CHAPTER I

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Assam is the land of Brahmaputra. The river is the propulsive force behind the making of Assam’s history. The relationship between the people living in Assam and the Brahmaputra River is eternal. As a source of water rivers have always been objects of wonder and practical concern for people everywhere. That the fertile bank of the river has been inviting numerous groups of people from various parts of the world is recorded by history. Since then the land and her people have been experiencing various phases of transformation in respect of rulers, administration along with the ever changing waves of the world. The Assamese nationality is of heterogeneous nature with the different tribal groups, the Bengalis, the Nepalese, people from the other North Eastern states and a few foreigners scattered over here and there. The Assamese mind constructed with the natural set up and the socio-cultural background and tradition is particularly assimilative and patient. This particular nature seems to be a direct corollary of the alluvial atmosphere created by the River Brahmaputra. Studies on the influence of non-human surroundings on humanity open up newer and newer vistas into the human cultural life.

Rivers have been the cradle of all civilization. Man is drawn to the banks of the rivers for their survival. In the book of Genesis, the Geography of humanity’s first home is defined by a river that flows through Eden. Rivers all over the world have always powerful over humankind. The genesis of civilization lies in an interaction between the result of biological factors and geographical environment. As observed by Toynbee (1946) stimulus towards civilization grows stronger in proportion as the environment grows more difficult.
Most of the ancient civilization is water dependent. The German-American historian Karl A Wittfogel in his book *Oriental Depositism* (1957) called them ‘hydraulic’ civilization’. ‘Hydro’ comes from the Greek meaning water. The nomadic lives of human beings are replaced by the domestic and social ones with the growth of civilization. Human population has historically moved into and concentrated in the river valleys and their adjacent areas. The flow of the rivers has nurtured life and spreads fertility to countless societies.

The study of rivers illustrates not only wide historical themes but also more personal, individual stories. The mysterious elements in a river catch the imagination of all irrespective of all ages. The water, the natural surrounding and the socio cultural milieu around a river open up multifaceted avenues to feel one attached with such an atmosphere. These life experiences influence identity. Those experiences will be crucially formative in the formation of individual as well as collective identification in a given society. Human personality is in fact a social product. As far as the river Brahmaputra is concerned, it is one of the great rivers in the southern Asia, the largest and the longest river in the North East and among the widest in the world. Its fertile banks have always been inviting numerous groups of people to find their settlement. The Brahmaputra needs no introduction. Originated in the glacial womb of the Kailash range of the Himalayas, south rake of Kanggyen Tso (Gun Kynd) lake in South West Tibet at an elevation of 5300 metres, the river passes through Arunachal Pradesh. Near Sadiya in Assam it changes its course to south west. M Taher the noted Geographer of Assam introduces the river thus:

The Brahmaputra, one of the largest river of the world has 920km lying within North east India out of its total length 2880km, the basin of the Brahmaputra within North East India covers 165000²km, including whole of Arunachal Pradesh and major parts of Assam accounting for 70 percent of the total of the region. (2006:16)
At the Ganges delta the river divides into two channels and the main channel came to be known as Jamuna. Both the channels finally plunge into the Bay of Bangal.

Assam has long been a region of in-migration hosting newer and newer generation of settlers from pre historic times to the present day. As observed by B.K. Barua in his *Cultural History of Assam* (1969), the Brahmaputra, for generations of Assamese lives, has watered their fields and drunk of its blessed water; their whole history and culture are intimately connected with the Brahmaputra. The very name of the river has established a kinship with the river. In the article ‘Assam Fosters Assimilation through the Ages’ Dr Promod Chandra Bhattachayya (1990) elaborately discusses on the historical migration to this region. The following words from Bhattacharyya briefly suggest the value of the environment in connection with the habitation trend in Assam from the past:

> It is in fact the green and fertile valleys of the Brahmaputra and the Surma (presently Barak river) rivers had attracted people of diverse races and dynasties through the different periods of history. These immigrant people became enchanted like sheep through natural beauties and easy economy of the land of Kamarupa-Kamakhya which was known as Pragjyotish, Lauhitya, Kamarupa etc. in different periods and where religious principles of Mongoloid or Kirata origin pervaded through the Mother Goddess worship with special characteristics in liberal way of life. (1990: 132)

As far as the question of the people of Assam is concerned, a heterogeneous landscape prevails with diverse groups of people scattered through the region. The term ‘Assamese’ needs critical discussion. As discussed by Prabin Choudhury in article “Asomiyattar Sangya Nirnay”
(Defining 'Assameseness'), the word 'asomiyatta' meaning Assameseness was not used till the sixth edition of the Hemkosh in 1958. Though the term owes its origin from the language it cannot be considered whether Assamese is a political category or cultural or linguistic. Historically the definition remains a flux. It was only after colonial period attempts have been made for the same. The word is naturally connected with the name of the state as well as the language spoken here. It is definitely the Anglicised formation built on the principle of English syntax. In Assamese the word used for both the language and the people of the land is 'asomiya'.

