CHAPTER-6

6 LEGENDS AND NATIONALITY QUESTION
A REVIEW ON ASSAM

Legend is conversational narrative whose reported events are set in historical (as opposed to myth’s cosmological) time and whose twelling makes possible debate concerning the “real world” occurrence, and/or efficacy of the events, characters, folk beliefs, and/or folk customs described. Deriving from the Latin word legenda (to read), legends were originally narratives about the lives of saints and were read aloud during medieval Christian church services. ¹

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK (NIGERIA AS A ROLE MODEL):

The movement to keep a community together under a political system is called nationalism. Smith defines nationalism “an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity on behalf of a population deemed by some of its members to constitute an actual or potential nation” (1991:73). We noted that nations have a specific mode of being and coming into existence. Similarly, nationalisms are patterned according to the model of the nation. A distinction can be made between what might be characterized as rational Western nationalism and organic, mystical Eastern nationalism. Following this line, Smith distinguishes between:

1. Territorial nationalism, with the following historical reference points:
   a. Pre-independence movements: anti-colonial nationalism;
   b. Post-independence movement; integration nationalism;

2. Ethnic nationalism, with the following historical reference points:
   a. Pre-independence movements: secession and Diaspora nationalism;
   b. Post-independence: irredentist and “nan” nationalism.
After closer examination, it can be discovered that the elements of ethnic nationalism strongly rooted in an anti-colonial, territorial nationalism. Anti-colonial nationalism begins as a movement directed against the colonial rule, attempting to replace colonial rule with a new state-nation. The concept of the nation is first defined in civic and territorial terms, opposing the foreign rule. Later on, this nationalism transforms into ethnic nationalism on account of the numerous different ethnic groups struggling for political and economic supremacy. Nigeria is the burning evidence in support of this type of nationalism where construction of a Nigerian cultural and political identity became an extremely difficult task due to the absence of recognized dominant ethnic and severely competitive relations between the ethnic groups.

Legends play a very much decisive role in ethnic as well as national assertion.

"What is more important in connection with legends is the fact that they are stories of liminality, stories at the border of a historical time, a time lost in the mist of a history. Legends also stress the importance of continuity within a group and of handing down wisdom from generation to generation. These stories are the intermediaries as much between the ancestors and the characters in the novel as between the ancestors and the readers of the novel."²

Recognizing the tremendous role that the educated have in disseminating nationalist ideals among the common people, Miroslav Hroch distinguished three main phases of any nationalist movement according to the character and role of the persons involved. Phase A is characterised by the work of activists in scholarly inquiry into and dissemination of an awareness of cultural, social, and sometimes historical attributes of the non-dominant group—but without specifically formulating any national claims and demands. The second period, phase B, is characterised by the emergence of a new type of activist who carries on the struggle for cultural awareness within the ethnic group to which they belonged. The aim of this type of activist is to gather as many supporters
as possible for the creation of the new nation. It is in this stage that cultural awareness comes to be translated into national awareness. The last period, phase C, represents the mass movement set in motion by the emergent national consciousness that has been created

We may cite Nigeria for implementation of the above theoretical framework. Nigeria is a union of states and a nation. It has 36 states and one capital territory. It became a very much complicated matter to determine the cohesive factor to stand Nigeria as a unified nation. Because there are 250 to 400 ethnic groups, many having subgroups with considerable social and political importance. Languages also could not be placed as the means of unity for identity as there are 350-400 estimated languages. Religion is also not a strong indicator for strengthening the national identity as 47% of the population is Muslim, about 35% is Christian, and more than 18% of the population adheres to indigenous religions.

But there were few influential ethnic groups like Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa and Fulani. The Nigerian found out that emergence of ethnic consciousness (especially Igbo and Yoruba) was more important before the emergence of Nigerian Nationalism. Several types of association became engaged over emphasized on the education in regional spheres as they had conceived the idea that the role of educated in disseminating and spreading the ideals of nation and nationalism through writing is very much encouraging. One Achebe, a Nigerian writer from Igbo community used commemorative narratives describing the colonial exploitation and references to stories, folktales, legends and sayings particular to his own Igbo culture. His novel "Things Fall Apart" shares some of the narratives with sufficient fabrication and symbolization. The contributions made by Achebe surrounding the Igbo society do not imply his Igbo superiority over the other ethnic groups in Nigeria but it is a process of purging the African soul of Years of denigration.

