come to rise in just this spot. ... but these myths still offer a truth of the imagination, if not the scientific that can be weighed and calculated and predicted. (2003:10)

People on its bank feel attached to the natural environment due to the immense contribution of the river to their lives. It evokes a gamut of emotions: emotions of awe, wonder, reverence, fear and love. Moreover, the acceptance of the beliefs associated with the river by the inhabitants on its bank leads to a shared mindset among them. Identification of oneself as a part of the collective mindset is the result of the acceptance of the beliefs which are communicated and handed down to each succeeding generations. Thus man through ages receives a larger and a more complex store of memories. The myths of a society express in elaborate rather in decorative form this storehouse of memories. J.F. Berlein (1991) identifies six critical elements of human condition as set out by the French existentialist philosopher Paul Ricour to analyse how myth speaks to the people of the
community in which the myths are found to have existed. These are our finitude, our estrangement from God, our process of becoming and transcendence, the paradox of freedom and burden of human choice, our existence with, in, and through others and ultimately our identity and participation.

The myths of the Brahmaputra communicate what the members of the community want to know about their origin. The sense of divine blessedness is mirrored through the narrated events. J.F. Berlein (1994) in his Preface to Parallel Myths observes that “myth is an eternal mirror in which we see ourselves. Myth has something to say to everyone, as it has something to say about everyone: it is everywhere and we only need to recognise it.... It is history of pre-history”.

The Brahmaputra has gained importance as one of the study oriented rivers in India. It engulfed the minds of those who create myths and mythical stories about this land. As mentioned out of the ancient texts Kalika Purana describes myths about the birth of the Brahmaputra and its flow through this part of the world. The Assamese translated version of the Purana makes it possible for the common people to read these myths and to get to know about how their past is imagined and constructed. There are other sources like burajis and historical fiction which depict legends connected with the river. Kalika Purana is one of the eighteen Puranas of Indian ancient literatures written in the tenth century. The earliest reference to the mythology is found in the copper plate grant of King Indrapala (c.1030-1055). Here the Louhitya i.e. the Brahmaputra is described as being born of the body of Brahma and the story of Parasurama letting out of the waters of Louhitya is mentioned. The Kalika Purana records series of stories connected with the emergence of the Brahmaputra. The narrations are the descriptions of Lord Shiva to Bhairava about the holiness of Kamrupa.
The titles given to the myths are translated from the titles given in the text of *Kalika Puran*.

**4.2.1.a Coronation of the Matted Hair**

This myth with the theme of Coronation of the Matted Hair is found in 77th chapter of the *Kalika Purana*. The myth is described below:

It was believed that during the marriage of Lord Shiva and Parvati the coronation of Shiva’s matted hair (*jata*) was performed in the holy land of Kamarupa. The amount of water used for the purpose formed a huge water body known as ‘*Joto Doiba*’ or ‘*Jotoda*’. *Jotoda* is another name for the Brahmaputra. Consumption of water from this river leads to the fortune of Nandi, the bull and Shiva’s vehicle. People are also blessed with Lord Shiva and are also destined to be rewarded with long life.

The 81st, 82nd and 83rd chapters of *Kalika Purana* record three interconnected myths in connection with the birth and flow of the Brahmaputra. The myth in 81st chapter follows:

The holiness of the large number of pilgrimage in the land of Kamarupa attracted numerous groups of people who were so blessed that they directly reached heaven after their death posing a threat for *Yamraj* (the lord of the Dead). He approached Brahma and Vishnu for a solution. They later requested Lord Shiva to hide the holy places in Kamarupa. Having arrived in Kamarupa Lord Shiva asked the goddess *Ugratora* to remove the holy places from this land. *Vasistha* got angry. The land of Kamarupa lost all its holiness in the curse of *Vasistha*. To get back the glory of the land Brahma created his watery son Brahmaputra that hides all the holy places. Those who are not aware of such holy places will be blessed with a dip in the Brahmaputra.
4.2.1.b The Birth of the Brahmaputra

