CHAPTER III

BRAHMAPUTRA AND THE LIFE OF PEOPLE IN ASSAM
3.1 Rivers and Human Life

Rivers leave their mark on physical landscape and on the communities that live in the vicinity. The life of the rivers is much bigger than any other lives in this universe. River is an art in water. Rivers not only channelizes water but regulates life in general. The natural stream of fresh water travels in meandering paths in various speeds. The riverine environment offers an avenue to study people as well as to study how people conceptualise the rivers they happen to lie by the sides. The study of the entire river context including the flowing water, the natural surroundings and its social and cultural milieu provides access to construction of selfhood. Places shape human history both collectively and individually. It fosters a sense of belongingness to the inhabitants. The association of river with the land is realised in a reciprocal way. Despite being a natural process the birth of a river proves to initiate a purely natural process. Mandy Ross observes:

It is found that the earliest human civilisation was built near rivers. The world’s first cities grew up around 5000 years ago in Mesopotamia. The name ‘Mesopotamia’, in Greek, means the land between two rivers. The two rivers, Tigris and Euphrates, flooded their plains every Spring. (2004:28).

The Brahmaputra is one of the largest tropical rivers of the world. Rivers are found in all the continents and on the smallest islands with bewildering variety ranging from a mere trickle to a mighty surge. Rivers always act like cradles of civilisation. Twisting channels hinder for the creation of elegant landscape. Prudence J Jones (2005) observes ‘... rivers
contribute to define personal identity with respect to one’s immediate society (ethnography), to the gods (rituals) and to one’s temporal position within the universe (cosmology). To think of Assam without the Brahmaputra will be the most unattainable task ever done. Assam is nothing without the Brahmaputra. Mention is made to the eminent Geographer Dr Mohammed Taher Sir’s article entitled ‘The Pride of Being an Assamese’. There he refers to the comment made by Professor A. J. Rose of Mac Quarie University, Sydney who standing atop a peak near the Brahmaputra River said, ‘this mighty river should give you pride and unity’.

The openness of the Assamese society is a direct contribution of the fusion of different indigenous communities who in different times settled on the bank of the Brahmaputra. Questions arise regarding what inspired series of human groups to settle on its bank. How to connect the folk life of the people with the great river? The river offers a dwelling and to appropriate that dwelling abundant art forms are found to have created throughout the ages determining the historicality of the people living on its bank.

The river is one of the few constants in Assam that has seen many changes over the centuries. It served as the ready transport corridor for trade and travellers. The large scale of the river has fascinated people from all walks of life. The banks of the river serve as a stage on which diverse group of peoples, languages and religions have gathered for thousands of years. In the words of Dr M Taher Assam is a ‘racial cauldron’, a melting point of socio-cultural diversities. Shane Mountjoy (2005) in his book Rivers in World History: The Indus River comments:

There are four rivers (the Brahmaputra, the Ganga or Ganges, the Karnali, and the Indus) that originate in this region. Symbolically, the four rivers are portrayed as coming out of different animals’
mouth as a way to attribute different qualities to each of the rivers. The Brahmaputra is said to come from a horse’s mouth, the Ganges from the mouth of an elephant, the Karnali from a peacock’s mouth and the Indus from the mouth of a lion. “The waters of the river Brahmaputra are cold and it is said that the one who drinks its waters would become sturdy as a horse.” (p.6)

Notwithstanding the racial variety present in the Brahmaputra valley, the river itself has divided the land along its side in Assam into Upper Assam and Lower Assam. This division is visible in different dimensions among its inhabitants. The Brahmaputra flows through three countries, possessing unique societies of their own. The part of the river that runs through Assam has been inviting different groups to settle on its bank from the pre historic times. Question arises how can there be any permanence to such a diverse culture that includes a number of caste, religion etc. the cohabitation of diverse cultural traits includes the incorporation of various traditions. As observed by Arup Kumar Dutta, “the river and its tributaries find echoes in the culture and ethos of the people, their folk-lore and literature, and in the very rhythm of their lives.” (2005: xiv)

Man’s adaptation to the environment is a supra-biological complex in which his experience mode of activity and mode of thinking are translated into ideas, beliefs and knowledge on the one hand and the material product such as artistic creation artifacts on the other. Man actively struggles against nature to obtain his material requirements and gains experience there from. He goes out to meet his material need and returns with the experience which builds his consciousness and thinking capacity. The link between human self and rivers is cardinal. Human civilisation owes its origin to the habitats in river banks. It is difficult to understand human habitat without the reference of a river. River
environments are very important because all lives need water to survive. Rivers are the parts a water cycle. River water is a shared and precious resource. The rivers have acted as cradles of civilisation and agents of disasters. (Nick Middleton, 2012:1). People have long interacted with rivers. Rivers play such numerous roles over the lives of this planet that they are often symbolised as a barrier that divides life from death. Sometime their flow is represented to signify the eternal flow of life. Rivers, being the product of a complex suit of natural processes, dominate landscape eroding and creating them. Rivers are found to influence innumerable aspects of our living as well as cultures. Hence as mentioned in earlier chapters rivers find their places in myths, legends, music, art and poetry.

Societies assign values to rivers both by intuitive reasoning as well as through empirical reasoning. The aesthetic and spiritual values (intangibles) are provided by the intuition and the other beneficial values by the empirical ones. Man’s needs are unending. Every now and then newer and newer projects come up to drive beneficial values of river. Though it is difficult to term the benefits of a river in physical form or in terms of money, its value is determined by the way how people feel attach to it.

Norman ND Smith and John Rogers (1999) observes that the earliest study of the Brahmaputra was made by Rennel (1781) who mapped the Brahmaputra as a braided river flowing into the Meghna River and following a course now occupied by a much smaller river known as the old Brahmaputra. Since, then the river has changed its course and avulsed into its present course known as Jamuna River. It is difficult to determine an exact era from when habitation started on its bank. Group adaptation started long time back. Group living is an adaptation that provides protection, co-operation, competition and communication to improve the
chances for survival. Human inhabitation on its bank not only invites groups of people throughout the ages but also inspires its inhabitation to view.

W. H. Allen, 1843

Landsat image, 1978

Fig. 3.1 : First map of River Brhamaputra

Jairamdas Doulatram (1991) in his article Assam underlines the value of the river Brahmaputra in the following words:

Assam speaks through of Lauhitya’s gorge, where tradition makes Parasurama wipe his bloody sword and where the Brahmakunda twisted out of shape by the great earthquake, recovered new form to sustain that ancient tradition. (p. 133)

The spatial dimension that a river provides to the inhabitants on its bank a sense of belongingness as well as a platform for sharing feelings symbolised by purity, renewal, timelessness and nourishment. Postel and Richter (2003) remarks ‘evoking magic, mystery and beauty, rivers have
inspired painters, poets, musicians and artists of all kinds throughout history adding immeasurably to the human experience." The value of rivers demands a host of reasons, some spiritual, some aesthetic and some practical.

The attachment of the people with the river water as well as with the river bank is realised from a multiplicity of angles in respect to the diversity of people from different strata of life. Dr Prafulladutta Goswami (1983) in his essay ‘The Brahmaputra in Assamese Life’ observes presiding over the Geography of Assam as well as the life of the Assamese is the mighty armed Brahmaputra cutting the land in two and flowing down majestically to the sea. The agricultural civilisation of Assam has owed a lot to this river.

In order to show the spiritual connotation of the river, reference is made to an interview telecasted in a news channel of Assam on 3rd June, 2009 with Mr Kamal Hazarika, noted Lyricist of Assam who lives in London. He informed that he keeps some amount of soil from Assam and preserves water from the Brahmaputra to use them in the funeral of Assamese people living there.