It is wrong to say that the banks of the Brahmaputra is inhabited only the speakers of Assamese language. Assam is inhabited not only by the speakers of various ethnic and tribal languages but also by speakers of other languages. What Sanjib Baruah (1999) calls 'Assamese Assam' is replaced by the reality of 'multiethnic Assam.' The natural environment generates unified cultural feelings moulding a cultural mosaic in the region. In the whole process the Brahmaputra with its several twisting movements turns out to be the natural as well as cultural language with which people could articulate who they are.

Identification of people with the natural environment in which they live in is an ancient tendency. Every natural element imposes impression on people when they come into terms with them. The sense of self is the sense of being located at a point in space, of having a perspective in time and of having a variety of position in a local moral order. 'The first is that we cannot understand people unless we understand the meaning that they attribute to the situation in which they find themselves. (Harre, 1995:23) Many of the human habits and customs are based on the available natural resources around them. While concentrating on the conscious expression of such contact with the natural environment it is found that the ideas are translated to artistic expression.
As far as the question of the Brahmaputra is concerned the most important observation that can be made is that it has not lost its creativity and the capacity to carry water since the time immemorial. The area covered by the river is so wide that very few people living on its bank have found opportunity to experience its wide bank on both the sides of the river. Suspense and inquisitiveness prevail in the mind of people to gather knowledge about its unexplored parts.

The environmental elements too differ from area to area within the same geo-political region. The banks of the Brahmaputra have a multiplicity of ethnic entities living among them since the prehistoric times. R.M. Nath in ‘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.

The tendency to transform natural environment into a cultural landscape is a product of human effort and aspiration modifying and adopting to a particular environment. It is from the middle of the 20th century the study of cultural landscape has emerged as an academic work. The scope of cultural heritage is widened to include people’s response to the landscape where they live. Hoskins (1955) focuses on the fact that landscape is best defined by those who read it aright. That is the greatest historical record a community possesses. That very notion gave rise to the
idea of what Franz Boas conceptualised as ‘cultural traits of societies’ and thereby focussing on the local context of culture. Cultural context changes over time and space. In this way, landscape becomes a clue to culture. The concept of ‘cultural landscape’ as an academic study is developed by Carl O Sauer (1889-1975), an American Geographer. In this process the association takes place with that particular environment. With the specific notion of cultural shapes, the communities transform nature into a cultural landscape. Areas are exposed how natural elements are turned into social and cultural construct through the passage of time and space. The commonplace aspects of the landscape acquire meanings through cultural choices. Cultural landscape is valued because of the religious, artistic or cultural association of natural elements. On the other hand, the cultural landscape in turn affects the people of the community. The same is also responsible for the development of an emotion towards the natural phenomena. The emotion is expressed through various creative forms. The associations are often treated while expressing one’s identity. Identification if it is to be productive can never be with some static and unchanging object. It is an interchange between self and structure, a transforming process.

It is noteworthy that people’s ideas of themselves and their waters in the various contexts are not restricted and limited to national identities rather it includes a range of ecological zones transcending national borders. Therefore, identities where water is a fundamental component may today represent transnational regions and broader cultural spheres. The identification of such regions has not yet been undertaken. With such an undertaking it is possible to illuminate how and why water as a socioeconomic and cultural variable and identity either transcends or divides nations.
The present study is connected with how people living on the bank of the Brahmaputra feel the essence of the river in encapsulating various aspects of their lives. It is obvious that the needs get newer and newer meaning with the passage of time, but since ancient times the very existence of the river has evoked the imagination of people to surmise it to be the highest reality upon earth. The progress and the development of the Assamese society depend upon the synthesis provided by the age old attachment with the river. The concord and unity seen amongst the Aryan and Non-Aryan population, the cultural and racial synthesis caused by the admixture of various elements and the liberisation of the rigidity in terms of caste system contributed to the formation of a unique selfhood of the people living in Assam. The psychological inquiry into the presence of an unseen thread constructs layers of meaning to our surrounding. The role water plays in defining, maintaining and negotiating identities and cultural values works at multiple levels, which may either oppose and contradict each other or strengthen and highlight unity and solidarity within a community or between communities.

Culturally and practically, the Brahmaputra is people’s exclusive or main source of water depending upon tradition, adaptation and economy, but most often there is a combination of these forms of water at a certain place. People get access to read the landscape through their incessant association with the river in various ways. The river has become a resource from different perspectives, physically, psychologically as well as spiritually. The association and approach to the river opens up vistas for continuous process of understanding the river. The process of reading the river gets expressed in identifying with its environment. References are found in written records to interpret the river for showing connection with the lives on its bank. There is evidence all over the world to imagine and create prolific creative works on the landscapes. Indian texts from the earliest found celebrate natural elements to disseminate culturally bound
meanings. The Brahmaputra too receives similar attention from time immemorial. This study projects to filter the information found in the various sources in order to extract the tendency to identify with river. The existing creative works on the river help to influence the mindset of the heterogeneous groups of people settled in this land from time to time.

