CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Jaymati Kunwari or Sati Jaymati is one of those major socio-historical figures who have occupied a commendable space in the public imagination of the people of Assam in the contemporary times. Throughout the last century, and till today, she has been celebrated in Assam as a patriot and a martyr, promoted as a national hero, cherished as a symbol of the ideal wife and mother and the adobe of feminine virtues, and even worshipped as a divine incarnation. Along with other historical characters like Lachit Barphukan, her story of self-sacrifice has found place in school text books in Assam. Her importance in the socio-cultural life of the Assamese people has remained so vital that instances of her representation can be traced, in varied themes, in almost all forms of art and literature produced in Assam at different times during the last hundred and twenty years.

The beginning of the twentieth century witnessed renowned personalities of Assamese literature composing poems and plays on the character of Jaymati Kunwari. Padmanath Gohainbarua, who would later become the first president of Asom Sahitya Sabha, wrote a play on Jaymati in 1900. This play was followed by another play by the greatest master of modern Assamese literature Sahityarathi Lakshminath Bezbaroa in 1915. While Rupkonwar Jyotiprasad Agarwalla, one of the strongest pillars of Assamese nationalism and art and culture, was seen making the first ever Assamese film on the character of Jaymati, Bishnu Prasad Rabha, another pillar of same stature, was seen composing songs on her. This tradition of literary and cultural representations continues even in the present times at the twenty first century. From noted filmmaker Manju Borah’s celluloid reconstruction to novelist Juri Borah Borgohain’s literary rendition or from popular singer Zubeen Garg’s musical tribute to some amateur theatre troop’s theatrical representations, the character of Jaymati continues to be a vibrant presence in the field of literature and art. Social institutions have been formed at
various parts of Assam for celebrating, commemorating, promoting and drawing inspiration from the character of Jaymati. Since her first public appearance in the print media during the 1890s till the present times, a good number of plays, poems, songs, novels have been written on her. Apart from that, the character of Jaymati Kunwari has been portrayed in two major Assamese feature films, along with a good number of short films and documentaries. Throughout this journey of representations, different themes and meanings have been imposed on the character of the woman in different artistic, theatrical, literary as well as cinematic interpretations and constructions of Jaymati Kunwari and her story.

Noted critic, social thinker Nagen Saikia, in an introduction to a book on Jaymati published in 2010, has commented thus: “The name of Jaymati comes first in any discussion on the character of Assamese women.” (Phukan viii) (translation mine) Such a comment by a man of erudite scholarship on Assamese society and history means a lot for a researcher working on the character of this woman figure in the twenty first century. Today, almost every Assamese person knows about Jaymati Kunwari or, at least, has heard her name. But things were not similar before the first appearance of the character in print media (through an article by Ratneswar Mahanta in Jonaki) in the 1890s. Little reference of her can be found in the historical as well as literary narratives produced in Assam before that.

Given the scarcity of historical and literary representations before the character’s introduction into the print media, the transformation of the character from an apparently unknown historical figure to a popular household name in Assam invites critical attention and catapults diverse types of questions towards the nature of her representations. Why, towards the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, was there a sudden rise of interest among the learned Assamese people in this character? What purpose could this character serve to those writers and thinkers? How is the emergence or ‘discovery’ of this character connected to the socio-political, historical and cultural context of that time? How has the character been appropriated to the changing ways of lives, thoughts and the social, political and cultural environments of Assam throughout a period of more than a century? What are the
politics of representation of the character in the different cultural texts produced by different artists/writers at different times of history? As these questions start emerging, the character of Jaymati Kunwari gradually ceases to remain a mere character in plays or novels or movies or poetry or in historical accounts. Her stature surpasses the limits of literary or artistic or aesthetic criticism and one cannot help plunging into the vast and complex field of social sciences that include political, economic, historical, anthropological, geographical and cultural studies of the contexts of her representations. In case of Jaymati Kunwari, such a study not only helps us in understanding the diverse representations of the character at the backdrop of its contexts but also, in reciprocation, helps us arrive at a better understanding of the contexts under the light of the politics behind the character’s reconstructions.