"By holding it up as an example of recovery from the obliviated past, Achebe hopes to bring about a similar process of change in the cultures of the other ethnic groups. "Here then is an adequate
revolution to espouse – to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement. And it is essentially a question of education”

Like Nigerian nationalism analysed in three phases by Miroslav Hroch according to the character and roles played by the persons, we may also classify Indian nationalism in three categories. This has been mentioned in the first chapter. The interest and emphasis laid by the Indologist, Academicians, and Missionaries in India for cultural awakening, for uncovering the oral treasures undoubtedly receive phase A. Indigenous leaders, teachers and scholars’ dive in the sea of ethnicity with their intellectual and literary contribution, who by their effort, reminded each community about its nostalgic past, made them aware of their racial and cultural identity, can be categorized in phase B. Mass participation in the freedom struggle under the bold leadership of M. K. Gandhi following a series of peasant riots can be recognized as phase C.

THE CASE OF ASSAM:

Similar is the case of Colonial Assam, when the native writers of B category of the above theoretical framework by Smith, tried to build the Indian nationalism by raising first the Assamese ethnic nationalism by discovering and fabricating the past history, myths and legends.

The same Nigerian model can be implemented in Assam too. The first phase was not crowded with philologists and linguists in NE India as no field data from NE India was found to be included in their contribution like the remaining part. The Phase “A” in Assam includes basically the American Missionaries (as a part of their evangelization process), and the British administrators and their family members (to serve their administrative purpose), who collected oral resources and cultural heritage, wrote grammars
and dictionaries in the vernacular languages. In that undivided Assam, G. H. Damant's "Two Manipuri Tales" in the Indian Antiquary as early as 1875 and 1877, C.A. Soppitt's "A Historical and Descriptive Account of the Kachari Tribes of North Cachar Hills", with specimens of Tales and Folklore in 1835, A.J. Primrose's "A Manipuri Grammar"- to which are added some Manipuri proverbs, J.D. Anderson's "Kachari Folktales and Rhymes" in 1895, P. R. T Gurdon's "Assamese Proverbs" in 1896, J Shakespear's "Mizo le Vai Thawnthu", a collection of Mizo tales in 1898, Mrs. Rafy's "khasi Folktales" in 1920 etc were worth notable.

The second phase "B" was characterized by the Romantic litterateurs of Assam where the luminaries were Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Manik Chandra Baroa, Bhadrasen Bora, Gopal Chandra das, Jogesh Chandra Tamuli, Hem Chandra Barua, and Benudhar Rajkhowa etc. This phase has been discussed in chapter IV.

The phase C is found to be identical with the Indian scenario.

The synchronization of the Romantic period of Assamese literature (1890-1940) with the rise of Indian nationalism resulted a numerous writing concentrating the plot Assam whether it was poetry, drama, fiction and other literary pieces. Though an anti-British campaign was going on in this plot of land roughly after the Sepoy mutiny in 1857, the boundary of nativity hardly overcame Assam or hardly touched the concept of Bharatbasa. It is also reflected in the literary achievements of the native writers of Assam. It was probably Gandhi's Visit to Assam in 1921 after which the idea of motherland had been shifting gradually from Assam to Bharat.

Among the various genres of Assamese literature of the Romantic period, dramas played a very much crucial role in invoking nationalistic aspiration in the minds of the populace. Because dramas are the most effective medium for conveying ideas and messages, even for the illiterate mass that can immediately draw inference, what the dramatist really wants to say. This is the reason why folk-dramas are still prevalent wearing new looks. It is to educate the unaware mass, to entertain them, to serve as a health care campaign,
sometimes a voice of protest against the ruling class and even as a political propaganda in some societies. Sankardeva chose the *Ankiya Nats* (medieval folk drama on mythical theme) both as a means of amusement and as a media to glorify the greatness of god. Shakespeare and Kalidas (called as the Shakespeare of India) are so popular among all classes of people of all regions.

But Legends come to this discussion for the fact that most dramas composed and staged by the Romantic litterateurs were on legends and legendary figures of pre colonial Assam. Numerous ballads were also created after these heroes or heroines. Figures like Joymoti, Mula Gabharu, Lachit Barphukan, Gadadhar Singha, Chandrakanta Singha etc were the common themes of the dramas, ballads and songs of the writers of that period.