The uniqueness as a member of a given geographical area is mostly contributed by the environment of the landscape. People get inspired to imagine themselves as being part of the surroundings. Imagination is expressed in the form of creative works which reflects human interaction turned into cultural idiosyncrasies. The thought raises many issues to be addressed from an interdisciplinary approach. The attempt to connect it with the formation as well as the expression of selfhood of the people in the landscape has also been focus of study from the angles of different disciplines. Naturally, generations after generation build up a psychological attachment with the environment. The long time connections generate unique meaning for the inhabitants. The physical attachment gives birth to symbolic connotation which opens up doors to peep into the history and evolution of the nation concerned. The associative value of the natural elements also helps to formulate visions about past as well as for the future. Thus evidence is found how people have psychologically shaped the nature in beliefs, rites, customs and myths and legends etc. Presentation of the association in such ways is a universal tendency. The aptness of the comment of Nora Mitchell et al. (2009) is observed:

Each people has a specific relation, physical and associative with its environment, which is ingrained in its culture, its language, its livelihood, its sense of being and its identity which is inseparable from its relationship with the land. the physical relation and the symbolic relation influence each other. (2009: 16)
A study into the expression of selfhood demands close analysis of the contribution of the people concerned in terms of language, literature and other related outcome as well as engagement with the knowledge, understanding, values, attitudes, assumption, feelings and beliefs transmitted traditionally by word of mouth or by customary examples. The diversity of manifestation propels close analysis into these the areas of literary as well as cultural activities of the concerned people.

As far as the question of the Brahmaputra is concerned Arup Kr Dutta (2001) in his book entitled ‘The Brahmaputra’ commented that the salubrious environment created by its river system has played a seminal part in unifying the desperate ethnic elements into a homogenized whole investing it with an Assamese identity. Human identity is, first and foremost, a wild and natural one because man is a product of the ontologically independent nature. The river invokes in the people an entire gamut of emotion, awe, wonder, fear and love. The term ‘Luitor paar’ (bank of the ‘Luit’ i.e. the Brahmaputra) is synonymous with Assam. The association that the people bear with the river is found to have rooted in the consciousness of their existence, mainly in the Brahmaputra valley.

Arup Kr Dutta (2001) observed that it is the river Brahmaputra which enables the Assamese people to shape their identity as citizens of a free nation. The vigour and the vivacity of the river have been amazing man from time immemorial and a variety of art forms emerged considering the Brahmaputra as the source of inspiration. The same is revealed in artistic and musical expression, rituals, myths, fiction, traveler’s note, scholarly writing, different archaeological structures scattered here and there. Rina Choudhury (2007) in her book entitled ‘Sahityat Brahmaputra’ (The Brahmaputra in Literature) commented that the Assamese race has endowed themselves with the very idea of enriching and identifying themselves with the vigour of the river.(p.19). The river no more remains a
mere physical component rather it is transformed to an index of cultural cohesion.

Understanding a natural flow, though seems to be a partial approach, requires symbolic vision towards it. The already existent literature, other creative works, beliefs of the common folk, academic and cultural exercise all help to stimulate the socio-cultural process of finding a definition of ourselves. Water constitutes identities and creates societies in many different ways, both as symbols and as a primary agency in culture. Cultural variation is based upon similarities and differences at various levels, which may or may not coincide with ethnicity or political units such as states. From a water perspective, the various water-worlds and types of water may transcend or divide states, enabling other identities since political boundaries may not correspond to the cultural units. These identities have their point of departure in the very physicality of the different forms of water and the biological necessity of the daily water.

The water carried by a river does not remain same. It is an incessant flow. It is a link. The physical cleave through which it flows enriching its bank is also subject to change. River is valued because of its multifaceted contribution for the community. While valuing a river depends very much on who does the counting. At the same time the value of a river cannot be determined within the framework of only economic or social analysis. The worth is valued from the overall response of people towards its contribution for the world view. Shane Mountjoy (2005) observes:

The river acts as one of the few unifying features in the region: All who live there need the life-giving waters it carries. The importance of the river is one explanation for countless invasions into the region: The river sustains life for whomever lives there. This one unifying trait has ensured that the region is filled with dissimilar people. (p.4)
The Brahmaputra has consciously or unconsciously transformed Assam into a cultural landscape. Every individual is endowed with knowledge of the river both naturally and culturally.

The search for self begins with a series of questions either by individually or collectively regarding the rootedness of a group. The development of the human self requires a historical process to be developed within a socio-cultural context. Selves are more than linguistic or socio-cultural construct. The idea of expression of selfhood through a river demands a reflexive study into the private self engaged in different domain of experience within the co-operate system i.e. culture. The idea of expression of selfhood is not merely a superficial expression of individuality. The study will concentrate on the public expression of selfhood rather than on its private expression.

The tendency to transform natural environment into a cultural landscape is a product of human effort and aspirations modifying and adopting to particular environment. The associations are often treated while expressing one’s self. The association of the river Brahmaputra in expressing the self of the people on its bank requires investigation from various angles. The river environment consists of three parts, the flowing water, the natural surroundings and its social and cultural milieu. It is worthy to see how the people of the valley have understood the river and have taken care of it while shaping and identifying their selfhood. Reading the river in its waves, its gargling sound, the golden ripples under the sun, its alluvial bank and the flood show affinity with the basic nature of the inhabitants on its bank. The continuous existence on its bank establishes tradition which confirms the acceptance of the river as a higher propulsive force. The river has secured an assured place in the memory of the Assamese people focussing on the integrity of thinking. It fosters a sense of
sameness harnessing the formation of imaginative construction of national identity. Natural element is a part of the human world and vice versa.

