CHAPTER VI

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This study is concerned with peoples’ attachment with a river and the folklore and literary genres connected with it. The study area is the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. The study has been conducted with the help of literary sources and field data in connection with people’s feeling of oneness with the river Brahmaputra. It is found that keen research is done in different areas connected with the river. Both oral and written records are found dealing with the role that the river played in the lives on its bank.

As far as the life of the people on the bank of the river is concerned the cultural aspects of people’s life cannot be denied. To see how the experiences gathered in the backdrop of the Brahmaputra gets manifested in many forms of art including narratives both oral and written. The soothing and the rustic environment arouses inquisition regarding its antiquity which resulted in the search of ancient materials. It is found that the gorgeous flow of the river entertained man’s mind in a way that a feeling of identification with the river is expressed consciously or unconsciously in respect of recognising strength, vigour and generosity of the heart. The identification with the river is both environmentally and culturally constructed.

It was sought to study how the inhabitants on the bank of the Brahmaputra build up a strong bond with the river which resulted in fabricating a cultural identity for themselves. The manifestation of the attachment with the self of people is best visible in social and cultural spheres as well. The discussion of the chapters deliberates on the manifestation unfurling layers of projection of the attachment. The approach to evaluate expression of selfhood of the Assamese in the
backdrop of the Brahmaputra is carried through various narratives. Accordingly, the investigation is conducted under theoretical perspectives of selfhood and narratives both oral and written.

The following research areas were selected under study:

Connecting Assamese selfhood to the Brahmaputra provides an environmental identity implying how we orient ourselves with the river. The environmental identity prescribes course of action which are reflected in the folk life of the people living on its banks.

The meaning of the existence of human civilisation as well as the eternal plan to establish a human habitation explicit through the study of the myths provides meaning to the mysterious queries about our past. Myth ensures our identity and participation in this world. The study of the myths helps to find out the central archetype of the selfhood of Assamese people. Assamese consciousness regarding the strength of the river is based on mythological and historic support. The past history serves as an active agent to consider the worth of the river.

That the existence of the Assamese people is understood in terms of the river has been found evident from early period. It is supported by the literature from a very early period till date. Beginning with the Mahabharata, Kalidas’s Raghubansam, Padmapurana, Kalika Purana, Joginitantra to a wide range of Assamese Folk Resource as well as written literature, evidence is found regarding the consideration of the Brahmaputra as a primary indicator of collective identification for the Assamese. Environmentally sustainable behaviour requires a strong community identity. To think of the Assamese as a cultural group, the Brahmaputra turns out to be the self, a self that attracts attention.

The religious self of the Assamese people gets expressed through the attachment of the Brahmaputra. Religious activities are found to have
existed which enjoin group participation resulting in a sense of belongingness to the group.

The research areas have been dealt with theoretical approach in the concerned fields. Selected theoretical application has triggered to the required concepts in different disciplines. Theoretical surveys have been done especially in the chapters on selfhood and myths and legends.

As far as the question of Assamese society is concerned it is wonderful in terms of the vibrant life style, the all-smile people, presence of diverse tribes and cultures. As discussed already the history of Assam dates back to the time of the Aryans and has got its mention in the epics, the Tantric, Vedic and Buddhist Literature. The people of the state are friendly and they belong to different tribes and communities. Keeping in sync with the picturesque landscapes and colorful customs, the Assam People are a perfect example of unity in diversity. The survey into the lives of the people on its bank and in the island and char areas it is felt that without the Brahmaputra Assam would have a different connotation.

Internalisation of group characteristics by an individual happens to be the first step of identification within the corpus of a given community. Experience of being a member of a community is enrooted in the consciousness of every individual. Interface between elements present in the environment and day to day practices connected with it builds habitual behaviour in the society. These experiences are multi dimensional. This very fact is tried to analyse from an interdisciplinary approach in the thesis (see Chapter II). It is found that all these approaches point to the same idea that awareness as well as response of the conscience forms the basis of selfhood as far as the question of cultural context is concerned. Whether it is Philosophical, Psychological, Anthropological or Phenomenological, it is observed that the formation of self is situation based. It is also found that problematic issues are raised to locate the nature of self throughout the
different periods of history. Interplays are found among the concepts of 
perception, continuity, consciousness, motivation, experience, ego, id, 
memories and narratives. Reciprocally, while searching for selfhood the 
attempt is made to connect the above mentioned concepts to elucidate a 
coherent understanding.

As discussed in the II Chapter of the thesis Alan Dundes' (1986) 
concept that a national character is always comprehensible in the 
behavioral pattern of the individuals, it is found the shared experiences 
generate as well as produce genres of creative writing and folklore. The 
involvement of the individuals contributes to the emergence of a wider 
identification for the members of a group. While projecting in a wider 
context, communal identification provides the sense of secured existence.