According to the myth found in the 82nd chapter the birth of the Brahmaputra is a divine plan of Lord Brahma to hide the existing holy places of Kamarupa. As far as the analysis of myth is concerned the Shantanu-Amogha myth is taken up in the later part of the same chapter. The myth follows:

Shantanu, a famous ancient sage began a long meditation in the Ashrama (heritage) of Marjyada (name of a mountain) in Kailash Manasarovar area along with his beautiful wife Amogha. One day when Shantanu was away to bring flowers as well as fruits for themselves Kamalajoni i.e. Lord Brahma enters into their hermitage. Lord Brahma became enchanted by the beauty of Amogha and requested her to make love with him. Lord Brahma felt Amogha was the right person to bring forth his own son whom he wanted to create for the benefit of humanity. But Amogha did not accept Brahma’s proposal. However, by that time Lord Brahma had become so excited that his semen discharged at that place. When Shantanu came to know about this, he inseminated Brhma’s semen in the womb of Amogha. Subsequently, Amogha gave birth to a son and he was called Brahmaputra Shantanu then placed him in the midst of four mountains, the Kailash, Gandhamadana, Jarudhi, and Sambaka. The son assumed the form of a large mass of water where the Gods and heavenly maidens would have their bath. Deriving from this myth, the Brahmaputra is considered a male river even today. He is the most important among the seven male rivers in the country. The tank near the ashrama of sage Shantanu is known as the Brahmakunda. (Part of a divine plan/ fundamental human nature/ a resolution/ creation through love./ divinity is implies rather than stated)
4.2.1.c Matricide of Parasurama

The other one deals with the saga of Parasurama.

One day Renuka, mother of Parasuram, went to fetch water. While returning she felt drawn towards king Chitranatha who was playing with celestial nymphs in the water. Consequently, she was late in returning to the ashram. Jamadagni, her husband, was worried over her delay as it was getting late for the midday worship. On perceiving through his divine power the reason of her delay, Jamadagni was so enraged that on her arrival he asked his sons to kill her. None of the six sons except Parasuram, the fifth one could oblige. He immediately beheaded his mother. The handle of the axe got stuck into his hand. Jamadagni ordered him to ask for boon. Parasuram asked for seven boons. Out of these three important ones are rebirth of the mother, ignorance of the mother about matricide and his liberation from the sin of matricide. Consequently, Renuka came to life as if she was asleep. However, this did not wipe out his sins. He was told that the only way to wash off his sins was by taking a dip in the Brahma kunda. Only then the axe stuck to his hand would drop. Parasuram immediately came to Brahma Kunda and took bath. The axe dropped from his hand. Considering the holiness of the Brahmakunda Parasurama cleared the edge of Braham so that the water flows for the benefit of humanity. The Kalika Purana states that a mere bath in the Kunda leads to emancipation.

The same story narrated above is also found in the Sristikhand of the Padma Purana. As the mention of the river as Brahmaputra is not found in the earliest references it is believed that the name Brahmaputra is thus the product of the mythology in Kalika Purana. Earlier the river is mostly named as Louhitya. There is a deliberate attempt on the part of Kalika
Purana to raise the status and sanctity of certain rivers and places of ancient Kamarupa.

4.2.1. d Dowry to Shiva

Another myth found to assign holiness to the river is connected to Lord Shiva. The myth says that the Kamrupa region through which the river runs was gifted to Lord Shiva as dowry by Parvati’s (Shiva’s consort) father Hemantaraj at the time of their marriage. The land was very dear to both Shiva and Parvati. The Bhasmachal hillock was the entertaining ground for them. The holiness of the river attracted the other gods too. They too established their residence on the bank of the river resulting in the institution of holy places like Kamakhya, Ashwaklanta, Monikorneswar, Umananda etc. Belief prevails that meeting with death amidst these holy places will lead to salvation. (This myth becomes a discourse to feel elevated for being the inhabitants of the bank of the river).