The study of the river as a source of connection to the self of the people living on its bank requires the understanding of how the riverine environment shapes the conscience of the people. Though society’s values and needs have changed people’s connection with the river remains intact in all its forms. In their natural states rivers function in multiple ways and generate numerous ecosystem services. The web of relations established hence is accelerated by the landscape shaped by the rivers. Besides the function of providing drinking water and as corridor for transport or for growing crops as well as producing electricity the Brahmaputra River is valued for gifting its inhabitants a healthy and life both physically and
psychologically. Rivers termed as natural capital have weaved interconnected webs with the early settlers. The Brahmaputra is the economy of the people knowingly or unknowingly.

The experience of the behaviour of the river in different seasons prepares the people on its bank to adjudge with both the opposites disastrous and calm form of the river in summer and winter respectively. Surprisingly, the damaging role of the moving ocean size river does in no way ignite a sense of anger in the mind of the people. Its course is never same in two subsequent years. Moreover, its oscillating trait with protean malleability does not provide with a homogenous atmosphere all the time of the year.

The study is conducted under the following heads:

3.1.1 Socio Religious Values

Water being the purifying agent for almost all the communities irrespective of any religion all over the world is esteemed high for all socio cultural and religious activities. Nick Middleton (2012:37) remarks that “rivers feature among the most important types of sacred place in Hinduism”. In Assam, water from the Brahmaputra has been considered very sacred and used religiously from time immemorial in different occasion connected to the cycles of life. Using river water to take religiously performed bath dispenses satisfaction among the user. Moving to the bank of the Brahmaputra in groups to fetch water in earthen pots is an age old cultural practice especially in marriage ceremonies. Of course, it is important to note that the tributaries of the Brahmaputra are treated with the same respect in the context of using water for religious purpose. In marriages it is believed that given the religious bath to the bride and the groom by river water is a step for transformation of the self for a new life. The practice of going to river for fetching water is a much awaited event in
marriages: it is performed with merriment. The local name for the event is ‘pani-tola’ i.e. to collect water. Both elderly and young ladies carry earthen pots and sing folk songs designed especially for the occasion. Such folk songs are included in the chapter on lyrical representation. These are sung while moving to the river for fetching water and at the time of ritual bathing of the bride and the groom.

The Yoginitantra, a sixteen century tantric text dedicated to the worship of Hindu goddesses Kali and Kamakhya, upholds the religious value of the Brahmaputra. The place surrounding the river is termed as ‘louhityatirtha’ meaning the pilgrimage of Louhitya. (Ch IV, Sl 2) In order to get rid of the sins of three births, the Brahmaputra is worshiped like this:

Namaste Brahmaputrayo namaha

Santanu sunabe

Trijanmahcha jot papong horo me

Lohitatmoja. (Ch VI Sl 15-16)

The region of Kamarupa is termed as ‘Brahmaputra’ in most of the slokas of the Yoginitantra. While introducing Lord Shiva’s various names it is said:

Paramesthi brahmaputre (Ch IV, Sl 12)

The evidence from the Yoginitantra implies that it is not a recent tendency to identify the land with the name of the divine natural flow that contributes to the growth of an age old civilisation on its bank. The tantric text elevates the religious sanctity of the place to its height.

In the Indian ideology the Ganges too receives the highest religious attention. Legends are found to have existed about the confluence of the
Brahmaputra and the Ganges which reflects the respect to both the rivers in the minds of Indians.

The sense of holiness attached to a particular water body may be due to many different reasons for example in terms of the river’s source, in terms of some saints who lived on its bank, in terms of some myth attached with the origin or birth of the river, in terms of the identity of the place through which it flows etc. The holiness attached to the Brahmaputra River owes its origin to the myth as found in Kalika Purana. The same is described in detail in the chapter on the myths of the Brahmaputra. The celebration of Ashokastami in different parts on the bank of the Brahmaputra elevates the minds of the people spiritually.

The religious self of the Assamese people is based on a broader response to the harmonious coexistence of the different religions as a result of the arrival of heterogeneous groups in the Brahmaputra valley in the different course of time of history. Hinduism, Vaishnavism, Islamic, Christianity, Buddhism, and Jainism are the major religions practised in the state. They followed distinctive religions with their specific faith and beliefs. Apart from these various indigenous communities follow their own religions. It is worthy to note that in spite of the presence of so many religious groups there exists a comfortable confluence among them; they live in peace and harmony. The open mindedness and the liberalism turn out to be the basic nature of the Assamese people on the bank of the Brahmaputra. (Mullan, 2010)

Emersion of the idols especially in the Durga Puja, the most celebrated religious festival, in the Brahmaputra is common religious practice in many parts of Assam. Though different environmental as well as ecological issues are raised against such practice no effort is practically made to stop this practice probably because of the faith in people’s mind.
3.1.2 Aquatic Life in Assamese Culture

Fishes and river dolphins form the major aquatic life of the Brahmaputra. The aquatic bio-diversity present in the Brahmaputra River enriches the Brahmaputra ecosystem in various ways. The abundance of fishes in the Brahmaputra, its tributaries and in the wetlands results in the inclusion of fishes in the main dishes. The cultural significance of fishes is observed in the value of fishes in the rituals especially of marriages. The fish is considered a symbol of fertility. To carry a big fish to the bride’s home in ‘joron’, a ceremony in which the groom’s family arrive in the bride’s household on a pre set date to present the bride traditional dresses, ornaments, cosmetics, other necessary materials, betel nut, milk, yogurt, sweets and a fish is customary in a traditional Assamese marriage.

The Kaibartas, the fishing community is marked as one of the major group living in the Brahmaputra valley. Their attachment with the river shapes their economy and psyche as a whole. They have their own culture with folk songs connected with rivers and riverine lives. Fisherman’s life shows how the riverine environment presented opportunities and challenges to individual communities by examining the role of navigable rivers concentrating on their contribution to trade, commerce and local economy.

Besides the consideration as livelihood fishing happened to be a pastime for many of the rural folk around the riverine areas. Various means are available in the Brahmaputra valley to conduct fishing as a pastime.

Offering food to guests without fish is a factor for dissatisfaction on the part of the host. Such discourse is existent because of the availability of fishes in the rivers of Assam. The Brahmaputra is fed by its tributaries in all respect including the aquatic resources.
3.1.3 Boatman’s Life

The navigation of the Brahmaputra River is tedious, uncertain and difficult. Boats in such a water course are subject to disaster both in summer and dry sessions. In comparison with the early river communication before the roadways and railways boats were the only means of communication for long journeys. Presently boatmanship as a profession is seen mostly in the char areas. Their skill of attuning with the streams of water prepares them to welcome a life of adventure. They are acquainted with anticipating the unknown. While doing field work it was very difficult to find out written records of the activities of the boatman’s life. It was observed that small boats are used to ply between the adjacent chars to cover short distances. The ups and down of their lives were adjusted with the unstable waves of the river water. Studies into the lives of the boatmen show that the riverine environment determines their hopes and fears, the motives and plans of their lives. Boatman, the man of the river sings as he becomes absorbed in the sight and the atmosphere of the river. Hem Baruah (2010) observes that ‘possibly this song originated at a moment when the boatman drifted along the current of the water and did not ply his oar.’ That is why the songs are termed as ‘bhatiyali git’ i.e. songs of downward stream. Another name for the songs is ‘naokhelor git’. The philosophy of their lives is best expressed in these ‘bhatiyali git’ s. Such songs centre on the themes of country lives, the love affairs of village girls, misery of their lives etc. The rivers flow downwards to the sea for their ultimate end and the philosophy of the bhatiyali git correspond to the flow as they too wish to end up their lives with the river’s stream. These songs are mostly found in the areas where the Brahmaputra enters Bangladesh. Hence the numbers of bhatiyali songs are very less in Assamese, rather they are mostly found in Bengali.
3.1.4 Transport System

From the ancient times until the roads were constructed both the Brahmaputra and the Barak were commonly used as the medium of transport. The Brahmaputra was declared National Waterway 2 in 1988 for a distance of 891 km from Dhubri to Sadiya to give recognition to its importance as a transport artery. Arup Kumar Dutta observes regarding the navigability of the river:

Water route for exchange of ideas and culture, as well as for exporting the region’s surplus and importing necessities not available locally were added to bonuses. Assam’s rivers, therefore, acted as channels for commercial exchange in three ways- internal trade within the region, trade with the hill tribes and immediate neighbours like Bhutan mainland India, Burma and Tibet, and trade with far countries especially highly developed ones like China. (2001:165)
The role of the river’s navigability in constructing the selfhood of the people is observed in their openness towards the otherness of those who enter the valley from different parts from inside and outside of the country.