Looking into the concept of selfhood from a Folklore perspective it 
has been found that the place one lives in is endowed with cultural 
meaning. Consciously or unconsciously one is found to affirm to the way 
how his group members act or behave. (See Chapter II). The natural 
elements are the resources that people have with them to work with. The 
importance of the Brahmaputra in the lives of the people on its bank 
touches the psyche of the people with various connotations. (See Chapter 
III). The Brahmaputra is not merely a body of water for the people living 
on its banks; rather it is a higher reality existent prior to the formation of 
human culture in this part of the world.

As stated earlier following Deaux (1993), social psychologist who 
relates to the conceptual model of multiple dimensions of identity as both 
defined internally by self and externally by others it is found that the river 
as self turns out to be an integrating factor for identification in a context of 
assimilative multiculturalism of the land. In other words, it is only because 
of the eternal flow of the Brahmaputra and its alluvial valley numerous 
groups of people have established their settlement in this land and have
disseminated their own cultural traits. It is stated earlier that the histories are found to record events that show how the river happened to unite people during the time of crisis. These intuitions indicate that the natural environment has value beyond its immediate or potential utility. Personal as well as collective values got attached with the strong elements of nature. What makes our relationship emotional with nature is not the economic value that it provided with. The view provided by Susan Clayton and Susan Optow (2003) has been applied to arrive at a concrete answer to such research questions. They believe that the emotional attachment is due to the connection with identity.

The Brahmaputra occupies an important place among all the rivers of India. It receives utmost attention and care in almost all the spheres of human life be it social or religious or art and culture. Many of the cultural and religious practices connected with it echo the role the river in the in the people on its bank. These practices in turn generate discourses from ancient times till date. Discourses surrounding the water body imply how natural identity and environmental issues have ties directly to our core identity. It is tried to see how significant the river is for collective identity of the Assamese.

There is a reciprocal relationship between the presence of the river and the cultural and historical identification of the people on its bank. Because the self emerges in and is reflective of the society, the approach of different disciplines to selfhood is taken into consideration of the study. (Chapter II). The chapter focuses primarily on the nature of self and how it reacts in an environmental perspective. The nature of the self and what individuals do depends to a large extent on the society within which they live. The discussion on selfhood unveils that seeking knowledge about self can be traced from diverse human activities starting from the sacred narratives to the mundane enterprise. The feeling of affinity and oneness
that was created about the Assamese community as a collective unit was also structured around Assamese culture language, folk songs, religious festivals and other such signifiers of a social group. In all these aspects, the presence of the Brahmaputra is all pervasive.

The discussion involves how the Assamese people felt to be a part of the environment provided by the alluvial valley of the Brahmaputra. The history of the Brahmaputra is the history of Assam. It is found that the habitation in the Brahmaputra valley is uniquely patterned, removed from the bank or in the banks as well as in the char areas of the river. Hence the attachment with the river finds expression from philosophical point of view to elevated art forms. Chapter III of the thesis deliberates on those aspects of the rivers that provide means to live a life. Those aspects finally happen to recognise the Assamese way of living. What is aimed to focus is to establish an affinity between the sense of belongingness and the river.

Besides, char areas encase another form of identity. Another dimension of the study was visiting the char areas. Simultaneous existence with the gorgeous flow and erosion of the river unfolds an uncertain lifestyle at least in connection with the settlement of people. For them their identity moves with the moving river. Their oneness with the Brahmaputra gets expressed through their practices of household as well as crop field maintenance. (see Chapter III). Their preparedness to live with the unpredicted course of the river makes the researcher feels that it is not possible for them to think and act without the unconscious attachment with the river.

The natural flow of the Brahmaputra River is gigantic. During winters too the river does not lose its gorgeous nature. Its magnanimity does not allow one to access the river easily. The river rushes and rushes in torrent. Along with the tributaries on both the sides of the river the Brahmaputra gives to Assam a tremendous water power potential. The
alluvial environment produced as a result of flow of the river turns out to be the source of awe and wonder generating a feeling of divine touch with it. The study covers the myths and legends. It has already been discussed that myth transmits a traditional culture specific understanding of the world. It is found that the purpose of the myths is to situate and thereby to legitimate those stories in a given socio-cultural context. From the ancient Indian Tantric text like *Kalika Purana* and *Joginitantra* a number of myths are found featuring the Brahmaputra. Those myths are explored which suggest the concept of communal identification. Myth is discourse. It communicates. Heritage is communicated through myths. As mentioned earlier Bascom considers myths are prose narratives which, in the society they are told are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the past. Myths are constructed around the natural phenomena that surround us. A desire to know about the past, origin of the universe as well as our existence gives rise to the formulation of the myths irrespective of age and space. Myths and systems of myths have been created by human beings for many reasons for thousands of years. The two distinguishing myths one on the birth of the Brahmaputra and the other on the matricide of Parasuram reveal the origin of human habitation across time and space in this part of the land. It points to an approach where the members of a community view their identity through common interpretation of community’s past. The knowledge of a common past brings the members of a community closer and thereby contributing in the formation of a common sense of selfhood. (see Chapter IV)

A major offshoot of the study of mythology is the linkage of the religious beliefs attached with the river. Different occasions are found to have celebrated on which the river’s sacredness is based. Like other Indian rivers the Brahmaputra receives immense respect and veneration. People feel fortunate to be a part of such sacred habitation. The holiness assigned
to the river is found to owe its origin to numerous creative works like epics, Puranas and Holy Scriptures. The story of the river’s birth as the son of Brahma and its journey through the valley as found in the myth draw people’s mind to become a devotee of the river. The name of the river itself is divine’

The study of the myths helps to find out the central archetype of the selfhood of Assamese people. Assamese consciousness regarding the strength of the river is based on mythological and historic support. The past history serves as an active agent to consider the worth of the river.