Peoples’ experiences with the physical spaces of the river Brahmaputra influence on constructing self image. In the words of Bender & Atiken (1998) “The landscape is never inert; people engage with it, rework it, appropriate it and contest it.” The familiarity established through interaction and attachment helps people to see them a part of the environment. To belong is the feeling behind such familiarity. For the common folk the natural surrounding is the first factor to identifying themselves with. Nature holds the unifying expressive components to feel attach with. When it is the time for the folk to express as a member of a specific group what is invoked to connect is the natural surroundings. Thus the collective self is designed with backdrop of the surroundings.

What is self? Does it exist in reality? Or is it a matter of social construct? The idea behind this is rooted in consciousness. Consciousness is means of revealing oneself as existing. Existence demands natural surroundings. It generates consciousness. Man being a part of Nature’s ontological independence gains consciousness to form the sense of primary identity from the natural surroundings. The consciousness is not only individual, but it is culturally constructed. Therefore self is by and large a cultural construct and also a phenomenological entity. It refers to the practices that produce meaning in the society. The Brahmaputra influences people to relate their growth, need (both physical and psychological), varied experiences and existence with the contribution of the river in their day to day life. Consideration of the Brahmaputra as the primary identity for the people on its bank needs investigation from various perspectives connected to human endeavour. The study requires allowing cultural and historical factors to condition our approach to the gift of Nature. Our primary identity is nature based whereas our culture, our historical
conditions, our particularities of language are secondary constructs. The primary identity for the people living in the Brahmaputra valley turns out to the source of the construction of other secondary identity. The identity as a nation depends on the continuity of our action and behaviour throughout history. It is mainly because the inhabitants are programmed according to the environment they live in. This in returns helps in orienting ourselves to the environment. Though nature’s impact is manifold the strongest one that inspires us to feel connected is the emotional bond with the river.

Selfhood is to be found in the oscillation of the projecting self and the projected self. In fact the self that is projected and chosen becomes a part of the involuntary order of necessity, a historical self accountable for its past and in need of imaginative meditation with new voluntary projection and the choice of self. Imagination is seated at a vertical and horizontal or cognitive or practical crossroad. Imagination calls for deliberation to come to a close choice that moves from interior to exterior. Evidences are not less in human history that imagination moulds the living environment into different forms of art forms. Association with the outer world, experiences in the different context, roles and relationship in the society, memories, the first person perspectives, internal relationship of experiences etc contribute to determination of self. The multifaceted role of the river in the lives of people precipitates memory as well as imagination which resulted in creative as well as research based activities. The links are innumerable in keeping with the variety of activities attached with the river.

The concept of Assamese selfhood refers to the conscious realization of the collective identity of a group of people- the Assamese. The proximity of the Brahmaputra River both geographically and socio-culturally directs people’s consciousness to feel affinity with it.
Identification with the river is a signifier of a social group. History shows that the process involved in the formation of Assamese identity has been multilayered. The culture on both the banks of the Brahmaputra unfolds layers of signs that help in identifying the inhabitants on its banks with those elements. The means whereby a group selects to construct and reconstruct a sense of self happens to be the strongest sign provided by culture. Just like all the other societies of the world different classes of people inhabit within a socio-cultural fabric from elite section to the people on the grass root level.

Rivers have nurtured lives throughout history. It also brings devastation. Both the roles are accepted by the inhabitants on its bank with equal importance considering it to be a natural force. Combined with human association the natural force is transformed to cultural artifact. Nick Middleton’s comment is worth mentioning here:

This dual function, as a force of nature that sustains life but also takes it away, has generated cultural echoes in groups all over the world. The powerful hold that rivers have over humankind has become embedded in innumerable traditions, myths, and sacred rituals through the ages. (2012:30)

Water creates society in many different ways. Water also constitutes identity connecting the innermost part of existence with the inevitable attachment of life, the self. In both the cases it functions as a symbol. While concentrating on the cultural aspect of identity formation, water bodies of a given context provides physical boundaries. Human practices with water, collecting, distributing and sharing on daily, seasonal and annual basis transform into traditional and cultural traits of the concerned community. The crucial point to note here is that this type of identification may not relate to the concept of ethnicity. Sharing values does not require
conscious effort to feel connected with. That we feel to belong to the Brahmaputra is not an acquired concept. Rather the people on the bank of the Brahmaputra inherit the values of the landscape which acquires cultural connotation. Shared social and religious experiences become core value systems when these experiences are structurally institutionalized into the body of collective knowledge through people's own identification of the importance of these practices and the values they attach to them.

The Brahmaputra basin provides a unique habitat for exquisite variety of flora and fauna including many endangered species. The flood plains of the Brahmaputra are dotted with a large number of wetlands. The fundamental and origin unit of life as a part of a larger ecosystem unit turns out to be an active agent in constructing the Assamese selfhood. A. K. Das (1998) in article ‘The Brahmaputra’s Changing River Ecology’ focuses on the natural balance in the man-river relationship in the following words:

This was the ideal ecological situation in and around the Brahmaputra River in upper Assam prior to the great earthquake. There was a natural balance between man and the river and at no time did people hate the river for its fury. The Brahmaputra was considered sacred and secular at the same time. During Magha Sankranti people preferred to go for a holy dip in the Brahmaputra rather than in the Ganga.