The navigability of the river was fully exploited during the ancient times. It provided the cheapest form of transport. The river transport yields for the economic growth of the locality by providing means of livelihood. Starting from the vegetable or other small scale hawkers to the entrepreneurs the river has been used for transporting their goods without much tension or difficulties. The Brahmaputra is navigable throughout the Bengal Plain and Assam upstream to Dibrugarh. Till 1962 the river remained unbridged. In the 19th century, the British having discovered the tea in upper Assam, decided to use it as a commercial crop. Extensive plantation was planned by the British. Labourers were needed. Ships were used to carry labourers from the Chotanagpur areas presently situated in the Jharkhand State. It is interesting to note that the labourers settled here permanently and hence contributed to the formation of the Assamese community as a whole. The demographic structure of the Assamese speaking community underwent a drastic change after the labourers from other states were brought through naval route for the establishment of the tea gardens between 1838 and 1841.

As a result of this, the British began regular streamer service in 1863 between Kolkata and Assam. Until Independence, the steamers carried food grains, salt, tea, forest products (especially timber), coal and rocks as well as limited amounts of petroleum products between Kolkata and Assam. The main ports of call were Dhubri, Pandu (Guwahati), Tezpur, Neamati Ghat (near Jorhat), Dibrugarh and Sadiya. Today tea is an identity marker for the people of Assam. Looking for the access to the knowledge and experience of the other part of the world through the navigation route the British official proposed for streamer communication.

A proposal for the introduction of Government steamer communication with Assam was made by Scott as early as 183, and as an experimental measure it received the sanction of the Supreme government but the project remained shelved until 1847 when for the first time a steam boat made its appearance in Guwahati. The services that were subsequently introduced were not dependable. (2004:301)

One of the famous luminaries of the Assamese literature Laksminath Bezbarua was born in a boat in the Brahmaputra. The detailed description of his birth story is very lucidly articulated in the first volume of his autobiography. The same is discussed in a different part of this chapter.

In the 19th century, the British, having discovered tea in Upper Assam, decided to develop it as a commercial crop with extensive plantations in the valley. Ships were used to carry labourers who were first transported from the Chota Nagpur area and areas of, what is now, Jharkhand to various parts of Assam to clear the forests and settle the land for tea. Heavy machinery for manufacturing tea also went up by the shipload. The smaller local boats were found inadequate to carry loads as well as travellers and, in 1863, the British began regular steamer services between Kolkata and Assam.

During this period and until Independence, the steamers carried foodgrains, salt, tea, forest products (especially timber), coal and rocks as well as limited amounts of petroleum products between Kolkata and Assam. The main ports of call were Dhubri, Pandu (Guwahati), Tezpur, Neamati Ghat (near Jorhat), Dibrugarh and Sadiya.
The Brahmaputra was, in those days, a deeper river, capable of carrying large transport vessels. The river was navigable from Kolkata to Sadiya. The earthquake of 1950 led to changes in the river's hydrography as well as its silt load capacity. The once-easily navigable river became shallower, especially in the dry months of winter, and reduced the journeys of large ships. In their place, smaller, low-draft local boats, country boats and government ferries began to ply, carrying consumer goods such as milk, vegetables, fruits, meat, fish, cooking fuel, livestock, grain and groceries, including hardware, wood and even vehicles. H.K. Barpujari (2004) narrates the difficulties experienced by the tea planters and officials. It was stated that the furious current of the Brahmaputra was unconquered by the steam. (304) From then on the river transport has been playing a key in the economic development in Assam.

Arup Kumar Dutta mentions about the Saudagar or river merchants who used the river as the route for carrying out their trade. Mention is found in many of the folktales about these merchants whose activities with the river are the life line of the narratives. One of such prominent folktales is 'Tejimolar Xaadhu' included in the Burhi Aair Sadhu by Laksminath Barua.

Regular communication through ferry, boats or ships are still in vogue in riverghaats of many important town areas including Guwahati acts like a bridge between human domination and the proximity with the great water body. People's feeling of identification with the changing flow of the river strengthens the capacity to face the struggles of life. It is no doubt disaster prone during heavy rainy days. Accidents also took place in the steam ferries resulting in the loss of many lives. It is suggestive to note that Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva, the greatest Vaishnavite Guru of Assam was said to have swam across the Brahmaputra while it was in spate.
It is noteworthy that Srimanta Sankardeva established numerous satras in different places of Assam to enlighten the people of his land. Satras are Vaishnavite social institutions like the Gurukuls where Gurus and disciples stay together for the cultivation of learning. The Brahmaputra became the only means for which such an activity could be attempted in those days when there was dearth of communication.

The three bridges over the Brahmaputra not only accelerate the speed of traffic and communication but also it serves as a link for the entire North East region in all respects. Strengthening the bond among the North Eastern states the rail cum road Saraighat Bridge, the first one among the three, the other two being Kaliabhumura and Naranarayan Setu, carries immense goods items for people’s benefit. The people earning their livelihood by selling their agricultural, horticultural produces and products of the small scale industries get an access to the market on the other sides of the Brahmaputra with the help of the bridges. The age old value of the river as a channel for commercial exchange receives new meaning with the coming up of the bridges.

To showcase the beauty of the bridges to the tourists signifies the aesthetic connotation of the bridges.

3.1.5 Flood and Erosion

The Brahmaputra river basin is prone to flood and erosion and these two hazards have led too many problems for the inhabitants living on its bank. Every year without fail the rivers rises in desperate and devastate large populated areas in the flood plains carrying away people and livestock. Its adverse effect is noticed in economic, cultural, political and other related fields. The flood of 1997, 1998 and 2004 in the recent years were the most severe ones during the recent years. A difference is noticed in the adaptation of lives with the flood in the past and the present era. The ever increasing population and acceleration of industrial as well as
commercial set up left little space for the rural folk to move at the time of flood devastation. Arup Kumar Dutta mentions Dr D C Goswami, an eminent researcher on the Brahmaputra who believes that the character of flood in the valley has changed for the worse after the devastating earthquake of 1950. The flood deposit heavy silting. It causes the riverbed to raise and thereby reducing the capacity of the channels to carry water flow. The surrounding low lands get inundated. Besides the other devastation the greatest casualty is the agricultural sector. The flood evoked two contradictory effects on the people of Assam. While on the one hand it scares people making them homeless, on the other it sustains them by fertilising their soil and giving them an essential means of transport.

Erosion is the permanent loss of land due to the heavy current. People living along the river side not only lose their but also many lives sweep away in erosion. Majuli, the largest river island is the worst sufferer of erosion. The people living in the char areas The effect of erosion on human life is discussed in a later part of this chapter.

Fig. 3.3 : Erosion
3.1.6 River as a Defensive Force

Assam was the only province which could resist the invasion of the Mughal in an advantageous position only because of the presence of the mighty Brahmaputra. During 17th century the Lower Assam witnessed tussle between the Ahoms and the Mughals. History records during the battles most of the engagement occurred on water. The militant force of the Ahoms comprises of strong naval force with big boats, cannons and ships. The famous battle of Saraighat was fought on the waters. Lachit Borphukan, the chief of the Battle anticipated such a move from the Mughals. In order to carry out counter attack skillfully the Brahmaputra was used as a natural perimeter defence and augmented her banks with stockades and mud embankments. Arup Kumar Dutta (p 131) mentions about the Muslim historians who have paid tribute to the skills of Assamese boatmen. As they were familiar with the morphology of the river they could devise to find ways to defeat the invaders well. The primary
defence force in all the invasions during this period was supported by the river. Prafulladatta Goswami observes:

In medieval times the Assamese knew what role it (the Brahmaputra) could play in the maintenance of their existence. They set up fortification at strategic points on its bank, and they maintained an efficient navy to stem the advance of aggressors who usually came along the river... , and prayed to it thus: O Brahmaputra, be propitious towards me and dry the channel which flows by Hajo. (1982: 130)

The evidence for the same is also recorded by Dr Pradip Sarma in his Sadiyar Pora Dhuburiloi that the Brahmaputra used to flow near Hajo which gained immense importance during the Ahom- Mughal battle but the place was deprived of that glory as the stream got dried towards the later part of the 17th century. (2007:223)

The presence of the river itself provides defensive force because of the difficulties to conquer it easily.