**FEW ASSAMESE LEGENDARY FIGURES OF THE AHOM PERIOD**

(a) **MULA GABHARU**:

In 1532, the Turbak, a lieutenant general of the Sultan of Banga, invaded Assam. The Ahom General Phrachenmung Bargohain breathed his last in the battle of Pichaliparia at the hands of Turbak. Having heard this pathetic news, Mulagabharu, the consort of late Phrachenmung set out to the battle field on elephants’ back accompanying other five valiant ladies. They fought bravely and sacrificed their lives.

(b) **JOYMOTI**:

Joymoti secures a reverend position among the legendery heroines of Assam who became a victim of political terrorism created by few bureaucrats after the great battle of Saraighat (1671 a.d.). Lalukkhola Barphukan, a tyrant adviser of an immature king Loraroja, expedited to cut some limbs of the eligible young lads to refrain from the norm that non injured youths are preferred to for enthronement. Gadapani (1680-1696), a much debated popular youth hide himself to escape from this expedition. The soldiers of the
expedition tortured his wife Joymoti till her death when she refused to tell her husband’s location. It is said that she had embraced inhumane atrocities deliberately in a place called Jerenga. Later on, her husband Gadapani enthroned bearing the name Gadadhar Singha putting an end to the anarchy created by his former oppressors. Lots of lore have been created regarding her heroic sacrifice in later ages, especially, during the freedom movement of India.

(c) LACHIT BARPHUKAN:

This Ahom lieutenant general is known for his valour, patriotism and promptness. He fell back the Mughal army under the general Ramsingha at a place called Saraighat in 1671 A.D. He beheaded his maternal uncle for the latter’s lapses to erect a bank for their convenience. There is a lore to glorify him that he uttered like “deshatko momai danggor no hoy” (the maternal uncle is not greater than the motherland) in the battlefield to make the soldiers swift and panicky.

A notable aspect of early twentieth –century Assamese drama is that some of the leading playwrights have dug into Assam’s glorious past to find out materials for drama through which the people can be made aware by contrast of their country’s plight. The historical figures of Joymoti, Gadapani and Lachit Borphukan are held in high esteem by the people of Assam for their almost miraculous heroism and self sacrifice for the cause of their motherland. Padmanath Gohain Barua wrote Joymoti (1900), Gadadhar (1907) and Lachit Borphukan (1915) and Lakshminath Bezbaroa wrote Joymati Kunwari, Chakradhvaj Simha and Belimer (1915). Patriotism and nationalism are the driving spirit of all these dramas. Nakul Chandra Bhuyan portrayed the devastation of the six hundred year old Ahom kingdom, the betrayal of Badan Barphukan by inviting the Burmese to the native land and Purnananda, the prime minister, as the full moon in a clouded sky, in his drama Badan Barphukan (1927). He also wrote another drama Chandrakanta Simha (1931) where Chandrakantasimha, once a weak ruler, has been presented as a brave soldier to defend his country. Another two plays based on legendary figures are
Mulagabharu (1924) by Radhakanta Handique and Chatrapati Shivaji (1927) by Atulchandra Hazarika.

"Handique expressly tells us in his preface that his aim in writing this play is to inspire 'patriotism and love of national life'. Dramatizing the story of Mulagabharu who, along with her husband, gave up her life for the sake of her motherland's independence, this play, through its action, characters and dialogue aims at inspiring nationalist and patriotic feelings in the audience. The playwright's pining for freedom from foreign domination echoes in such lines as:

What's there in this life
If freedom is lost?

There is no happiness even in heaven
When the noose of servitude is around your neck.\(^5\)

Jyotiprasad Agarwala, a nationalist writer of the Romantic period borrowed both mythical and legendary figures to his poem "Asomiya deka lorar Ukti" (statement of the Assamese youth)

Moye asomar
Moye bharatar

Moye deka lora agnimoy
Moye bharatar nabin surya

Purbachalat bajao turjiya

Moye asomiya

Pragjyotishar,

Moye asomiya sonitpurar,

Nabin jugar

Kumar bhaskar moi

Moye asomiya sharaighatar

Choka tarowal lao lachitar,

Momai tamuli garh

Durjay agnigarh moyei

Nai mor samasar\(^6\)
(From Assam
and Bharat
The fiery youth am I.
The newly rising sun
Blow trumpet in the eastern hilly regions.

Assamese am I
From Pragjyotishpur,
And Sonitpur,
Of new era
Kumar Bhaskar I am,
I am Assamese from Sharaighat
Bearing the sharp sword of Hero Lachit at my hand,
The huge Momai Tamuli bank
The invincible Agnigarh I am
None to compete with me)

Jyotiprasad also used the patriotic zeal of Lachit Barphukan and
Joymoti in the song composed in the early twentieth century—

Luitor parore ami deka,
lora moribole bhoy nai
Tahani lacite
eri thoy joware
pora janani tor
Laghu lanchana
dukhe bezare
ajio je napare ore?