The regular rainfall during summer contributes to the overflow of the river along with its tributaries rendering both positive and negative effects. Positively, the soil gets fertile producing an array of flora and fauna. The existence of tropical and sub tropical forest on both the sides of the river render a socio-psychological attachment with symbolic interaction with the environment. Our attachment with the environment requires the understanding other's reaction to the environment because many beliefs,
behaviour and attitudes of a society depend on what we find around us. Susan Clayton and Susan Opotow (2003) define ecological identity ‘as that part of the self that allows individuals to anticipate the reaction of the environment to their behaviour. (p.299) An intuitive sense of identification with the environment generates roles and responsibilities. The direct experience with the water body directs to connect our consciousness with the natural setting. The concept is theoretically discussed in the chapter on Theoretical Perspectives on Selfhood.

The present study is undertaken with an interdisciplinary approach in connection with the concept of selfhood. Since ancient times the concept of ‘self’ has received critical handling in different academic disciplines. The study into selfhood justifies that human beings are not merely manikins; the attributes of being man is connected to the fields of philosophy, ecology, anthropology, culture etc. the environmental philosophers have attempted to reconstruct human identity. As mentioned above the ‘ontological independence’ inspires man in the formation of personhood. ‘Ontological independence’ means that nature’s identity, its property, its origination, its continuing existence do not depend on our existence. Man is the product of millions of years of evolution. Our needs are not very different from other products of nature. Allowing our historical or cultural factor to condition our knowledge of nature our self is seen in a pluralised position none of which with much authenticity. All the various positions generate ambiguity about our existence in a specific space and time. The ambiguity can only be resolved by believing that every human being has one important thing in common- a natural, dependent and biological identity. The emergence of an organising psyche out of that thought allows us to perceive self in action with which we respond to the elements of nature. The aspect of selfhood of the Assamese that is conceived with the backdrop of the Brahmaputra is culturally and naturally oriented. It appropriates the Bauman (1996) who describes cultural identity
as 'an escape from uncertainty, the thing we turn to when unsure of ourselves'. Cultural identity has become popular as an expressive term for the need to find stability and order in a rapidly changing world.

1.1. Objectives of the Study

Considering the above perspective discussed above the present study is made with the following objectives. The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To study selfhood from environmental perspective
2. To identify the nature of relationship of the Brahmaputra as a metaphor of life and the expression of Assamese selfhood as reflected in different genres of creative writing and folklore.
3. To relate the common Assamese consciousness with the Brahmaputra through lyrical representation.
4. To establish the continuity of considering the Brahmaputra as a factor for identity formation for the people on its bank.

1.2. Review of Literature

Various available literary works on the concerned subject are reviewed visiting different libraries. The literature on the subject is fairly large and it has been delimited to review some important literature to trace some important core issues. Since the purpose of the study is to examine the association of Assamese selfhood with the river Brahmaputra, literature related to selfhood in general as well as from environmental perspectives, both creative and critical writings on the Brahmaputra, books and articles on Assam and Assamese identity are surveyed.

Karen E Beardslee (1965) in her *Literary Legacies, Folklore Foundation: Selfhood and Culture, Tradition in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century* observes that a culture exists through and maintained by a constant
reiteration of its own monomyth. The book focuses on how folklore is one of the most important ways of life. She talks about self-defining folk tradition in which what matters most is that we learn and grow from living. The book explores the possibility of searching for selfhood.


Urs Fuhrer (2004) in *Cultivating Minds: Identity as Meaning Making Process* deals with the contemporary ideas on cultural psychology. It is a book about culture and identity. The primary focus of the work is on cultivation as a metaphor in identity formation. The idea of cultural mind has profound implication not only for cultural psychology but also of theories of identity and, of course, development. It affects the way we understand of the formation and growth of self. Self is treated not as entities but as a process. In the process Fuhrer deals with in what way do the environment and the culture transform person’s selfhood and in what way does the personal identity transform into culture.

Sheila Peace, Caroline Holland and Leonie (2006) in *Environment and Identity in Later Life* study the interaction between environment and identity formation. The concern of the writing is how people present themselves to others leading to the perspectives of different versions of self constructed through spatial and temporal frames. As observed environment means both place and space that encompass the person and affect their understanding of themselves and the culture in which they live.

argumentative style the book pleads for reflexive modernity and strives for a more open and dialogic society that inspires one to overcome segmented identities.

Simon J Bronner (2007) in *The Meaning of Folklore Analytical Essays of Alan Dundes* talks about semiotics interpreting expressive culture as symbolic system. Henry Nash Smith's theory of ‘Virgin Land’ representing the importance of folklore in identity building is discussed at length. The meaning and expression of the articulation have sources in unconsciously held ideas generated by the contact of the environment around.

Giampiero Arciero and Guido Bondolfi (2009) in *Selfhood, Identity and Personality Style* discuss self both as a subject and as an object. They talked about the consciousness regarding the experiences of life and its relationship with the formation of human identity. They also talked about different systems in the construction of self and arrived at an idea that self is only a mechanism.