4.2.1. e Ganga Brahmaputra Confluence

Puranas record another myth regarding the river’s journey through the plains till its meeting point in the ocean. The myth is as follows:

The southern part of the remote areas of the Himalayas was reigned by Himavat and the eastern part by Brahma. They were hostile to each other. Ganga, daughter to Himavat and Brahmaputra, son of Brahma fell in love. The knowledge of the fact made Himavat angry resulting in the erection of an ice wall between the two regions. Himavat’s decision kept them apart. Attempting for suicide Ganga rushed to the plains leading to the south sea. Brahmaputra too failed to find any way moved its journey towards plains. After traversing long way they again meet at the point of emersion in the ocean. (the vigour of the river/ the land being a congenial place to live/ to
discover greater depth of the meaning of life/ feeling rich because of the divine attachment).

4.2.1.f Vasistha’s Anger

The 81st chapter of the Kalika Purana and the Kamakhyatantra documents a precautionary myth to save people from the heavy current of the river.

According to the myth the sage, Vasistha was meditating on Shiva on Sandhyachala hills. Shiva’s host exasperated at Vasistha’s prolonged presence, wished to expel him from Kamarupa and one of them, Ugratara, became so bold as to lay her hands on the sage. Vasistha pronounced a curse not merely on Ugratara, but also on the Lord of Destruction himself because he had been so eager to see him leave. Brahma, having to put the curse into effect, caused the descent of the Brahmaputra by the strokes of Parasurama’s axe, which washed off all sacred places so that it became impossible to recognise individual tirthas (holy place). Anyone desiring to earn merit in an individual place of pilgrimage had to bath in the Brahmaputra with the thought of that tirtha (holy place) in mind. However, the river also washed off Vasistha’s Ashram as well as the wherewithal of the worship. It enraged the sage who pronounced a curse upon it, saying that henceforth it would be a carrier of human effluents and thus impure. When Brahmaputra Deva pleaded for pardon, sage Vasistha relented and said that out of the entire year the river would attain sanctity on a single day, when those who bathe in it would acquire redemption. That auspicious day is Ashokastami or Suklastami (8th day of the full Moon in the month of Chaitra, (March-April)).
There may be other narratives in the form of myths scattered in some other texts or in the orally transmitted forms in certain areas which are not visited. The mythological narratives that are studied here reflect the fact that the river has occupied a secured as well as sacred place in the hearts of the people living on its bank. Though no concrete record is found regarding the age from which the river is known as ‘Brahmaputra’, the myths celebrate what is imagined in the pre scientific era about the process of the emergence of the river which has attracted numerous races to its bank.

4.2.2 Analysis of the Brahmaputra Myth

Unlike the other theorists on myth, Claude Levi Strauss, Franz Boas and Dell Hymes s a structural approach to myth and used the deductive method for analysing myths. According to Levi Strauss myth is an instance of thinking per se, modern or primitive, because it classifies phenomena. It leads to the apprehension of conceiving myth synchronically. Now the question comes how the myths can be understood removing the diachronic aspect in order to find the timeless core of myth so as to link it to the collective conscience. Diachronic element in a myth is a factor which makes it possible to tell the myth. As Levi Strauss has observed that the diachronic element is simply a technical expedition in the process of conveying the message of which it forms no integral part. The myths connected with the Brahmaputra are a part of social document providing ecological significance. Though the myths are based on totally different concept and plane of time they relate the paradigmatic events and conditions in a symbolic way. Hence, the myths, the timeless stories can be told in different forms because they are symbolic. The effect of this symbolic appeal organises the members of the community to think of a common origin.
Both myths and science offer explanations of the cosmos. A key difference is that information about the universe presented through myths is not testable whereas the scientific experimentation is designed to be tested repeatedly. While scientific experiment depends on cumulative, frequently updated knowledge myth is based on passed down narratives and beliefs. Myths may change over time, particularly after the contact with other cultures, but they do not change and adapt to new periods and technological developments in the same as science does. The readers as well as the tradition bearer of myths on the Brahmaputra, distant in time and space from the creator, are equipped with the timeless aspect of the myths especially from the fact that the river is named after the narrative discourse of the myth.