Fig. 3.5 : Brahmaputra kite festival
3.1.7 Festivals

It is a recent trend to celebrate Brahmaputra beach Festival and Brahmaputra Kite Festival on the sandbank of the river during winter season. Such celebrations mark the cultural variety of the region with a view to promote the unity and thereby reinforcing the concept of attachment to the atmosphere of the river. People from all over the state as well as from other states of India arrive on the river bank to feel oneness with the river. The kite festival receives immense response from the young generation as they get the opportunity to revive an old pastime and that too on the bank of the Brahmaputra. Arrangements are also made for cultural night on floating ships. These attempts to get close to the river imply perennial relation with the river.

3.1.8 Modernisation and Urbanisation

Rivers and societies explore the ways in which human-river relations have shaped important historical transformation processes. The notion unfurls ways how sweeping changes have occurred in the society of Assam since the arrival of the British as well as the academic connections to Calcutta initiated by a few luminaries of Assam including Laksminath Bezbarua and his group in the 19th century. The water transport happened to play the seminal role in upholding the modern mindset of people disseminating the message of self realisation through elitist orientalism. The evidence for such an atmosphere was found in the write ups published in Arunodoi, the first Assamese journal, Baahi, Ramdhenu etc. under the leadership of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Hemchandra Barua, Gunabhiram Barua and others. For the people living in Assam the Brahmaputra turns out to be the sole agent in showing the path of modernisation leading to the establishment of the important towns in Assam. All the towns possess riverghaat which served as gateways of communication for all purposes before the beginning of modern means of
communication. Township grows in Guwahati, Tezpur, Dibrugarh, Sivsagar, Jorhat and Dhubri as these places have experienced the flow of people frequently from time immemorial. The river as the merchant route led to the formation of modern self of the Assamese people.

Almost all the towns of Assam are situated on the river banks. In the colonial period the river enlivened the British due to its commercial and administrative centricity. In connection with the setting up of township especially in Guwahati, Arup K. Dutta observes:

Guwahati, of course, had its importance since prehistoric times, yet when the British first arrived it was not much more than an outsized village. By establishing an army and civilian headquarters, opening out missionary schools, providing for medical treatment, and imparting to the place utmost importance on the streamer route, the British converted it into a township. (2001:196)

Towns of Assam viz. Dhubri, Goalpara, Tezpur, Jorhat, Sivasagar and Dibrugarh are very close the Brahmaputra River. The district headquarters, educational and administrative centres, commercial centres set up close to the river banks has harnessed the urbanisation process in the specific towns. Though the major parts of the Brahmaputra valley fall under a rural set up groups of people move to the town areas in searching for amenities. Assamese selfhood finds new direction confronting with non-rural functions or occupations and hence with urban oriented values, customs and behaviour. Concentration on the upcoming urbanisation process generates the attention on a two tiered lifestyle for the people of Assam. The people living in the town areas are endowed with an urban identity. The urban selfhood coexisted with the generalised countryside identity for the people.

The process of urbanisation unfurls layers of identity markers to its stakeholders. Different academic exercises connect the process of urbanisation to the formation of selfhood of the Assamese. The issues like
distribution of water in different countries, constructing dams by China for hydroelectric projects as an offshoot of the process of urbanisation makes the inhabitants of Assam rationally sentimental. These issues sometimes stand as clashes between the cultural memories attached with the river and the modernised attitude to the river.

The feeling of familiarity, intimacy, oneness and rootedness with the river is reflected in the nomenclature of different institutions and organizations. Many educational institute, cultural academies, technological set ups, residential colonies; lodge, awards etc. are found to bear the name of the Brahmaputra. The sentiment attached with such act shows a semiological process to indicate the sign of Assameseness. People envisage a close relationship and thereby projecting the river not merely as cultural landscape but as a process of cultural construction.

Out of the numerous proper names by the river the most noteworthy is the naming of the supersonic cruise missile called ‘BrahMos’. This portmanteau word was from the names of two rivers, the Brahmaputra of India and Moskva of Russia. To identify the contribution of India the use of the word ‘Brahmaputra’ is remarkable. Such historical decision reinforces the hierarchy of the value attached with the river. The word will be uttered in a sense of identifying the vast land. As far as the question of ‘BrahMos’ is concerned the values attached with the nomenclature signifies the heritage that the river is endowed with since the time immemorial.

3.2 Lives in Island, Islet and Char

The Brahmaputra houses River Island, islet and large sandbank areas called char. Human habitation in these areas explicitly determines the connectedness of the people with the riverine environment. Almost all the seasonal communal activities are determined by the annual change of the water course of the river. That the life of the river intermingles with all
types of lives over it establishes group identity as an offshoot of a strong sense of belonging. The question of the relative importance of identities does not arise in this riverine atmosphere. Majuli, the largest river island, in the world is situated in the bosom of the Brahmaputra in Jorhat District of Assam while Umananda, the smallest one is also in Guwahati in the midst of the river.

3.2.1.a Lives in Majuli

The day-to-day activities, cultural exercise, celebration of different festivals of the people in Majuli, the largest river island in the world as well as in the char areas get connected with the changing habit of the watercourse. The adventure with the water becomes a way of life. Arup Kumar Dutta (2005) in his book The Brahmaputra comments that the harmonious coexistence of so many ethnic and religious groups in Majuli testify to the Assamese ethos of tolerance. Regarding the formation of the river island Dutta records that a geological phenomenon around 1662-63 caused the creation of another channel of the Brahmaputra which merged into a section of the Dihing’s flow, giving Majuli its present character. (p.154) A legendary story is found to have existed regarding the formation of the river island. It is discussed in the chapter on myth.

The attraction of tourists not only from different parts of India but also from different countries around the world towards Majuli is due to the fact that it is the principal site of Vaishnavite faith, culture and practice. The humanitarian teaching of Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva and Mahapurush Madhabdeva as envisaged through the sattras which housed bhakat, the followers who maintained a celibate life status draws heterogeneous groups of people to this island. In the establishment of unity and harmony, the river’s surrounding contributed a lion’s share as it is the link to connect the other parts of the world to Majuli. The environmental hazard posed by the river turns out to be an ecological parameter that
necessitates socio-cultural adjustment on the part of the dwellers. The inhabitants consider the flood severe only when it enters their settlements. It seems life faces a jolt. Life is precarious for them. But their co-existence with the water forms their mindset in such a way that neither anxiety nor fear is noticeable from their behaviour. In spite of facing so many hurdles the people do not want to leave their own settlement rather they wait for the river to get calm in its own.

3.2.1.b Lives in Umananda

Umananda, the smallest river island of the world in the midst of the Brahmaputra is a religious abode for the people of Assam. Dr Maheswar Neog (1960) observes that it was created by Lord Shiva to provide pleasure to his consort, Uma i.e. Goddess Parvati. This river islet is mentioned in the Kalika Purana and Joginitantra as Bhasmakut and Bhasmashela respectively. The location of Umananda being in the bosom of the river near Guwahati attracts the attention of the passersby. The worshiping place in Umananda is attended by numerous pilgrimages especially on the day of 'Mahasivratri' to worship Lord Shiva. The socio-religious aspect is discussed in a different part of the same chapter deliberating people's religious attachment with the river. The myths connected with the Umananda are discussed in Chapter III.