**Review of literature in connection with the Brahmaputra and the people on its bank:**

Regarding the origin of the river a fascinating myth prevailed which is dealt in the *Kalika Purana* and *Padmapurana*. Many of the famous histories on Assam and Kamrup bear testimony on the river’s role in the life of the people of Assam. The story of Arimatta, a king who is assumed to have ruled a part of Assam in the 14th century, is an illustration. In *‘Kamrupar Buranji’* (History of Kamrupa) Surjya Kumar Bhuyan revealed incredible tales regarding the river in relation to the lives of king Arimatta and his parent King Pratapsingha and Chandraprava.
Hem Barua's (1954) *The Red River and the Blue Hill* describes the numerous groups of people migrated to the land of the Brahmaputra and spread into the river beds of Assam in different periods of history. Barua's book is an authentic documentation on history, races, religion, people, language, literature, urban, rural and related issues of Assam. There he shows the affinity of people with the natural gift on it.


Tiziana and Gianni Baldzzone (1998) in their book ‘*Tales from the River Brahmaputra*’ personifies the river and considers it initial point as its childhood and the point of meeting with the sea as the old age. The socio-cultural association of the river with the lives of the people on its bank is highlighted.

L.A. Waddell (2000) composed a book entitled *The Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley*. The author pens how the alluvial valley of the Brahmaputra draws people of so many different tribes in its course from the Tibetan region to the Bay of Bengal. Waddell observes “Driven into these wild glens by the advance of civilization up the plains and lower valleys these people have become hemmed in among the mountains, where pressing on each other in their struggle for existence”.

Arup Kr Dutta's (2001) *The Brahmaputra* is a chronicle on the river creating and recreating life of the people of Assam from time immemorial. Dutta reiterates that the cultural paradigms and complexity for the people on its bank itself turn out to be propulsive force behind the making of Assam’s history. The evolution of a composite Assamese society centered
around the Brahmaputra. People’s feeling of awe, safety, security, stability towards the river elevates the river to sacred place of pilgrimage.

Nirmal Kr. Choudhury (2004) in his article entitled ‘Brahmaputra Soundarjya Upobhogar Sapon’ (Dream to enjoy the beauty of the Brahmaputra) published in the first issue of ‘KATHA Guwahati’ delineates his wish to be one with the vibrant beauty of the river.

Rina Choudhury (2007) in her ‘Sahityat Brahmaputra’ makes an extensive study on how the river is dealt with in different creative, historical, archeological scattered in Assam as well as in some parts of India as a whole. The study not only covers oral and written, ancient and modern literature but also the various rites and rituals connected with the river.

Mrinal Talukdar’s (2007) travelogue entitled ‘Tsangpor Pora Brahmaputroloi’ (From Tsangpo to the Brahmaputra) is an adventurous account of an epic journey from the upper reaches to Guwahati in a mechanise boat by the writer to explore the history of the Brahmaputra. In the process he also highlights on the investigation to ensure how the Tsangpo becomes the Brahmaputra. The narration generates an urge to delve into the connection of the river with the soul of the people living on its bank. A desire to be one with the vigour of the river is generated by the writer which draws the readers’ attention to the hidden treasures of the river.

Bhaben Barua (2009) in his article entitled ‘Brahmaputra Punarabishkar’ (Rediscovery of the Brahmaputra) published serially in ‘Sadin’, a weekly newspaper, asserted the importance of the river saying that the Indian civilization cannot be articulated without the influence the Brahmaputra.
An insight into the sighted texts generates the need of studying the river Brahmaputra from the perspective of selfhood formation of the people on its bank.

1.3. **Research Methodology**

Research is a decision-making process that requires careful and thorough deliberation, and entails making choices from “known” alternatives. Numerous factors influence the choices and decisions a researcher makes, and in this case, my ‘positionality’, the research topic, objectives and approach, and theoretical framework have collectively shaped my research design and methodology. In this chapter, I outline my ‘positionality’ and the research procedures and methods employed to understand the theoretical concept of selfhood and the psychological connection of the people of Assam with the Brahmaputra.

The study is undertaken basically in a qualitative approach.

1.3.1. **Method of data collection**

The study is conducted with the help of both primary and secondary data. The primary data consists of the field study and face to face interviews conducted for the chapter on Brahmaputra and the Life of the People of Assam. Textual materials as secondary data are used for the theoretical part and for the chapters related to Mythology and Lyrics of the songs.

The methods of data collection applied in this thesis are:

- (a) Observation
- (b) Participant
- (c) Interviews
- (d) Collection of text
- (e) Still Photography
Available literary text, e-books and materials from websites are used to collect the theoretical material and the available literature on the Brahmaputra in respect of myths, songs as well as the fictional writings.