When I talk about the politics of representation in literary and historical texts, I allude to Hayden White’s critique of modern historiography. In his book *Metahistory*, Hayden White argues that historical writings in general can be seen in the form of narratives. While developing his idea of ‘history as narrative’, White opines that all historical explanations are rhetorical and poetic by nature (White *Metahistory* ix) and the narratives can be seen in the form of a “coherent and ordered representation of events or developments in sequential time” (Thompson 132) For White, historical texts in the form of literary artifacts erase the distinction between history and fiction, thereby raising questions over the claims of truth and objectivity in the narration of the factual details. White terms this situation as nondisconfirmability. (Fulbrook 29) He developed his argument around his study of historians like Michelet, Ranke, Tocqueville, and Burckhardt and a group of Western philosophers of history like Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Croce. (White *Metahistory* x) He discovers that the authors of histories follow four distinct rhetorical styles or tropes – metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony – in their interpretation of the historical facts and incidents (Thompson 132) and four different literary genres, or ‘emplotment’ as he calls them, – Romance, Tragedy, Comedy, and Satire – in order to tell their versions/interpretations of the historical incidents in their stories. (White *Metahistory* 426) White argues that the authors he analyzed had certain specific motives behind their historical writings,
certain other messages that they sought to convey, and the historical past functions as the medium of their expression. Thus, historical works carry the readers directly to the conclusion the authors have in mind and the ideas that the authors design to convey.

Hayden White observes that, as historical narratives move forward from empirically validated facts or events, in the process of history writing, they necessitate imaginative reconstructions on the part of the writer to place the facts or events in a coherent story. Besides, historical narratives represent only a selected set of historical events, which is determined by the author. Hence, the possibility of truth becomes limited, conditional and partial. Thus, White’s arguments reduce historical narratives to the level of verbal fictions on the ground that their contents are as much ‘invented’ as ‘found’. Besides, the forms of historical narratives are more similar to their literary counterparts, like Romance, Tragedy, Comedy, and Satire, than that of objective empiricism and social theorisation in social sciences. (White *Tropics* 82) Narratives, held by the historian’s assumptions about the forces influencing the nature of causality, try to explain why events happened. But the assumptions of the writer may get influenced by different factors that include individual or combined elements like race, culture, class, religious views, geography, region, political affinities, ideology, gender, etc. So, for White, historical narratives are nothing more than individual statements over certain events or facts, conditioned by certain inherent intentions on the part of the historian. Our study of the historical texts and the literary works on historical events in this thesis will be guided by White’s articulation of the author’s intentions behind his/her narration or representation. We shall not study the historical documents for the purpose of validating their claim for truth but for understanding the author’s intentions behind his/her representation.

**Jaymati – historicity and first entry into print media:**

The story of Jaymati Kunwari is connected to an important period in the history of Assam in general and the Ahom rule in particular. Based in the second half of the seventeenth century, the story is connected to the restoration of order
and power in the Ahom kingdom with the advent of Gadapani alias Gadadhar Singha of the Tungkhungiya clan to the throne. There are debates over the actuality of the woman character as most of the history books as well as chronicles or Buranjis written at different times don’t mention anything about Jaymati Kunwari. Haliram Dhekiyal Phukan in his Assam Buranji, published in 1829, does not mention anything about Jaymati Kunwari. Gunabhiram Baruah also leaves Jaymati unnoticed and unnarrated in his Assam Buranji which was published in 1884. Edward Gait, who based his historical research on the hitherto found Buranjis in Assam, does not mention anything about Jaymati in his The History of Assam which was first published in 1906. The exclusion of Jaymati Kunwari from the historical texts may not be seen as unusual as, on many occasions, historians are seen ignoring women and their roles and achievements in their narratives. On the other hand, in Ahom historical documents, there can be found numerous records of women figures like Mula Gabharu, Borroja Phuleswari Kunwari, Queen Kuranganayani and many others who come out of their conventional spaces and took part in political activities, found in Ahom historical documents. In such a context, Jaymati’s exclusion from historical records raises questions about the character’s actuality.