To ground into a specific landscape in order to identify ourselves justifies the study of the myths on the Brahmaputra. The myths imply the significance of the place which is blessed with the arrival of various races of people throughout the different eras of history. Specifically, regional identity arises in part out of a collective or shared sense of belonging: a sense which is influenced by local landscape, beliefs, and stories and crucially, by local history and a sense of belonging in the landscape.

The narratives of the myths are intimately connected to the landscape. The way in which we narrate our mythic and national past through the stories we create within and about the landscape fundamentally influences the production of on the Brahmaputra. It also perceives the idea of identification through participation.

While considering the underlying system of meaning and the message of the myth of the Brahmaputra it can be observed that the emergence of the river generates a habitable place holy and divine in nature. The age old civilisation on the bank of the river proves to be a testimony for the same. That Parashurama washed away his sins by the
waters of the Brahmakunda is suggestive of the holiness conferred on the river thereby thematising the reflective consciousness on which it rests.

Myths connected with the river serve as a discourse to provide the sense that all who happen to be the inhabitants on this part of the world are endowed with the bliss of the Brahmputra. The myths communicate the commonality of the members of its groups. Heritage is communicated through myths. In the words of Donald Mills, 'myths are cultural inheritance; a tradition handed down from one generation to other and therefore invested with communal values. This explains the close association between community and its mythology.' Immense studies and theories are found in connection with the credibility of myth as explaining the past of a group of people. Robert A Segal comments that 'while myth, while still an explanation of the world, is now taken as an explanation of its own kind, not a scientific explanation in mythic guise. The issue is therefore not the scientific credibility of myth but the compatibility of myth with science.' (p. 13). However, it cannot be denied that the products of collective memories in any form are evidence for the past resource of present.

As observed by Anamaria Dutceac Segesten (2011) 'the construction process of collective identities is partly supported by myths.' Myths are understood as narratives that illustrate the belief of the community to itself. While quoting Somers (1994) Segetan writes:

People construct identities by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories; people make sense of what has happened and is happening to them by attempting to assemble or in some way integrate these happenings within one or more narratives;... people are guided to act in certain ways, and not others, on the basis of the projections, expectations and memories derived from a multiplicity but ultimately limited repertoire of available social, public and cultural narratives. (2011:73)
Myth can be studied as the loci of identity construction. While personifying innate objects and natural forces the myths codify people’s attachment to natural phenomena. They work by demonstrating order. To bring the powerful world of preternatural forces into somewhat manageable situation with the experienced world the members of a community share their connection with the experiences decoded from the myths.

Myths are carried by the members of a community generation after generation. It bears different functions. For Joseph Campbell the study of myths is an exploration of the consciousness. Identity takes shape in the stories we tell about ourselves. They are narratives that we construct as we orient our present choices and actions in the light of our imagined futures and versions of our own past that fits with these projects. Narrative has become a favoured concept among the practitioners of human science who study collectivities. The stories that the individuals create often strike variations upon a repertoire of socially available narratives that in turn legitimate the community and guarantee its existence.