3.2.2 Lives in Char

It was really adventurous to arrive in char areas after crossing by boats, walking through sand patches, playing with golden bubbles in the water due to sunlight, enjoying the picking up of snail and small fishes by children with little dress to cover their bodies, touching the river water, washing the faces while crossing the river bodies, the threatening big holes of erosion, the running of children after here and there, the peeping look of the villagers and above all, the easily adaptable quality of the villagers. All
these imprint lasting impression on me and my companions during the field
study. My pre-conceived knowledge about the char areas had undergone a
drastic change as soon as I arrived there.

The word ‘char’, in this context, refers to the shifting river island in
the bed of the Brahmaputra. Char is a characteristically linear
landform completely within or extending into a body of water. It is
typically composed of sand, silt, and small pebbles. The watercourse of the
braided rivers form char areas in their bed.

The vast sandy areas in the bosom of the river house a large number
of populations who artfully manage to construct their cultural identity with
turmoil as well as blessings of the river. The physical vulnerability of the
char areas constructs their livelihood with an alertness of destruction and
shifting. These areas are characterised by frequent physical changes
resulting from seasonal fluctuation of the fluvial process. The process of
humanisation in the Brahmaputra Chars began first at the western end of
the valley and gradually spreads upwards to cover its central and more
recently the upper part as well. As observed by Prudence J Jones (2005) in
his seminal book ‘Reading Rivers in Roman Literature and Culture’
remarks that rivers functions on a symbolic level. Rivers along with other
aspects of physical surroundings influence the societies that inhabit those
surroundings. At present almost all the permanent char of the Brahmaputra
are found to have human habitation. They have adapted to the environment
of the riverine landscape. Their life is as unsteady as the unsteady boats in
the rivers because during the flood the chars get submerged and some may
even get completely wiped away by erosion. The chars are 6 to 10 years
old. Chars are formed during the heavy floods.

The char areas taken for study belong to Barpeta and Dhubri
districts of Assam. The chars under study are Alopoti Char with Pahartoli
and Mandalpara area, Mizanor Char, Kalaidia Char and Majorchar under
Baghbor Sub-division of the Barpeta district while Japur Char, Fakirer Char, Charbastir Char, Salakura Char, Dhubir Char, Paspir Char and Birsing Char in Dhubri.

The char dwellers have passed three to four generations in these areas. The great famine of Bengal in and around 1905 brought these dwellers to this uninhabited naturally blessed land from the erstwhile East Bengal. (ref to A K Bhagwati) Conversation with the informants of the char areas reveals their preparedness for the struggles to be faced. They expressed their oneness with the changing trends of the watercourse. Formation of char areas is not common to all the rivers. Noted Geography A. K. Bhagawati (2014) observes that every river initiates the process of forming river islands, chars but only a few rivers have full formed char areas. The braided rivers like the Huang Ho and the Brahmaputra can produce such sandy river islands.

Two large chars are found in and around Majuli named as Suniya Chapori and Bhakat Chapori. Dwellers living in the Suniya Chapori belong to Muslim religion while People following Hindu religion live in the Bhakat Chapori. The dwellers are not of indigenous origin. They are immigrants from erstwhile East Bengal and Nepal. The adaptation of the culture of the Assamese people with whom they come into contact frequently is visible in their lifestyle. Adaptation with the temporariness of their dwelling does not dishearten them to lead their lives.

That the char dwellers are prepared for shifting their dwelling in an unpredicted atmosphere is reflected in many of their activities. A variety of shrubby bushes and grasses characterise the natural vegetation of the Brahmaputra. The semi permanency of the char does not allow big matured trees to survive. Their agriculture depends on the distinctive process of soil formation as a result of regular inundation. The watercourse
deposits silt every year creating different soil structures. The soil here is a mixture of fine sands, silt and clay freshly laid by the river. The sandy soil does not support all types of vegetable. Vegetables with longer roots are found in the sandy soil of the char areas. Onions, cabbages, brinjal, potatoes are cultivated by the dwellers. The neighbouring markets would suffer without their supply of vegetables. Being inhabitants of riverine environment the char dwellers are acquainted with the habit of fishing. But no family is found who earn their livelihood by fishing. During winter the small children get engaged in collecting fishes from the riverbeds. They can meet the daily need. If access fishes are caught then they bring it to market. The major cultivation is paddy.

3.2.2.a Adaptability with the Uncertainty of Existence

The most significant factor in their cultivation practice is that they are always prepared to part with their crop if the watercourse compels them to shift their dwellings. One of the informants shared his experience reporting that when flood swept away their residence in 2012 one of their uncles reaped his field of immature paddy to provide shelter to his family. Such incidents are common to the lives in the char areas. Another important observation made by the observer is that the ever changing water course of the Brahmaputra does not allow the char dweller to possess a concrete idea of the boundary of the household. They can point out to their previous owning land in the midst of the river. Sometimes the whole area of the char is swept away and thus the char and the village on it become a story overnight. As if as a balancer a new one emerges in the near vicinity as suddenly as the original vanishes. Life has to go on. They start building up their shelter afresh. They get adjust with exploring the possibility of living to adapt to the situation.
Their attachment with the sand is noteworthy. The absence of sand is a threat to them. The sand is the gift of the river. Grasses that grow in the areas like nol, khagori, dhonsa etc not only beautify the vast sandy areas but also provide them the building materials for their houses. The preservation of dried stalks of jute plants, ikora and dhonsa become a part
of their regular activities. When their houses are inundated the walls made up of dried sticks of the grasses are allowed to float in the water tied with a rope. The common practice of layering such dried stalks made walls with the paste of cow dung and soil is not practised in the char areas. Layering with cow dung and soil paste is not congenial when put in water. Evidence is found that the jute-stalk walls lasted for 10 years or slightly more. Their preparedness to preserve the seeds as well as the dried stalks was noticed in almost all the households.

From the conversation of the informants it was clear that they possess the capacity to make better arrangement to live but the frequently changing course of the water does not allow them to do so.

Their food ‘muri’ prepared by frying rice grains in hot sand is one of their culturally recognised images for identification. Offering of muri to the guest is a cultural practice which reinstates their attachment with the sand. Muri happens to be the staple food for them. In the days of disaster use of ‘muri’ saves them from as it can be taken without cooking. River water and sand make and remake their lives.

The floodwater carries logs of different size and quality. The char dwellers mostly use these for kitchen fire. Evidence is also found for using such logs to make some domestic furniture. A few carpenters are found in the study area.