Noted historian and man of literature Surjya Kumar Bhuyan played an important, in fact the most significant, role in popularizing the character of Jaymati Kunwari in Assam in the first few decades of twentieth century. But his pursuit of the character’s actuality was handicapped by the lack of trustworthy resources on the character. Bhuyan expresses how major historians like Haliram Dhekiyal Phukan, Edward Gait, Gunabhiram Baruah, Kashinath have not given any space to the story of Jaymati in their writings. He even failed to find reference to Jaymati Kunwari in the saanchipator puthi or the palm leave texts. He talks about a Lailik Buranji written in Tai Ahom language, which was in fact a copy of a Buranji written in Shan language, once under the possession of Kripanath Phukan. On the basis of Phukan’s notes, Bhuyan tried to draw a family tree of Jaymati Kunwari. Bhuyan gives reference to two more Buranjis that he found under the possession of Hemchandra Gowsami. In both these texts, the story of Gadapani’s escape and return to the throne has been recorded. There
are references to the ‘wife’ of Gadapani, but the name has not been mentioned. In one of them it is written, “…in fear of Laluksola Barphukan, Gadapani kept his two sons hidden in the Naga Hills. His pregnant wife died in torture.” (translation mine) (Bhuyan Jeebani Sahitya 265) In the other Buranj it is written, “Barphukan caught and assassinated all the princes who could be traced. But he could not find Gadapani. So his wife was tortured to death.” (translation mine) (Bhuyan Jeebani Sahitya 265) Bhuyan found a reliable account of the story of Jaymati in Harkanta Majindar Baruah Sadaramin’s Buranji which was edited, compiled and published by him in 1930.  

However, questions were later raised against the authenticity of the history as scholars like Lakshmi Nath Tamuli have expressed concern over the possibility of interpolations on the part of Dr. Bhuyan while editing the manuscripts.  

One interesting example can be found in Dr. Bhuyan’s edition of Srinath Barbaruah’s Tungkhungiya Buranji. After compiling and editing the manuscripts, Dr. Bhuyan published the first edition of the Tungkhungiya Buranji in 1932, two years after his publication of Harkanta Sadar Aminar Assam Buranji. In both these two Buranjis, Bhuyan vividly clarified the confinements of his editorial role, “Our editorial being confined only to the presentation of the text in modern orthography rigorously and systematically avoiding any phonetic alteration.” (quoted in Tamuli 57) But, in reality, Bhuyan does not confine his role the mere technical functions; he himself admits of certain thematic alterations in the text. To the Tungkhungiya Buranji, he added the long account of history of eighty two years, from 1669 to 1751, which was not originally present in the manuscript. He wrote two prefaces to the Buranji separately in Assamese and English. In the preface to the Buranji written in English, he declared that he had “prefixed an account of the earlier Tungkhungiya kings from Gadadhar Singha to Pramatta Singha.” (“Preface”, V) In the preface written in Assamese, he declares, “In order to maintain the completeness of the Tungkhungiya Buranji, I have compiled this episode by collecting material from other Buranjis.” (quoted in Tamuli 57) (translation mine) The credit for the inclusion of the story of Jaymati Kunwari in this Buranji also goes to Dr. Bhuyan. He wrote in the Preface written in Assamese:
Descriptions of the revolution which resulted in the self-sacrifice of Jaymati for her husband and the advent of the Tungkhungiya Princes to the throne have been collected from other Buranjis and incorporated within the episode titled ‘Patrar Adhinat Swargadev’. (quoted in Tamuli 57) (translation mine)

Such instances of interpolation, on the part of historians or historical researchers like Bhuyan, not only problematise the questions over the actuality of the historical character but also invite critical attentions towards the inherent politics of the historians behind such interpolations. Lakshmi Nath Tamuli, in his critical enquiry into authenticity versus interpolations in the Tungkhungiya Buranji in his essay “Tungkhungiya Buranji: Moulikota bonam Prokshiptota” has attributed such acts of representative design on the part of Bhuyan to the larger context of nationalistic representations of history prevalent in his time. We shall discuss this issue in detail in the chapter dealing with the nationalistic representation of Jaymati Kunwari.

Of late, historians Sarat Kumar Phukan and Supriti Phukan, in their book Jaymati Kunwari, have claimed the discovery of a number of ancient manuscripts, written in both Tai-Ahom and Tai-Phake languages, where, as they have claimed, reference to Jaymati Kunwari can be found. These manuscripts, as the authors have claimed, have been found under private possession of different families and individuals of Upper Assam. Their book provides a list of persons from different parts of Upper Assam from whose private possession they have collected the manuscripts. The manuscripts, according to the authors, belong to different phase of the history of Assam and they are written by different persons, mostly unknown. These manuscripts, being considered as private property, are also not meant for public circulation. Except minute differences in the description of Jaymati’s personal facts and a few other historical characters, these manuscripts tell almost the same story of Jaymati’s self-sacrifice for her husband and the kingdom. It has to be noted here that the claims made by the authors cannot be held above the questions of authenticity as their project lacks evidence of application of any scientific apparatus such as carbon dating method in order to determine the proper age of production of the manuscripts. However, such
questions over the authenticity of historical representations in order to judge the character’s actuality are outside the scope of this research project. This thesis concentrates on the politics of literary and cultural representations of the character; and the study of historical texts will also be done with the same purpose of understanding the politics of representation.