While describing the Shantanu-Amogha myth narration is found about the true intention of the Creator as ‘devakaryarthatasidhaye’ meaning to fulfill the desire of the gods. It was as if gods wanted to establish civilisation in this holy land for which the flow of water bodies is the first and foremost necessity. It accelerates the psychological mechanism capable of fostering in describing ourselves in a location where we live. This particular myth deals with mighty force of creation. Though its source is not an easily navigable, the myths signify the value of the fertile and congenial banks of the river for inhabitation. Numerous human races have found to have existed in this land throughout the ages. The banks of the Brahmaputra have a multiplicity of ethnic entities living among them since the prehistoric times. R.M. Nath in his *The Background of Assamese*
Culture comments that the first race of people to inhabit the province now known as Assam was the Austro Asiatics or the Austrics. From then on the land is inhabited by various groups of people such as the Negroids, the Kiratas, the Bodos, the Dravidians and the Aryans, the Asuras, the Naraka Dynasty, the Varmana Dynasty the Mlecha dynasty, the Pala dynasty, the Kacharis, the Tepperahs, the Mikirs, Garos and Laloongs, Pators and the Sylhetties. Finally, the Ahoms established their rules that continued for long six hundred years. The history of Assam was made and unmade on the bank of this river during the six hundred years of the Ahom rule and the river was utilized both for the defensive and offensive purposes.

4.2.2.a Jung’s Psychoanalytical Approach

To study myth in search of self from the psycho analytical perspective Carl Jung’s mythic model is used to analyse the myth related to the birth of the Brahmaputra. Carl Jung was interested in searching for the presence of the ego through the myths of a community. He identifies four main archetypes in the narration of a story. These archetypal images are the universal motifs that are arisen from the collective consciousness of a community. Jung felt that to act with the collective consciousness implies to be at one with oneself and the cosmos. This helps in experiencing of the self as the regulating centre of the psyche. The archetypes derived from the narratives of the myths determine the activities of the psyche. The four archetypes in Jung’s mythic model are the ego, the conscious mind, the shadow, the unconscious aspect of the psyche, the anima, the opposite of either man or woman and lastly the self, the central archetype, in the words of Laurence Coupe the psychological integration. Though the story comes into existence collectively it is realised at these four individual levels.

The Shantanu-Amogha myth of the birth of the Brahmaputra is fragmented into the four archetypes in the Jungian model. Brahma stands for the ego, Shantanu for the shadow, Amogha, the anima and finally the
Brahmaputra is the self. The ultimate aim is the attainment of the self. The purpose of the narrative is borne by the ego i.e. Brahma who made a divine plan for incorporating a new connotation of identity by the inception of the Brahmaputra. It works in the symbolic level. The river is introduced to the world as a part of a divine design. This particular myth is studied to explore the intersection of myth, history and identity to demonstrate how and why the river is evoked to define the innermost qualities of the Assamese people.

4.2.3 Legends and Folk Epic on the Brahmaputra

The oral narratives on the Brahmaputra are also enriched by legends and epic scattered in different histories of Assam. The popular among them are the legend of Arimatta and the folk epic Beula-Lakhinder. Interestingly, almost three hundred versions of the legend of Arimatta are found to have existed all over Assam. Legends are thought to be true and are set in a time like today. As observed by Dorson (1972:73) Grimm’s definition of legend includes the fact that it is localised, down-to-earth, and has historic validity. Being localised legends are extremely variable. Legends are understood cross-culturally. That very fact validates the numerous version of Arimatta’s legends.

To understand legend Bascom’s definition is considered here. The definition is taken from Birendranath Datta’s Folklore and Historiography (2002):

Legends are prose narratives which, like myths are regarded as true by the narrator and his audience, but they are set in a period considered less remote, when the world was much as it is today. Legends are more secular than sacred, and their principal characters are human. They tell of migrations, wars and victories, deeds of past heroes, chiefs, and kings, and succession of ruling dynasties. In this way they are often the counterparts of written history in verbal tradition. (1981:98)
Timothy R. Tangherlini in 1990 puts forward a practical definition on legend. He defines legend as follows:

Legend, typically, is a short episodic, traditional, highly ecotyped historicized narrative performed in a conversational mode, reflecting on a psychological level a symbolic representation of folk belief and collective experiences and serving as a reaffirmation of commonly held values of the group to whose tradition it belongs.