Other rites are also found to have existed around the river water. Discussion is made in the Chapter IV of the thesis regarding the performance of rituals on the celebration of Ashokastami. The beliefs connected with these rites show the path of salvation. The river is turned to be the meeting ground for the earthly self and the divine self. It is observed that rituals bring people together at a plane that is different from the mundane plane at which they ordinarily meet.

To achieve social cohesion through the rituals has been understood to be a strong motivating factor for expressing selfhood. Assamese collective self finds its inclination to the collective religious association with the rivers.

As far as the question of expression is concerned the musical expression of the river have been found to have reflected through the songs both folk songs and songs of established lyricists. The multifaceted connotation of life is best expressed considering the self of the river with the inhabitants on its bank. Music making is best understood as an experience of self in process. While delineating on the folk songs it is found that the river bank and the river water captured the heart of people with spontaneous attachment and thereby inspiring to define cultural identity for the inhabitants. Music being the language of the heart appeals
to a collective sentiment of the group in which it has been practiced. Many of the times the songs with the mention of the river provides Geographical identification to the psyche of its inhabitants.

It is observed that the river has been turned into a replica of group identification as reflected in the songs. The songs of Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Dr Bhupen Hazarika attract academic attention through their attachment of human values to the river. The river based identity has been evoked to inspire people at the time of crisis. What Dr Hazarika finds and what he wants the people to carry out is the stamina engendered by the river. The reverence that is generated for the Brahmaputra makes the composer sentimental in inquiring how it can flow incessantly after witnessing the heartbreaking suffering of the people on its bank. The reverence is shown to the river mainly because of its presence from the hoary past thinking that it possesses the quality of understanding the history of the land. The magnanimity of the river bestows strength on the dwellers of its bank. Songs on the Brahmaputra celebrate this aspect in the invigorating songs by Jyotiprasad Agarwala. Songs of Parvati Prasad Barua reveal the glorious cultural landscape which happens to be instrumental for a cultural identity of the people on its bank. The socio-political fabric is endowed with a natural backdrop of pleasant surroundings. In the same way the folksongs on the Brahmaputra elevate joyous and passionate experience with the river. (See Chapter V)

There is a difference of attitude found to have existed between folk songs on Brahmaputra and the songs of the established lyricists. The folk songs mostly celebrate the natural holiness and divinity attached with the river while the songs of the established lyricists invoke the spirit of vigour as well as strength and unity by identifying the Assamese people as the inhabitants of the bank of the Brahmaputra.
The range of Assamese literature that is surveyed in this study is best expressive of the contextualization of the river with the human conscience. The reflection of life experience projected through literary works since ancient times is preoccupied with the cohesion of a strong identification with the river. Mention has been made of David Hume who deliberates over a position of identity and selfhood of an invariable and uninterrupted existence. Immense evidences are found in the literary texts regarding the multiple activities performed in accordance with the river. The natural beauty, the socio-religious space provided by the river, the river’s role in transport and defence and in upholding modernization and urbanization shape and preserve cohesion bringing a fusion of nature and human existence. (Chapter III).

The study has sought to cover a few arenas in connection with the affirmation of a cultural self with the backdrop of the Brahmaputra River. The extensive study on the selected areas unveils a crucial aspect regarding the use of the term ‘Luit’ to mean the river. To address the river as ‘Luit’ is dearer and closer to the sentiment of the Assamese.

As mentioned in different parts of the thesis the term ‘Assamese’ is used with a wide connotation including all who follow Assamese way of life. Being inhabitants of Assam the psyche of Assamese people is inclined to be one with the multifaceted aspect of the river. The study covers discourses representing various periods of history. The elevated feeling of identification with the abundant potentiality of the river has been found to exist since time immemorial. The present work brings out the various facets with regard to the mental association of the Assamese consciousness with the eternal presence of the Brahmaputra.

The thesis embodies materials and ideas connected with the river Brahmaputra. It shows that in the folk life environment can also constitute self identity. The self identity is layered as the environment gets enmeshed
with different levels of society, culture and arts. In sum, folk society cannot be understood in isolation from the environment and society and culture as a whole. The nourishing presence of the River Brahmaputra inspires the folk mind to shape and express their imagination in multifaceted avenues to consider it to be the soul of the Assamese.