The story of Jaymati’s self sacrifice for her husband and the Ahom kingdom had been in circulation among the people of Upper Assam, especially in Sivasagar district, in the form of oral narratives of different types like stories, songs etc.\(^8\) There was local lore in circulation that the famous Jaysagar Tank and the temple on its bank were built by King Rudra Singha in memory of his mother Jaymati. It is believed that the place where Jaymati was tortured and killed by the royal army of King Sulikfa is at the centre of the tank. Many scholars give reference to certain historical documents that support this theory that Rudra Singha commissioned the digging of the tank in order to immortalize his mother’s name and deeds.\(^9\) Journalist and historical researcher Guna Baruah refers to the *Buranji* of Charunga Phukan in one of his historical writings:

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\text{…. in Charunga Phukan’s *Buranji* it has been mentioned that King Rudra Singha at first dug Jaysagar Tank in his mother’s memory and then on Monday, the 12\textsuperscript{th} day of Aghon, he commenced the establishment of Rangpur town. (Baruah, Guna 17) (translation mine)}
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Thus it can be presumed that the setting of the story of Jaymati is the seventeenth century Sivasagar, which would later become the centre of Ahom politics and culture as Rangpur, a place in Sivasagar, would be established as the capital of the Ahom kingdom. This fact bears significance because both Padmanath Gohainbaruah and Lakshminath Bezbaroa, the first two playwrights writing plays on Jaymati Kunwari, hailed from Sivasagar and possessed a soft corner for anything connected to Sivasagar.

Most of the early literary works composed on Jaymati were not based on any historical documents or chronicles. The limitation of available historical documents supporting the character’s actuality in the initial decades of her
literary representations will throw interesting lights in our investigation. Such a fact may even unveil certain hidden agendas on the part of writers who chose to write on a character whose actuality was not unquestionable; it may also through light on the inherent interest of the historians who later incorporated the episode of Jaymati in their historical narratives.

The character of Jaymati Kunwari made its first appearance in the print media through the article “Mowamoriya Bidroh” written by Ratneswar Mahanta in *Jonaki* in 1892. While Mahanta was writing for the journal, there was hardly any historical document available for him that could provide detailed information about Jaymati Kunwari. He was neither a historian nor well-versed in historical literature. He was dependent upon Gunabhiram Baruah’s *Assam Buranji* which was published in 1876. But this book on the history of Assam could not provide him enough information to ground the story of Jaymati Kunwari that he had heard in his childhood. In his first article about Jaymati in *Jonaki*, he portrayed her as the queen of King Lakshmikanta Singha and located her in the context of the Mowamoriya Uprising. Though he realised his mistake very soon, it was too late to stop the printing of the article. He immediately acknowledged his mistake in the subsequent issue and later published a different article titled “Jaymati Kunwari” in the same journal. He claimed that, while writing the article, he was dependent on an article named “Abalar Atmadaan” that he had found in a Bengali journal *Pakshik Patrika* published from Calcutta. He claimed that his confusion in terms of the names of characters originated from this article. Indibor Baruah, a resident of Sivasagar, who wrote a book called *Jibanadarsha* under a pseudonym, provided Mahanta with some oral versions of the story of Jaymati. In the second article, he presented Jaymati as the wife of Prince Gadapani from the Tungkhungiya dynasty and this story remains the base of all literary works composed upon the character in later times.