While concentrating on the functions of legends, Dorson (1972) stresses on the point of educating people, to inform them about an important fact. It is to take arm against the danger within one's cultural environment. The belief and ideology of culture receive priorities in the consideration of legends. A legend is a story which is told as if it were a historical event, rather than as an explanation for something or a symbolic narrative. The legend may or may not be an elaborated version of a historical event.

Grimm Brothers classified legends into four categories viz. etiological and eschatological, historical legend, mythical legends with supernatural forces and religious legends. The legends found around the Brahmaputra fall under the historical and mythical category.

Birendranath Datta (2002) deals with the legends of Arimatta as non-mythological legends and remarks that it 'has remained an enigma' for more than a century now.

4.2.3.a Legend of Arimatta

It is interesting to note that several versions are available about the legend of Arimatta. P C Choudhury (1987) remarks 'a number of traditions centre around Arimatta, and it appears that he was an important ruler. His book The History of Civilisation of the People of Assam to the Twelfth Century A.D. records five versions of Arimatta. While describing the
genealogy of the rulers the tradition of Arimatta is analysed elaborately. All the versions about Arimatta prove that he was an important ruler. Different lines of families are mixed up with the name of Arimatta. The noteworthy point is the birth of Arimatta who is said to have born of the union of a woman with the Brahmaputra. The woman bears different names according to the different versions of the narrative.

On the other hand two different versions are found in S K Bhuyan’s *Kamrupor Buranji*. Accordingly, Pratapsingha, son of Somapala of the Pala Dynasty took bath in the Brahmaputra with his wife, Chandraprabha. The Brahmaputra appeared in Pratapsingha’s dream and asked to sacrifice Chandraprabha to the river. The king was also threatened that if the order is not followed the villages under his kingdom would be inundated. His ministers wished to save the land and they also wanted that the king should sacrifice his wife for the greater benefit. The king did accordingly. Later on Chandraprabha was rescued by a Brahmin in a distant place. She gave birth to a child whose face resembled a fish named ‘Ari’. So he was named Arimatta.

Gunabhiram Barua in his Asam Buranji (1972) records King Arimatta was born as his mother’s secret union with the Brahmaputra. She was a Brahmin lady. The different historians as well as a number of fiction writers record the legend because of the varied account and numerous conflicting legends concerning Arimatta. Different opinions are found regarding his place of reign. His kingdom was stretched from the then eastern part of Assam towards Darrang district. Arimatta became the king of Kamata.

4.2.3.b Folk Epic Beula-Lakhinder

On the other hand, folk epic as conceptualised by Felix J. Onias (1972) are narrative poems in formulaic and ornamental style dealing with the adventures of extraordinary people. Folk epics are not just literary
masterpieces but also an integral part of the world view of people. Folk epics come out through telling tales in oral literature. The folk epic selected for the present study records the immortal love of Beula and Lakhinder. It is scattered in Assam as well as in West Bengal.

The Beula Lakhinder is a popular oral narrative connected with the name of the river. In that tradition of West Bengal Behula is the protagonist in the Manasmangal genre of Bengali medieval epics. It is found that the story of Beula found in both the cultures resemble closely. Accordingly, the king of Champaknagar, Chand Saudagar, a river merchant refused to perform Monosha Puja (to worship the Goddess of snake). With utter rage Goddess Monosha attempting to punish him took away the lives of his six sons by snake biting. He was also brought to abject penury. When he planned to conduct marriage of his youngest son Lakhinder to Beula he was threatened that Lakhinder would be killed on the first night of his marriage. Despite all the precautions, the prophesy turned into reality when Lakhinder was bitten by a snake and died on that very day. But Beula following the tradition of the plight of the snake bitten people took a plantain raft down the Brahmaputra with the dead body of her husband. While moving through the water she witnessed a strange happening in the west most part of Assam named Dhubri district. A washerwoman busy with cloth washing killed her young son and also brought him back to life after finishing her work. Beula approached the washerwoman believing that she (washerwoman) knew the incarnation which could give life back to the dead. She was successful in her mission in befriending the washerwoman and following the steps suggested by her. Triumph met Beula. Lakhinder along with his other six brothers came alive, Chand Saudagar’s property was restored. The river happens to be the agent for realisation. In the Bengali version of the story the river found to have mentioned is the Ganges. The ‘Netai Dhubuni Ghat’ situated in Dhuburi
district of Assam bears the evidence of the commemrisation of this folk epic.