The field investigation connected with the present study is intended to gather knowledge about lives of those who live in the river island and of the Brahmaputra. To select the research site decision was taken to conduct the field study in Majuli and in some char areas of the Barpeta and Dhubri districts. Visiting those areas was the maiden experience for me. From an outsider’s point of view the uncertainty observed with regard to the havoc meted out by the river’s outrageous flow is very difficult to understand. The data has been recorded as per responses are received. For effective data collection a steady correspondence has been maintained with the different informants at the sites. Since I regard interviews to be “one of the most common and powerful ways of understanding humans” (Fontana and Frey, 2000: 645), I chose structured interview as my primary means for gathering data. The data were collected through semi structured interviews, participant observation, group discussion with the help of a set of self made questions.

My position being a member of the group is advantageous. Because, “working within my own ethnic and cultural community, I gained legitimacy, access and an insider’s view of cultural practices” (Kobayashi, 1994: 74) of the people under the domain of my study. My insider position was also beneficial during the interviews as they trust me to give their information. As this is an academic study my position was also like an outsider as my intention was to link the data with theories that are applied in the study.

The winter season was selected to go the field because as soon as the rainy season starts the journey to the riverine island becomes a difficult
task. Face to face interviews were conducted during the month of October in 2011 in Mjuli and during February and March of 2014 in the char areas of Barpeta and Dhubri.

Altogether 30 persons, 10 from Majuli, 10 from Barpeta Char and 10 from Dhubri Char, were interviewed. Setting the sample size at thirty also enabled me to handle the interview process comfortably. Developing a more intimate connection with my participants allowed me to be respectful and empathetic towards my participants’ responses, experiences, and views, by providing them with the time and attention they deserved. They were encouraged to share their stories of struggle and respect connected with the water of the Brahmaputra.

While selecting the participants, representatives of both the sexes as well as of different age groups were considered. In Majuli out of the 10 persons 2 were Satradhikars (Head of Satra Institution), 2 tourist guides and 6 local people both men and women were interviewed. But in char areas the scenario was different. If they notice the arrival of a stranger into some family people from the neighbouring household gather and start participating in the conversation. In the Major Char and Alopatti char out of the 10 participants 1 was a journalist and 1 lady was a Panchayat member and the other 8 persons were villages whose main occupation is cultivation. In the six chars of the Dhubri district out of 10, 2 were boatmen, 2 were vegetable sellers, 2 ladies who worked in the different household of Dhubri Town and the others are cultivators.

Structured interviews were conducted in the study areas. The questions were arranged mainly to know the time span of the settlement in the island areas, the history of their migration, causes of shift, the crops produced and fisherman’s life etc. the interview was conducted in the local language i.e. Assamese. As mentioned above during the interviews more
information was gathered than expected. Informal talks were conducted with the key leaders of the community.

Moreover, out of my expectation, printed literature was found around the themes of their oneness with river.

Moreover, still photography is also used to capture influence of the natural aspects on human life as a whole.

1.3.2. Data processing

At the first stage of data processing, the collected data was classified genre wise. The collected materials on myth and legends, the collected songs and the description of the field were separately filed to develop understanding about the setting and encapsulating the ideology. The myths and legends as well as the songs were classified thematically to observe their attachment with the self of people. Aspects of socio-religious activities were connected with the world of mythology. The line of interpretation guided the processing. The social context provided argument in the analysis of the activities connected with the river. Basically, the data was processed keeping the generic reality and search for interpretation exegesis in mind.

The data collected from the field study were coordinated with the supporting documents provided in the form of books, journal and pamphlets by the informants as well as the other secondary sources.

1.3.3. Methods of analysis

To analyse the data, theoretical tools and concepts have been drawn in somewhat eclectic fashion. The theories developed since structuralism and contextually developed by Malinowsky, Freud, Jung, Goffman, Alan Dundes have broadly be analysed. Alan Dundes has triggered study in connection with the possibilities of self expression and the folklore of a given community. His interpretation unfolds areas of the related field of
selfhood studies. Attempts have been made to analyse the data from that perspective.

The chapter on Selfhood is based on the theories of selfhood from the perspectives of Philosophy, Psychology, Anthropology, Sociology and Phenomenology and Folklore.

With regard to the study of myth, theories of Alan Dundes, Ronald Bearthes, Lawrence Coupe, Malinowski, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and Levi Strauss are given priority. To connect the myths of the Brahmaputra to the concept of Assamese Selfhood, Jung's archetypal analysis is applied.

The interpretation is based on the application of the theories on selfhood and mythology in the collected data about the relationship of Assamese selfhood and the Brahmaputra. The available literature both ancient and present as well as recent ones, songs both folk songs and compositions of the established lyricists, folk customs and rites, lives of people of char areas and river island are studies in the light of the expression of Assamese selfhood through the Brahmaputra river. The study brings a connection between mythological stories on the Brahmaputra with the identity formation of the people on its bank.

With regard to the songs in the Chapter on Lyrical representation the translation of the songs are given in the chapter while the Assamese songs are given in Appendix in English transcription.

1.4. Limitation of the Study

As is the case with any research, this study too is undertaken within certain limitations. First of all, the scope the topic is itself a broad one. To determine the selfhood of a community requires investigation from various perspectives. Though the concept of selfhood is analysed from the perspectives of different fields only a few are, in fact, applied while analysing on Assamese selfhood. The methodological limitation is felt
especially in connection with the lack of theories based on oriental thinking. To observe an oriental society through the mirrors of western theories cannot answer some society based queries.