A researcher may raise a question over such an erroneous discovery of Jaymati by Mahanta in print media. Why, in a condition of confusion or lack of valid information, was Mahanta tempted to write about Jaymati Kunwari? For an answer to this question, we have to understand not only the man behind the work but also his contexts that have affected and encouraged such a representation. A
close look at the writings of Mahanta published in *Jonaki* reveals that Mahanta was seriously engaged in re-evaluating the changing roles of women within his contemporary Assamese families and societies. Most of his articles like “Ghoinir Kartabya aru Stree Siksha” (“Wife’s Duty and Women’s Education”), “Bibah” (“Marriage”), “Minavati”, “Swadhinota ne Swecchachar” (“Independence or Fascism”) concentrates in the themes like the virtues of the ideal woman, the qualities of an ideal wife, the roles of an ideal Assamese woman etc. However, Mahanta does not stand alone in his interests at his time. There were several articles published in *Jonaki* and in other Assamese journals like *Assam Bandhu*, *Banhi, Usha* etc. which concentrated in different issues connected to women. These journals, at the juncture between the nineteenth and the twentieth century, were host to several debates over diverse issues ranging from child marriage to widow re-marriage, the traditional notions of the ideal wife to the idea of the modern woman, women’s dress to women’s education etc. The contemporary Assamese woman has been tested against her traditional roles, prescribed by religious texts, customs, cultural practices; she has been compared and contrasted with the women of other places, especially Bengal; she has been discussed under the light of the changing patterns and demands of life in contemporary times; her roles within the family and the society have been redefined and the her traditional attributes have been tested against the demands of the modern times. So the questions connected to Jaymati Kunwari’s entry into the print media in such a situation compel us to critically consider the larger social, cultural, political and intellectual contexts of her discovery.

**Contexts – understanding the nineteenth century Assam:**

Our study of the contexts behind the discovery of Jaymati in the print media and her sudden popularity among sections of contemporary Assamese intelligentsia must begin with the understanding of the different socio-political and cultural changes taking place in the nineteenth century Assam. The nineteenth century bears tremendous significance in the history of Assam and the Assamese people. In fact, in the words of Nagen Saikia, the modern Assam and the modern Assamese people are born in the nineteenth century itself. In his detailed study of the history of the Assamese people in his book *Asomiya*
Manuhar Itihas, Dr. Saikia divides the history of the Assamese people into four major stages of which the first stage covers the prehistoric times while the second stage covers the advent and expansion of Aryan civilization, language and culture. The third stage comprises of the period spreading across the twelfth to the early nineteenth century when all the major kingdoms like the Ahoms, the Kacharis, the Koch, the Chutiyas and the Bhuyans have formed and developed. The fourth stage of the history of Assamese people, according to Dr. Saikia, starts at the beginning of the nineteenth century and continues till the present time. For Saikia, the history of this period is, “the history of the Assamese peoples’ ethnomorphic, political, economic, academic, linguistic, literary and cultural rebirth.” (Saikia Asomiya 362) (translation mine) In other words, it is also an era of the change of worldviews for the people of Assam. Saikia further divides the fourth stage into two major parts: the first part being the period between early nineteenth century and the independence of India from British colonialism in the middle of the twentieth century while the second part beginning with the independence of India. Of these two periods from the fourth stage, the first period encompassing the nineteenth and the early twentieth century bears remarkable significance by virtue of being witness to the negotiations between tradition and Western modernity, and the development of cultural nationalism and a language based national identity in Assam.

Modernity – India and Assam: The idea of Western modernity as an intellectual, socio-political, cultural and economic movement is generally associated with the European Renaissance as well as the ideas of Enlightenment. During and after Renaissance, there emerged groups of thinkers contributing to different aspects of intellectual exercise in Europe: Machiavelli revolutionized political thoughts by rejecting Aristotelian and medieval political theories; Bacon and Descartes proposed newer method for studies in science as well as humanities; Rousseau questioned the basic nature of man in terms of his rationalist views on social studies; Thomas Hobbes proposed the application of new methods of physical sciences to humanities and politics; and so on and so forth. In the field of science, the sixteenth and the seventeenth century Europe saw newer approaches to physical sciences and astronomy by Copernicus,
Kepler, and Galileo; and later in the eighteenth century, Isaac Newton further developing his theories on the understanding of the laws of nature. The drastic transformation in the systems of knowledge production and circulation in the sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe catapulted a scientific revolution that resulted in the development of technologies and machineries and helped some of the European countries expand beyond Europe especially for commercial expeditions, thereby fostering the rise of capitalism. Commercial expedition is directly connected to colonisation of non-European spaces like America, Africa and Asia. The colonisation of America marks the beginning of capitalism, which later got expanded to Asia and Africa. Modernity is further associated with the development of the nation-state in the West.