Fig. 4.1: Netai Dhubuni Ghat

Mention can be mentioned of Taziana and Giannai Baldizzone (1998) who observed in *Tales from The River about the Brahmaputra: Tibet, India, Bangladesh* observes:

A river with many stories to tell: stories about the men who came to search for and discover this river. About armies who crossed. About pilgrims who purified themselves in its waters. About the gods who quarrelled on its banks. About savage tribes and tea pioneers. About otters that fish in its waters and tigers of Bengal. About the ashes of the dead, carried along by the Ganges and then deposited by it into the ocean.

Like other parts of the country Kamarupa earlier known as Pragjyotisha and later as Assam, was associated with myths, legends and fables, which to a great extent, contributed to the growth of the
superstructure of the society. (Myths and Legends in Kamarupa: A Historical Perspective by Dr Santo Barman p 27). Evidences are found that the pre historic age of any civilisation is found to have been reconstructed on the basis of myths, legends and fables. Similar stories are found to have been incorporated for the reconstruction of history in general and in particular for the advancement of particular interest suitable to the changed socio-political-religious circumstances.

Many of the famous histories on Kamrup and Assam bear testimony on the role of the Brahmaputra in the lives of the people of Assam. Gunabhiram Barua in his ‘Asom Buranji’ named a race as Brahmaputra Bansa (race). In a number of cases episodes of history are transformed by the people into folk legends. The legend of Arimatta turns out to be the best example of the personification of the river.

Every few yard in the Brahmaputra valley there is a ruin or a site that brings mythological associations with it. One site, which is considered very holy, is the Kamakhya temple, about 2 km from the banks of the Brahmaputra, near Guwahati. It is believed that if one does not go up the steps leading to this temple of feminine power, Shakti, or the consort of Shiva, he will be made to cross the Brahmaputra seven times. That was quite a threat, for the Brahmaputra is not a quiet river that lets you pass easily. In fact, there are stretches that are so dangerous that locals believe a monster lives in those patches. Every year that monster takes a toll on the human life as boats capsize or floods swallow the neighboring areas.

4.2.4 Rituals

All the myths as well as the legends generate divine beliefs towards the river. The people on the bank of the Brahmaputra from time immemorial have been performing rituals in definite period of the year. The rituals vary according to the occasion to which it is attached. The
Rituals that will be discussed here are performed during Ashokastami, the eight day of the bright half of the Moon in the month of Chaitra, the last month of the Assamese calendar. Rituals connected with the celebrations of the cycles of life are discussed in the Chapter III.

Rituals are traditionally followed verbal as well as physical behaviour based on arbitrary rules in a given society. As observed by Dr Kishor Jadav (1998) ‘ritual is quite often described as a symbolic expression of actual social relations, status, or the role of the individual in a society. Rituals are always dependent upon some belief systems. The ritual connected with the celebration of Ashokastami on the banks of the Brahmaputra owes its origin to the myth of Parasurama as described in the earlier part of this chapter. At the same time it also echoes ecological tune connecting nature with humanity.
Rituals play significant psychological role in the life of an individual and also the society. Regular performance of certain rites imposes a discipline on our minds and movements which could not have been otherwise achieved and which improve the quality. Rituals also bring people together at a plane that is different from the mundane plane at which they ordinarily meet. Quoting the archaeologist Claire Lyons (2002) "... through artworks, religious icons, monuments, literary manuscripts, traditional myths and rituals hold the power to create a profound sense of belonging. To take bath on the auspicious day of Suklastami, eighth day of the full moon in the Assamese month of Chaitra (March-April) is a ritual named Ashokastami connected with the holiness of the river. The eighty third chapter of the Kalikapurana expresses that taking bath in the Luhitya, i.e. in the Brahmaputra leads to the salvation of human being. The water level of the mighty river remains comparatively low during those days and hence it is not dangerous for taking a dip into the holy water body. It is also believed that offering the mortals remains of the forefathers into the water of the mighty river frees one from the responsibility towards our forefathers.