The topmost part of the sandy area in the chars houses Government provided cattle rearing fields. While most of the time these fields are used for drying the necessary seeds as well as vegetables during floods these places serve as shelter for both humans and animals. No fees are to be paid for that. On the other hand, the waterlogged and marshy areas are breeding grounds for different edible aquatic flora as well as fishes.
It was unexpected on my part to find written literature on their relation with the river. A good number of creative writings are found around their attachment and oneness with the river. Some of them are found in the form of book while others are collected from souvenirs published on the occasion of Literary Meet. Abul Kalam Azad’s poem entitled “Bali Chaporit Mor Ghor” (My House is in the Sand Island) from the Anthology entitled Bali Chaporit Mor Ghor (2002) is a representative poem on life struggle of the char dwellers, their positivism with the glittering sand and their adaptability with the unpredictable natural disaster. The life for them is like the unstable boat in the river water. He writes ‘rhythm of life is captured in boat and oar/ In each flash of the oar, exists the wish’. Another representative poem composed by Miss Nazira Begum is ‘Bor Luit’ meaning ‘the Great Brahmaputra’. The poem expressed the mystery over how the respected river has been providing shelter to innumerable races in Assam. Assam being a tourist spot, being a land for integrity is the gift of the Brahmaputra. The river feels dejected when Assam faces some problematic days. It is only through the water of the river the Assamese people will secure a place in the heaven. The feeling of being oneness with river’s overall contribution is reiterated through the whole poem. Another poem entitled ‘Brahmaputra’ by Mohammad Majnur Rahman reveals the futility of life of the Assamese without the existence of the river because the river is the creation as well as the creator, the eternal stream in the mind of the inhabitants on its bank. Akram Hussain Sikdar’s poem ‘Bhumiputra Moi Luitporia’ (meaning ‘I am son of the soil, inhabitant on the bank of the Brahmaputra’) echoes the long history on the bank of the river. Being an inhabitant on its bank the speaker feels that he revives with the essence of the river after every struggle on its bank. So he considers his identity as a ‘luitporia’ meaning inhabitant on the bank of the
Brahmaputra. The search for the past and present beneath the scrap of the stone on the sandbank of the Brahmaputra is reflected in Hafijur Rahman’s poem ‘Byatikromi Kolom’ meaning ‘Exceptional Pen’. Rabikol Islam’s poem ‘Koisabon, Chorbasi aru Borluit’ meaning ‘reed called Kois, Chardwellers and the Brahmaputra’ expresses sadness over the fact that though they worship the river considering the river as a deity the river seems to stand as an enemy without understanding their feelings. But their attachment with river is so intense that they want to live in the bosom of the Luit. M Hussain Ali in his poem ‘Bhaal Pao Moi Char Chaapor’ meaning ‘I love the River Sandbank’ describes how the transparent river water and the sunny golden river bed make and remake the temperament of the char dwellers. Asserting the identity in the sandbank Neelkamal Bordoloi wishes that the foundation of his dream house should be in the sandbank. Out of the ravages directions of lives get changed, yet they struggle to fit themselves with the new accommodation’

3.3 Literature on the Brahmaputra

Literature provides a home to roam over searching for people’s ideology and self concept. The range of literature of a given community plays important role in the formation of various forms of social identity including national, ethnic and religious identification. The literary works function as process, product and a method for the feeling of oneness among the members of a society. The same reason clarifies the reasons for studying the literature based on the different aspect of the Brahmaputra River. Studies reveal that both creative as well as non-creative literatures are found to have existed with Brahmaputra as the main theme. Literature is one of the finest products of the civilisation. It is true that all the civilisations of the world are based on rivers. There is no end of imagination regarding the role and position of a river. Common people’s imagination cannot articulate the wonder of the river. But its utility is felt
by all. Hence, consciously or unconsciously the oneness with the river is expressed in different forms.

Water floats memories. Rivers are about the endless flow of experiences. Rivers serve to connect state to state, interior with exterior, the past to the present, but they also divide places and peoples from one another. These connections and divisions have given rise to a diverse body of literature that explores the nature, ranging from travel accounts, fiction and non-fiction writings etc.

The discourse on the Brahmaputra contributed to the formation of community identities. The thought of the river arrives whenever the question of greater interest is brought under discussion. To think of people as a whole and their strength to face the struggles of life brings to mind the vigour of the Brahmaputra River that we are acclimatised with. The river in its infinite variety has always been in the mind of the Assamese. The attachment with the river involves emotion, attitude, beliefs and behaviour.

Rivers serve to connect place to places, sometimes they also divide places and people from one another. These connections and divisions have given rise to a diverse body of literature that explores the nature in Assam ranging from travels account to other literary creation. Rivers being a sign of grace, fluidity and ease create emotion and feelings in us because they reflect the values and beliefs we learnt and experienced and experience in that setting. Since water is essential in life, it is a basic human nature that imagination will carry its value to the possible height. It makes meaning of life. And the meanings are articulated in a variety of form. Apparently, rivers and literature do not belong to the same category. Literature in relation to nature and natural affairs receive less attention than to social issues. Bringing both rivers and literary it is meant to give meaning to the flow and the form of river water. In the words of T. C. McMillin (2011):
Literature presents a special set of conditions in which we can study meanings. Literature involving rivers offers a rich resource for understanding meaning's fluidity. ... ... It represents a way of bringing together two complicated systems rivers and meaning. (p. xiv)

Different rivers mean different things to writers. From such a perspective the Brahmaputra may be termed a literary river as it has been a source of inspiration for writers of different ages to construct meaning of the experiences of the writers.

With respect to the Indian literature in general, the Mahabharata has reference to a place and a river called Louhitya in the Sabhaparva. (Rina Choudhury, 2007:62, 63).

The great Indian poet Kalidasa in the fourth chapter of his Raghubansam talked of the Louhitya crossing which Pragjyotishpura can be reached. While describing the political Geography of India of Raghu’s victory throughout India Raghu approached Pragjyotishpura which is said to be situated on the bank of the Louhitya.

In connection with the emergence of the creative literature in Assamese language Arup Kumar Dutta observes :

An indirect gift of the Brahmaputra to the people of Assam is the Asomiya language, the result of the synthesis taking place through centuries between the diverse ethnological and linguistic groups which the river drew in the valley and hills. A commonly accepted language making possible communication throughout the region had come into being even before the arrival of the Ahoms. (p. 204)

Coming to the arena of Assamese literature the Charjyapadas are probably the earliest instances of written literature of Assam. These
writings in the poetic form constitute the composition of twenty three Siddhacharjyas out of whom the first one was \textit{Luipad}. The term \textit{Luipad} comes from the combination of Luit meaning the Brahmaputra and Pada meaning country. His identity is provided by the place of his existence.

In \textit{Matsy Karati}, a composition of incantation in Assamese, the Louhitya is worshipped along with the other great rivers of India. In many of the scripts like these the reference of the river is found in respect of the sacred temple Kamakhya, the sacred Hindu temple dedicated to the worship of Mother Goddess Kamakhya. The flow of the river alongside the temple accelerates its beauty.

The great saint of the Assamese literature Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1568) identified himself with ‘Louhitya’ when he said he belonged to a \textit{grama} (village) vibrant with the wealth of Louhitya. Anata Kandali another remarkable poet of the Vaishnava era described his identity as an inhabitant of a village near the sacred river Brahmaputra. Ruchinath Kandali, another contemporary poet too put forward his identity saying that he belonged to the North bank of the river Brahmaputra.

During the middle of the nineteen century Assamese language and literature were enriched by the writings published in the journal \textit{‘Baanhi’}. A poem entitled ‘Brahmaputra’ was published in the 3\textsuperscript{rd} volume of the 1\textsuperscript{st} year of the journal. The poem brings association of the aesthetic mind of an onlooker with the alluring physical surroundings of the river. The graceful charm of the river in different times during the day enchants not only its inhabitants but also the aquatic lives on it. The physical description of the river suggests the feeling of awe and mystery. Another composition is found in the 1\textsuperscript{st} volume of the 1\textsuperscript{st} year. The immenseness of the river has appealed the hearts of the people in such a way that the presence of any larger river is nullified:
Luitor dore bornoi hot aase kuwa/ ghuri aha bosumati tothaapi nupuwa (Tell me where would you find a big river like the Luit/ Visit the whole earth, nowhere you will find it.)

A poem entitled ‘Asambasi’ (Inhabitants of Assam) is found in the first volume of ‘Assam Bandhu’, a News Bulletin published in the beginning of the nineteenth century. The poem bears important significance as it bears a call to imbibe the spirit of the river in order to accustom with the changes of the time. The river with its ever changing mode has been performing its responsibility throughout the ages towards the all types of lives on its bank:

Brahmaputra nodo sodaa jatnabaan nije kaarjye (The Brahmaputra river is always responsible in its work.)

The river’s role in making the people living on its bank independent in all aspects of life is stressed upon. There is no necessity of feeling insufficient or dependent on other:

Poromukho saai kiyoni thaakibaa sodaa (Why will you depend on others?).