Anthony Giddens observes that the nation-state and the development of systematic capitalist production are the anchor of European modernity in the development of its imperial history. (Consequences 174). The expansion of modernity beyond Europe, was always combined with certain structural, institutional, cultural factors functioning within the society, can be realised as the crystallization of new civilizations – a process which resembles the spread of the great religions and empires in the pre-modern world. In structural terms, as Eisenstadt and Schluchter observe, modernity was combined with epochal development in communication, industrialization, urbanization. Institutionally it combined with the development of the nation-state and the rational-capitalist economy. In cultural terms, modernity induced the formation of new collective identities that would be bound up with the nation-state. (Eisenstadt 3) Björn Wittrack observes that during the eighteenth and the nineteenth century the social institutions like the democratic nation-state, the liberal market economy, different disciplines of science studied in research oriented universities, that are emblematic of modernity in Europe had been spread as models, if not always as reality, to almost every continents of the globe. (3) The modernist colonial enterprise uses rhetoric of salvation, civilisation, newness and development in order to hide the inherent imperialist motif, as Walter D. Mignolo observes, “‘Modernity’ became — in relation to the non-European world — synonymous with salvation and newness. From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, it was
spearheaded by Christian Theology as well as by secular Renaissance Humanism (still linked to theology). The rhetoric of salvation by conversion to Christianity was translated into the rhetoric of salvation by the civilising mission, from the eighteenth century on, when England and France displaced Spain leading to Western imperial/colonial expansion.” (160) To understand the Indian context, we can look at Gauri Viswanathan’s analysis of the politics of imparting English education as a mask to hide the imperialist agendas on the part of the British. Anthony Giddens summarizes the idea of Western modernity in three terms: “(It is) a certain set of attitudes towards the world, the idea of the world as open to transformation, by human intervention; (it is) a complex of economic institutions, especially industrial production and a market economy; (it is) a certain range of political institutions, including the nation-state and mass democracy. (Giddens Conversations 94). India’s encounter with Western modernity is translatable to its encounter with these three ideas that condition the nature of Western modernity.

India encountered different tenets of Western modernity through the economic invasion of the East India Company, which in turn got translated into the British colonialist enterprise. In the name of modernity, India witnessed diffusion of technology, rise of large scale complex economic, political and administrative organizations that gained size, capacity, stability and efficiency. In the eighteenth and the nineteenth century the Company’s concern gradually shifted from the mercantile to the colonial; such shift was resisted by various small and indigenous rulers and merchants who were interlocked with the company. The different anti-colonialist movements, by unifying and adjusting the interests of various classes, races, groups and strata, fostered the gradual growth of the nationalistic consciousness in India. However, modern technology and capitalism was not resisted by all, as the early nationalists accepted the idea that the complete economic transformation of the country was possible through the adoption of modern technology and the capitalist enterprise. (Chandra 93) The exponents of Western modernity like foreign trade, railways, currencies, finance, and labour legislation had been perceived in connection with the paramount goal of national development.
However, thinkers like Rabindra Nath Tagore and M K Gandhi have utterly rejected the western norms of development, salvation and civilisation in the name of modernity. Rabindra Nath Tagore in his *Crisis in Civilisation* mentioned that the word *sabhyata*, being a synonym for the word ‘civilisation’, itself is a proof of its being in India prior to the coming of the British. That is why, apparently, there was no need for being conscious of its ‘lack’ in the Indians. What Indians had, much before the coming of the British, in the words of Manu, was *sada-char* (proper conduct). (Tagore 13). This was adapted in Gandhi as *ku-dharo* and *su-dharo* in Gujarati. Indian thinkers tried to look back at its cultural past as a resistance to Western modernity. In the fifth chapter of the thesis, we shall discuss this phenomenon in detail.

Assam’s encounter with Western modernity took place with the coming of the British and the American Baptist missionaries in the first half of the nineteenth century. The missionaries started schools, worked for the development of the Assamese language and published the first Assamese journal *Orunodoi*. The missionaries’ benevolence was characterized by their formulation of the ‘civilized/uncivilized’ dichotomy in regard to the natives where they project themselves to be the civilizing agents. The chief agenda, i.e. conversion to Christianity was hidden behind the civilizing mask. Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan (1829-1859) is considered to be one of the earliest spokespersons of Western modernity in Assam. His famous visionary expressions about the need for a developed, progressed Assam can be seen as a representative document to understand the influx of modernist thoughts into Assam. Anandaram envisioned a future for Assam based on the many things he had witnessed in Calcutta during his long stay there as a student as well as in other professions. Fighting for a justified cause of using the Assamese language in the courts and the educational institutes in Assam, Phukan also prepared texts to be used by the students in Assamese medium schools. In “Inglandar Bibaran” (“Description of England”) Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan gave a vivid description of England where, as he argues,
… and then you will witness, Assam will change its jungle foliage to transform into a garden, big edifices will stand in place of lowly huts, small boats will give way to steamers, and everywhere there will be prosperity … Oh the Supreme Gracious Lord of Creation! Impart good conscience into the people of Assam so that they can make their country civilized, wise and holy; bestow upon them knowledge to perceive the want and hardship that constrain them; and with your extraordinary power civilize them… the day when Assam will transform from a jungle into a garden, big ships will sail in place of small boats; mansions of brick will rise in place of bamboo huts; and thousands of schools will be established in villages, there will be assemblies for learned people, hospitals and refuge for the poor … bring that time soon, oh Supreme Father! (129)