(, we, the youth from the bank of the river Luit, fearless for death
From the very moment of the departure of Lachit, the motherland
is overwhelmed with disgrace, grievances till now)

Again,

\textit{Luitore pani jabi o boi}
\textit{Sandhiya luitor pani sonowali}
\textit{Chahare nagare jabi o boi}
\textit{Joyare kiriti deshe bidesh}
\textit{Chahare nagare phuribi koi}

\textit{Matire dehati eri joymoti}
\textit{Jyotire dehati loi}
\textit{Jautijugia kiriti rakhila}
\textit{Chaneki jagataloi}

\textit{Etupi dutupi teje tini tupi}
\textit{Deshar hoke joyai gole bilai}
\textit{Asomar jiyari asomar bowari}
\textit{Etupi chaku/u jowa pelai}

(Go on flowing, the water of Luit
The yellowish water of evening Luit
Keep on flowing through towns and villages
Tell the glamour of Joymoti far and abroad)

She adorned herself with light
forshaking the temporal body and leaving
glamour for ever

Go on flowing, the water of Luit
One, two, three drops of blood
Joiya gave for the motherland
You, the daughter and daughter in law
Shed a drop of tear)
LEGENDS FROM THE KARBI SOCIETY

The legendary heroes deserve a reverend position in the Karbi society; an Indomogoloid tribe of Assam. One such figure is Thongteron who was the chief lieutenant general during the reign of the Jayantia king Brichungkoida Timung. Thongteron became very much popular for his victory over the neighbouring kingdoms and non-Karbi heroes. His valour and heroism resembles with that of Lachit Borphukan, the legendary Ahom hero of seventeenth century Assam. But he had been killed brutally by his own jealous officers and soldiers in conspiracy like the miraculous death of Julius Caesar.

In the ups and downs of the Karbi history, they had to live like servants many times even under the monarchy of the Kachari people. This can be discovered by the folk history of Rongpharpi Rongbe, a Karbi legendary heroine. When a person of the Kachari king supplied milk to a domesticated tiger from the breast of Rongpharpi Rongbe, the former was cut into pieces by the latter. After that she escaped from the field with other Karbi fellows.

CONCLUSION

These legendary figures, once historical figures with patriotic overlapping and who served as the most reverend statues for the patriots during the British regime, have still been serving the province as well as the country in national and ethnic elevation. Movies were made on their biographies highlighting unprecedented sacrifice. Huge statues have been erected in the doorway of the cities, institutions have been named after the legendary figures, further research aptitude have been generated on their lives and works. Slogans were manipulated in various protests and in voice for the rightful and justified one. For example, during the six years long Student’s movement to deport the
illegal migrants from the state, slogans like---- *kone kole Lachit nai? Hazar Lachit aguaai* (who says there is no Lachit now? Thousand Lachits march ahead) were uttered. The same slogan was shouted by the women wing substituting Lachit for Mula Gabharu. Similarly, the Karbis also started naming their institutions and organizations after their communal legendary figures like Rangsina, Thong Nikbe etc. Historical figures with heroic self sacrifice for a greater cause or extra-ordinary commitment for the sake of the community or for the province, are revitalized as legendary figures when the country or the community falls in jeopardy whether genuine or artificial. Here, literature shares the upper hand by borrowing their exaggerated activities through ballads, folksongs and fiery slogans. Contraction and expansion of space to glorify the hero/heroine vary according to the need of the hour. For example, Rangsina, Thong Nikbe, Gambari Sikhla etc were communal heroes who could not think beyond their respective communities, but their ethos had been utilized for a much greater cause i.e. to drive away the British from India. Reverse is also true when Mahatma Gandhi or Subhas Chandra Bose is interpreted for a group interest.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


2 Csilla Czimbalmos, “Using Literature as a strategy for nation building, A case study from Nigeria” File://A\Csilla%20Czimbalmos%20Using%20Literature%20as%20Strategy... downloaded on 25/11/06

3 Ibid, 3

4 Ibid, 4


6 Satyendranath Sharma, *Jyotiprasad Rasaniwalia*, (Guwahati: publication Board, 1999), 591-594

7 Ibid, 455

8 Ibid, 455