One of the major luminaries of Assamese literature Laksminath Bezbarua felt pride being born in a river while moving with the stream of the Brahmaputra. Kishore Bhattacharjee (2008) comments on the contribution of Laksminath Bezbarua in the fields of Assamese Folklore:

Lakshminath Bezbarua can be termed as the Brother Grimm of Assam. He worked from a specific nationalistic agenda. He used folklore for consolidating Assamese identity and was involved in the project of framing a distinct hinterland for Assamese culture early in the twentieth century. (p. 4)
He was born on a boat that was anchored on the sand of the Brahmaputra. While deliberating the incident of his birth Laksminath Bezbarua imagined that the boat in which he was born must have rotten one day and was wiped away by the river water. Those water drops might have one day transform into vapours and again come back to the earth. A drop from there might have been used in the ink with which he wrote his autobiography. He wrote:

Listen O you Brahmaputra,  
Picture of Golden Assam’s heart  
May the boat of my life, in the end,  
Lose itself in your bosom. (own translation, from Autobiography)

Noted Poet Ajit Barua’s Academy winning poetry collection ‘Brahmaputra Ityadi Padya’ consists of his seminal creation ‘Brahmaputra’. Regarding the composition of the poem Ajit Barua writes, ‘... ... I have been wishing to write a poem on the river throughout my whole life. From 1937, when I first started writing and when I got a chance to stay on the banks of the river for a month’. In the Notes to the poem Barua himself wrote that he had a wish to construct his house on the bank of the river Brahmaputra. As it had not fulfilled he planted more than hundred flower plants on its bank. The poem celebrates how the river was generated in the background of a Buddhist. His narration echoes the crisis of the identity of the Brahmaputra during the 19th century. The Geographers of the 19th century were struggling with the question of the origin of the river whether the river is the same stream with Tsangpo which passes through the Shigatse in Tibet. The poet feels that the voice of Assam is carried from the other parts of India to the whole world by the wave of this great river. One of the parts of the poem entitled ‘Luitore Paani Jaabio Boi’ (O the water of the Luit, please flow) the Brahmaputra is conceived as the seer and as the contemporary for all. The link of the Brahmaputra with the people
speaking Assamese language is sought through the words stating that Assamese language will flow like the stream of the Brahmaputra.

Dr Maheswar Neog in his *Gurucharitkatha* (1980) written around the lives of Srimanta Sankardeva used a variety of terms to mean the river such as Luit, Burha Luit etc and commented that the history of the people and the language in Assam can be compared to the vast sandy bank of the river.

Nabakanta Barua (1926-2002) immortalized his name in Assamese literature by immensely contributing in the field of children literature. He was known as *Ekhud Kakaideu* as well as *Ekhud Kaka*. He devoted his life for the mental well being of the children who are the future for tomorrow. The poem entitled Luit is an attempt to enkindle the spirit for energizing the ‘Akoni’ (small children) with the knowledge of the past in the form of ‘xaadhu’ i.e. stories that are supposed to be delivered to them by the Luit i.e. the Brahmaputra.

In considering the questions of what constitutes a usable past for the people of Assam the children are summoned to awaken ‘Burhaluit’ (the age old Brahmaputra) who is sleeping dejected (‘aaman jiman ko’i’) in the edge of the hills. The composition of the poem is divided into four parts with the sub titles ‘Kharaali’ (non-rainy season), ‘Baarixaa’ (rainy season), ‘Jonak Raati’ (moonlit night) and ‘Sirakaal’ (ever). The first part projects the Brahmaputra as a worn out ragged old creature that is sleeping dejected beside the vigorous hills. But the speaker is not happy with the idea to let it sleep like that. He urges the young generation (Akoni) to be aware of their past and proposed them to face the Brahmaputra. The Brahmaputra is personified as a historian who can tell about past, present and future. The proposed request to the Brahmaputra is to tell the stories of the past. Story telling is the inheritance of the past. The oral tradition of story telling is one of the strongest threads of humanity across time and across globe. Storytelling is perhaps the most essential element which
separates human beings from the animals. By telling stories we are able to share our experiences with others. We do not learn mainly from instinct or experience, although these are certainly a part of human learning. We learn from the experiences of others. Others tell us these experiences in the form of story, and human knowledge is increased as more people think of ideas to expand upon these experiences and they pass their new found knowledge down through the generations. The ideal of a storytelling culture is one where individuals are not blocked from self expression, where the ideas emerging from that situation are shared in an organic (for want of a better word) and democratic way. Any storytelling culture, regardless of its moral setting or political background, can produce great examples of human expression and achievement.

The speaker believes that our 'Burhaluit' (the age old Brahmaputra) can tell thousands of such stories either heard or unheard. Hereby an attempt is made to consider the issue of story-telling in literary history as an attempt to capture, reorder, and even reinvent a sense of the self in society. Fundamental differences among societies can be grasped only by our interpreting the stories people tell about themselves and others, they remind us of Anderson's insights in Imagined Communities (1983) that the power holding individuals together in the community of the nation is at bottom narrative: that the story is the most intense and comprehensive expression of the culture, or the site where sensibility is both mirrored and actively shaped. My argument seeks to justify "the story" as important not only to identity-making in the nation or the society, but to the interpretation of the culture in literary history. The Brahmaputra proves to be the witness for the composite culture on its bank. Nabakaanta Barua in the concerned poem reiterates that it knows the communication between gods and human beings:

Devataayu/ maanuhere/ paatisile kathaa
So, the speaker is ready to listen to all the stories wholeheartedly. He also does not want to spare time; he wants it to listen it today.

The second part of the poem describes the crushingly effective mood of the river. The magnificent waves on its banks during the monsoon generating flood and causing damage to all types of lives frighten the inhabitants on its banks. The awe and wonder as the speaker feels is not a matter of fear rather it is a ‘blow of love’ (*maramar kil*) and ‘anger of sport’ (*dhemalir khong*). In spite of all its devastating nature the Assamese loves the Brahmaputra, so it is often addressed with all its dear names. The river is worshiped, is considered sacred. The river thus serves as the metaphor of life.

The third part of the poem entitled ‘*Jonak Raati*’ meaning moonlit night exhibits the sense of wonder in beholding the river as a link between the heaven and the earth. The water of the river reflects the full moon in the sky and hence another full moon is seen in the wave of the water:

*Eta jonbaai butaa tolaa aakaaxat/ aanto jonbaai nadir bukut*

*Eta paahaarar tingar xipaare/ aanto xilar saranat*

(One moon is on the starry sky, the other in the bosom of the river. One is on side of the edge of the hill while the other is on the foothills of the pebbles).

It is only with the help of the Brahmaputra our motherland is capable of enjoying the blessings of two moons. It proves to be a blessing for generations to have the heavenly abode created on this river valley.

The fourth part entitled ‘*Sirakaal*’ is an urge to the river to let them know about its plan to enrich our motherland with an aim in view. It is as if the river determines the plan for building and rebuilding the resources of the land throughout the history from primordial past. The offspring of our motherland worship it for being the source of its vegetation on its fertile
and alluvial valley. The knowledge regarding all these is passed from
generation to generation. The river works as an agent on the process. This
ability to pass on knowledge has aided many species through the
evolutionary path to today. The speaker ensures the future of the state with
his new dreams. The mental map of the state is drawn with the wave, sand,
water and bank of the river Brahmaputra. These criteria are addressed to
inquire about the well being of our motherland. The wave makes the land
fertile; the sand enchanted the banks with golden flowers of mustard; the
water provides thousands of routes for trade enhancing the financial aspect
of its inhabitants and the bank of the river would be made splendid with the
dreams of posterity:

*Aamaar natun xaponere hobi jaatiskaar.*

The above discussion encapsulates the Brahmaputra as a historian who
reminds us the age old tradition of the land of Assam by telling stories of
its alluvial valley. We are invited by the speaker not to keep ourselves in a
distance from the proximity of the legendary Luit. The speaker is feels
himself happy for being the agent to let the young generation a chance to
talk to the Brahmaputra.