(translation mine)

For Anandaram, this prayer was part of a solemn expectation to usher in a blissful future for his people. He saw the hope of this future in the coming of the British into Assam. His prayer is conditioned by the dichotomy of civilized/uncivilized: he asks for ‘good conscience’ for the people of Assam so that they become ‘civilized’ (xobhyo). This is where we can notice a reflection of the ideals of modernity that Anandaram confronted with.

Many thinkers in nineteenth and early twentieth century Assam saw Western modernity as a catalyst for material progress in terms of development in commerce and industrial technology. In a serialised article named “Banijya” (“commerce”) published in Usha in 1906, Sri Jogendra Nath Baruah expresses that the British have opened up the avenues for unprecedented progress in industry and commerce for the people of Assam:

Despite having our potentials, because of our poverty, we had been waiting without doing anything; had the English not come, perhaps we would have been waiting till today. Now they are paving the path; and our people are also getting some portion of the profits. (45) (translation mine)
However there were writers like Ratneswar Mahanta, Lambodar Borah who staged vehement critiques of Western modernity because of the threat it posed to the traditional ways of life of the people of Assam. Lakshminath Bezbaroa used to satirize those who blindly followed Western lifestyle forgetting their own cultural roots. In the following chapters, we shall discuss how Western modernity has been contested by Assamese writers. The conflict between tradition and modernity fostered re-articulations of the feminine space in the society.\textsuperscript{14} Again, the conflict between tradition and modernity resulted in the development of cultural nationalism in Assam as well as in other parts of India.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{Women’s Education in Assam:} The discovery and rise of Jaymati Kunwari in the popular imagination of the Assamese people is intimately connected to the spread of education for women in Assam. The history of formal education for women in Assam is not very long. In the pre-colonial Assam, formal education was generally confined to men only, especially from the aristocratic, learned classes and professionals. The British occupation of Assam opened the doors for the American Baptist Missionaries to come to Assam and in 1836 a small group of missionaries along with a printing machine arrived at Sadiya. The Missionaries, especially their wives, established schools for both boys and girls.\textsuperscript{16} As religious conversion was their main concern, the learners were basically taught to read the Bible. But whatever might be the reason behind, the spreading of education among women in schools meant a lot to those who understood its value, as a Missionary wife reacted after her women students completed reading the Bible for the first time: “It’s a great day for Assam.” (A. Mahanta 9)

Such attempts to educate the women were not easily accepted by the local people as both the learners and the teachers had to face diverse forms of humiliation and disturbances. Apart from the social customs like early marriage, child marriage and female seclusion (\textit{purdah}), the women’s own belief in their ignorance and inability to learn – beliefs that had been impressed on them since birth by the patriarchal society – also stood as a strong hazard against women’s education at that time. Mrs. Brown, a missionary wife, wrote about her experiences of being ridiculed by a Brahmin pundit on her attempts to teach women, “Our old Brahmin pundit often comes along by my little school room,
and laughs at the idea of my spending my time teaching women to read”. (Barpujari 107) Similarly, in her writings in 1940, Mrs. Ruth Bronson also narrates her experience of being resisted by a Naga chief when he discovered her teaching girls in a school established for boys:

You cannot teach our females. They are trained to bear burdens, to bring wood and water, and to make the salt by which we get our subsistence. If they learn to read and sew, they must give up these labours and remain at home; then who will do the work; … …? Our young men can learn, but not our women; it is not our custom. (Imchen 204)

Thus, male convenience, in the guise of custom and usage, was another hazard against women’s education in the reason.