Assam is a vast land. There is scope for making field study in various spots either in riverbanks or in the char areas of the river. In this research, field study is undertaken in the biggest river island of the world that is situated in the bosom of the Brahmaputra and in selected char areas of two districts. Though they are representative of the struggles of life in the bosom of the river it is felt that other representative groups might have responded differently to the queries made during the field investigation.

The approach to selfhood addresses how psychological process interacts with social processes in the explanation of human behaviour. To study a big community like the Assamese from psychological perspectives will only results in partial understanding of the issues connected with it.

The study of literary creation under this research topic has to be cover period from Vedic literature till date. Hence, there is the chance of losing both fiction and non-fiction literatures suggesting the connectivity of the Brahmaputra and the selfhood formation of the Assamese.

Though care has been taken not to overgeneralise the findings there may be some aspects left to such prejudice. The approach to cultural assimilation as a heritage taking a natural element on the backdrop requires an extensive study on the cultural history of the concerned group. It was not possible on the part of the researcher to go through the cultural history of the different ethnic groups who have enriched their lives with the Assamese way of living.

In connection with the songs around the theme of the Brahmaputra, those songs are taken for discussions that are found in the written form in
authorised texts. There is the possibility of the availability of more song composed considering the Brahmaputra as an identifying factor for identification of the people living in Assam.

1.5. Justification and Relevance

   The Brahmaputra like all the other major rivers of the world forms a vital component of livelihood shaped by the human imagination into living and breathing presence. The association of the river with the lives of people on its bank is reflected in different genres of creative writing and folklore. The river system being the seminal element in the economic front of Assam delineates complex cultural phenomena. The notion of sameness based on being the inhabitants of the bank of the Brahmaputra holds the concept of communal identification among them.

   The river provides a space through which the inhabitants are provided with the medium to project themselves into the outside world especially in the cultural context. The association of the river system in the field of agriculture, transportation, trade, occupation like fishery and boatmanship transmission of culture as well as rituals bears testimony of the people’s kinship with the river.

   The reflection of selfhood has been found to have existed since the ancient times. An urge to know why and how numerous groups of people throng to the banks of the river generates the idea of inter relating the concept of Assamese selfhood and the river Brahmaputra. An effort is made to look at the issue of understanding selfhood from the standpoint of natural backdrop. The river flowing from one end of the valley to the other has been imparting to the region a political, economical and cultural centricity which aided to the evolution of a vibrant society.
Throughout recent years several creative and critical writings did found in respect of the river and its psychological connection with the people of Assam. From the study of the famous writings, songs, books, history created by the sons and daughters of this land invoking a cultural spirit of unity it is observed that the major river course i.e. the Brahmaputra from Sadiya to Dhubri turns out to be the only unique element to provide a common sense of association for the people living in this vast land.

This study was motivated by concerns and questions expressed in the different types of genres of writing since the early days of history. Among the early contributions the *Mahabharata, Kalika Purana, Charyapada, Matsy Karati* etc record the name and related information about the river. These records are also orally transmitted from generations after generations. A study into the creative writing of the luminaries of Assamese literature viz. Srimanta Sankardeva, Ananta Kandali, Laxminath Bezbarua, Gunabhiram Barua, Surya Kumar Bhuyan Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Ajit Barua, Nabakanta Barua, Medini Choudhury, Bhupen Hazarika, Mrinal Talukdar, Purabi Bormudoi inspires to arrive at a conclusion that the very idea of the river creates and recreates the sense of belonging in people’s mind resulting in a psychological association to consider the river as the ‘other’ in the formation of an Assamese selfhood.

Arup Kr Dutta observes:

The salubrious environment created by its river system has played a seminal part in unifying the desperate ethnic elements into a homogenized whole, investing it with an Assamese identity. It has also moulded the collective psyche of the society which evolved in the valley and bestowed upon it common traits and attitude towards existence (2005:201)
All the above mentioned reviews and studies show that there is scope to investigate how the river Brahmaputra enters into the psyche of the people on its bank from time immemorial which is articulated in expressing their selfhood. Issues that are relevant to our sense of self attract attention, arouse emotion and connect to other aspect of life more than issues that are less personally significant.

The study has been undertaken for the primary reason that it is intended to serve as a critical self reflection to gain a better understanding of the cognitive recognition of one’s identity or the subject of experience. To ground experience of self with cognitive consequences will provide insight into a communal selfhood in a multi dimensional society. The attempt to link the river with the very idea of Assamese identity recognizes the dynamic between person and place and the spatial experience involved in it.

Secondly, the study also attempts to address a concern faced by the people who live in the sandbank and island that face regular threat of erosion and the changing course of the river.

With the exchange of knowledge in academics and cultural context the issue of selfhood has emerged as a meeting ground of culture and heritage. The culture and heritage of Assamese people are explicit through diverse means such as written histories, oral literature, written literature, rituals etc. An analytical study into all these reveal that strength and vigour of the river is always associated a projected strength and vigour of the Assamese community.

Finally, the aim of the study is also to make a potential contribution to the contemporary academics by a sense of composite Assamese selfhood that has been emerged in a heterogeneous set up.