Purabi Bormudoi’s *Santanukulanandan* (2005) is a philosophical
fiction projecting the Brahmaputra as a historian who is aware of the
eternity. Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel *Santanukulanandana*
narrates the story of the Brahmaputra civilisation giving the role
*sutradhara* meaning interlocutor. In order to get rid of the loopholes of
man made history the Brahmaputra is made the speaker of the story. A
‘mythic fiction’ *Santanukulanandana* is one of the remarkable evidences
which celebrates the role of traditional narrative in the unconsciousness of
people. The ineffable traditionally transmitted knowledge regarding the
birth of the Brahmaputra has been retold in the form fiction for the
comprehension of common people. That the myths of Shantanu and Parasuram can be understood as a process of Aryanisation receives lucid treatment in the form of conversation between the scholars of Kamarupa and China. The elevated sentiment about the river is given in the thinking process of Hiuen Tsang as summerised below:

Every country has a river because the river gives birth to a river and its civilisation. ... People become sentimental with any river. The river teaches humanity to live, it teaches to be fearless for death, (it) teaches man the value of love and makes man artist. Hence, people worship their river in every country. Louhitya is the river of worship for the people of Kamrup region. (own translation/ p.154)

Extending the symbolic meaning of the names it is said in the course of narration that the Brahmaputra is the father while the Ganga is the mother for nation. Their assimilation is responsible for the existence of so many human groups who happen to inhabit this part of the world. The identity that is provided to the divine figure i.e. the Brahmaputra is the role of a historian. The history of the land as a pilgrimage of solidarity is told and retold through the narratives which establish the Brahmaputra as the highest reality with which the people on its bank feel absorbed.

The most influential factor in the Santanukulanandan is the call to establish the oneness of human race irrespective of caste and creed. Human blood is same. This very fact is unfolded in the valley of the Brahmaputra itself. In the book Brahma informed his son Brahmaputra all men are same and the history of this land shows how the banks of the river are endowed with the comfortable assimilation of various groups of people from different parts of the people.

Mrinal Talukdar’s work ‘Tsangpor Pora Brahmaputrolo’ is a narration on his journey from the eastern most part of the river to Guwahati
through the water route. An attempt to build up his personality with the very proximity of the river the narrator wanted to feel the touch as well as atmosphere over the river. His experiences with the changing mood of the river allow him to feel identification with the river. In the epic journey he began as a tourist but ends up as one who feels himself attached with the Brahmaputra. The divergence and the inconsistence of the river in its longs course frightens the average boatman which becomes clear when the writer’s proposal to take a voyage from Saikhowaghat in Tinsukia district of Assam to Guwahati.

A wide range of poetry is found to have picturised the Brahmaputra from a perspective of identifying factor for the people of Assam. Reflecting on the attachment of the people with the river the poetic discourses suggest the composite texture of Assamese culture and a sense of higher reality connected with it. In Laksminath Phukan’s ‘To the Brahmaputra’ the river is presented as carrying the weal and woe of the community on its bank. Mitchell’s (1994) comment on the connection of natural element and human life is worth mentioning:

The connections, therefore, between landscape and identity and hence memory, thought and comprehension are fundamental to understanding of landscape and human sense of place.

Mitchell sees it as a part of a process by which identities are formed. Laksminath Phukan’s poem sees the river as memorising the hidden pangs of loss and parting and banner of might. The Brahmaputra remains as witness to the history of the making and remaking of the nation. The river as the poet feels conveys this by the gargling sound during summer.

Many of the famous histories on Assam and Kamrup bear testimony on the role of the Brahmaputra in the lives of the people of Assam. Gunabhiram Barua in Asom Buranji named a lineage named Brahmaputra
Bansa. John M'Cosh in his *Topography of Assam* (1837) refers to a Table drawn up by the Secretary Mr. Jas. Prinsep published in the Journal of the Asiatic Society. The table records the names of rulers of ancient Kamrup. It started with a dynasty called ‘the Brahmaputra Dynasty’. The rulers recorded under the Brahmaputra dynasty are *Shusanku* or *Arimatu*, *Phainhuya*, *Gujanke*, *Shukaranku* and *Mriganku*. As discussed in the Chapter IV there are numerous versions scattered in different parts of Assam about the first ruler i.e. Arimatu or Arimatta.

Rita Choudhury, one of the prominent writers of Assamese literature compose her historical novel *Deolangkhui* (2006) around Arimatta who was undoubtedly a great ruler of ancient times. An admixture of fact and fiction *Deolangkhui* unfurls a few untold facets of the history of this land about the ancient administrative strategies.

Besides Assamese works instances are also found in writings of people from the other parts of the country who happened to be in touch with Assam. Anything composed about the blessed land of Assam without the mention of Assam will remain incomplete.

Dattatreya Balkrushna Kalelkar popularly known as Kaka Kalelkar, a Gandhian leader of the Indian Independence in his article “I Know Assam” expresses his wonder in the absence of the motherly attitude in the Brahmaputra after witnessing the havoc wrought by the river near Dibrugarh. He considered the river ‘a goddess meeting out both life and death with equal indifference.

The grandeur and beauty of the Brahmaputra led Mahatma Gandhi to use the identification of Assam by the river. In 1921 in Young India, a weekly journal in English Gandhi wrote an article about his fourth visit to Assam entitled “Lovely Assam” which began with the expression ‘I am
writing these at Tezpur on the banks of the mighty banks of the Brahmaputra'.

Chakravarti Rajagopalachari, the last Governor General of India wrote in the Young India, 1922 about his visit to Assam with the title ‘From the Brahmaputra’. It is one of the best evidences of how the magnificence as well as splendour of the river let one to identify the land with its name.

Overwhelmed by the scenic beauty of the river Swami Vivekananda

As found in A Comprehensive Biography of Swami Vivekananda (1990) by Sailendra Kumar Dhar Swami Vivekananda expressed his feelings on the Brahmaputra through the following words:

“The Brahmaputra valley is incomparable in its beauty.”

The discussion in the previous chapters strongly supports the occurrence of the Brahmaputra in creative works. Right from the beginning of civilisation it is the water body that is supporting human life. People are thrilled and awed to think of the link of the earthly river with divinity. When used in literary work the rivers no more remain only a physical water body. Simile, metaphor, personification uplift the river to a height of a divine entity. The role of the river in moulding the mindset of the people on its bank finds its manifestation in the creative works. It is noteworthy that literary work around the river is found in many languages other than Assamese and English.

The river tells many tales. Memories attached to the rivers continue to flow in everyday’s experience whether in smooth or rough days. Long memory of hydrological property leads to the creation of the tales throughout ages. As far as the Brahmaputra is concerned the river dominates the landscape of Assam.
3.4 Riverine Influence on the Assamese Language

The influence of a river in the language of the land through is a peculiar concept. Two most influential terms are ‘ujoni’ and ‘namoni’ meaning the upper and the lower respectively used as Upper Assam and Lower Assam referring to the eastern and western parts of the state. The very idea of upper and lower is connected to the flow of the Brahmaputra River. In the same way, the expression ‘ujai jowa’ and ‘bhotiyai juwa’ meaning going upward and going downward referring to the eastward and westward journey respectively suggest the flow of the river.

A good number of Assamese proverbs bear suggestive meaning with the inclusion of the word ‘luit’. Most of such proverbs imply the strength of the river. Some examples are given below:

*Luitehe jaane botha kimanoloi bohe* meaning Only the Luit knows how much the oar go deep suggesting only the concerned one how much to toil knows in order to attain goal. Here, Luit implies the hugeness and intensity of the task.

*Luitot bali bheta* meaning putting impediment with sand on Luit suggesting trying in vain to block a huge force. For the people living in Assam the river bears the most powerful energy.

There are other proverbs with the reference of river in general with various connotation of the river.

The chapter analyses the attachment of the river in both concrete and metaphorical terms. Significance in terms of human habitation inspires people to imagine its role and worth in the form of both fiction and non-fiction. The comfortable habitation produced by its alluvial atmosphere provides materials for culture and art. The next chapter focuses on the sacred narratives as well as folk epics that carry record of the Brahmaputra considering it to be a stable identity marker for the people on its bank.