The prime function served by performing the celebration is to promote social cohesion through shared, recurrent and positively reinforcing performances. The celebration of Ashokastami draws attention to the necessitated link of nature and humanity. If taken out of the context such celebrations may lose their meanings as well as its role in the course of time. It can be assumed that the belief in the ultimate divine connection and to be one with the eternity happens to be major motivating force in bringing numerous groups of people on the specific day of Ashokastami.

Social cohesion being an indispensible factor for the identification of any community or group of people can be very well achieved with the help of the rituals performed in different ceremonies and festivals.
Practising and preserving rituals is one of the seminal ways to preserve the cultural identity of a given culture. Quoting Catherine M Bell rituals functions to ‘formulate social dimension of religious activity’:

... the formation and maintenance of the social bond that establish human community, the socialisation of the individual through an unconscious appropriation of common values and common categories of knowledge and experience, the channelling and resolution of social conflicts, the periodic renewal or transformation of the social and conceptual structure underlying the community life. (1997:59)

The Brahmaputra turns out to be a Pilgrimage point on the day of Ashokastami. Ashokastami is dedicated to Lord Shiva and Goddess Shakti. Ashoka means the one who removes and protects from hurdles, obstacles and sorrow. The different parts of India celebrate the festivals following various rituals. Ashokastami is celebrated in Eastern Indian states, mainly in Orissa and West Bengal, Tripura including different parts of Assam. The rituals connected with this religious festival found in Assam are the observation of Basanti Puja and having a holy dip into the river Brahmaputra. Ritual bathing is done for purification. Bathing happens to be an integral part in the different rituals conducted in various social functions. In Ashokastami large people throng on the bank of the river to take bath believing that all gods and goddesses flow through the water body of the river on this specific day. Ashokastami is performed in different parts of Assam especially in Guwahati, Dhubri, Sualkuchi etc along the length of the river and Melas (exhibition cum selling point of various good where large number of people gather) are held. The Hindus invest the river with sanctity treating it as instrument through which redemption can be obtained.
Ritual of taking bath in the river bears testimony of long lasting attachment of people on its bank with the water course. Physical cleansing has been a focal element in religious ceremony. The prevalence of this practice suggests a psychological association between bodily purity and moral purity. The value as well as the logic behind the saga of Parasuram runs through the communal psyche of the people on the bank of the Brahmaputra that the water body carries with it the spiritual healing touch for the innumerable races throughout history. To immerse the mortal remain of the departed souls of the family happens to be the major ritual in Ashokastami. The idea that our soul makes the final journey to the heavenly abode connecting our souls to the supreme lord gets manifested in almost all the religions of the world. Water bodies are considered to be the medium to purify our souls as well as our physique. The practice to immerse the mortal remains of someone very close to heart into the stream that leads to ocean satisfies the sense of responsibility towards those who happened to play a major part in their lives. Shouldering the responsibility generation after generation proves to be a strong social act for solidarity and cohesion.

In this connection reference can be made to the fifty eighth chapter of the Kalika Purana where Lord Shiva while advising his disciples about the intensity of acquiring blessings from the different holy places of the Kamarupa informs that one who takes bath in the Louhitya i.e. the Brahmaputra is blessed highly in comparison to many of the holy places.

To sum up, the study of myths and legends provides a traditional culture specific understanding of the world. Such oral narratives need faith not proof. Like all other myths, the myths of Brahmaputra communicate over time and space the divine plan of establishing a human habitation on its bank and thus elevating the concept of selfhood in them with its multifaceted contributions.