The attitude of the Missionaries was utilitarian, as showed by Aparna Mahanta, as they concentrated on teaching their female learners how to read the Bible and to sew, weave clothes:

The criterion of literacy was the ability to read the Bible and the scriptures in their own languages as translated by the missionaries themselves. Thus, ‘a plain vernacular education’ along with useful work like weaving, spinning, cutting and stitching of ordinary clothes was considered enough for girls…

(10)

The Missionaries’ project was careful enough to ensure that the girls thus educated cannot go beyond the level of what they are expected to be – wives of the ‘native brethrens’ or the Bible-women to assist the Missionary wives or lady Missionaries in their preaching works.17 This system did not get much popularity among the upper class Assamese people and thus their attempts at women’s education could not succeed enough.

Among the earliest Assamese thinkers who advocated for women’s education in the early nineteenth century was Haliram Dhekiyal Phukan. Considered to be one of the earliest exponents of Bengal Renaissance in Assam,
Haliram Dhekiyal Phukan was an ardent supporter of women’s education. Through one anonymous letter to the newspaper called *Samachar Darpan*, he openly advocated for women’s education.\(^\text{18}\) One of his inspirations was his brother Jajnaram Kharghariya Phukan, who, with commendable mastery over many languages like English, Hindi, Parsy, Arabic, Tibetan besides Assamese and Bengali, was a man of progressive thoughts. Haliram had close acquaintance with Raja Rammohan Rai, whom he accepted as his teacher, and was highly inspired by Rai’s reformative and modernist approach to the contemporary society. In a letter published in the *Samachar Darpan* on 9\(^\text{th}\) July, 1829, he congratulated the British government for abolishing the *sati* system. He even fervently criticized the social and religious practices the orthodox Brahmins.\(^\text{19}\)

Haliram Dhekiyal Phukan’s son Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan (1828-59) was another important spokesperson for women’s education in Assam. His biographer Gunabhiram Baruah wrote that Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan had a humanitarian approach towards the issue of women’s education: “both women and men are part of mankind; therefore one part of man will remain handicapped if women remain uneducated.” (Gunabhiram Barua 109) (translation mine) He himself taught his wife with Bengali and Assamese and also formally started his daughter’s education with a *vidyarambha* ceremony which was normally celebrated for boys only.\(^\text{20}\) However, it is also known that in the Dhekiyal Phukan family, all young wives were encouraged to read and write. Anandaram’s wife knew a little arithmetic to maintain the household accounts; she also knew sewing, cutting, weaving and other traditional crafts besides perfectly reading books in Bengali and Assamese. Thus she became one among the ‘meet companions’ or ‘meet wives’ – a new concept coming up in the new class of educated and aristocratic people both in Bengal and in Assam.\(^\text{21}\)

Gunabhiram Baruah was a radical figure in his ideas regarding women’s right to education and liberation from traditionally imposed roles. In the 1850s, as a young student, he wrote numerous letters to *Orunodoi* advocating for women’s education and other rights. Being a follower of Brahma Samaj and a close ally to educated personalities like Durga Mohan Das (who was a co-founder of Hindu Valika Vidyalaya), Baruah married a widow, provided his daughter Swarnalata
formal school education and encouraged both his wife and daughter to write articles in magazines. His play *Ram-Navami* composed in 1870 tried to promote widow remarriage in Assam. Baruah’s edited magazine *Assam Bandhu* published writings by Swarnalata and Padmavati Devi Phukanani.

These small steps towards women’s liberation from conventional stereotypical roles through education were, however, vehemently opposed by established writers like Ratneswar Mahanta, Lambodar Bora and Purnakanta Sharma. They feared that women’s education would adulterate the sanctity of Hindu law and traditions and inflict moral degradation in women thereby destabilizing institutions like family and marriage and the conventional roles of women within a Hindu family. To think about women or girls going to school and be taught by male teachers and mingle with men from outside family (*par-purush*) was impossible for them. They feared that educated women would become idle, luxury-loving, repulsive to household chores and dependent on servants, which would, degrade the economic condition of basically poor Assamese society. There was a growing sense of insecurity among certain Assamese writers that the educated Assamese women would start preferring Bengali men to the comparatively less educated Assamese men. For thinkers like Ratneswar Mahanta and Purnakanta Sharma, education and literacy for women would not only deflect their interest from the household chores but also inflict their minds with impurity. To prevent such a catastrophe, Ratneswar Mahanta took recourse to dictating the norms of the ideal wife on the basis of the ancient Hindu scriptures like *Manu Samhita*. It is in such a historical juncture, which can be termed as the conflict between tradition and modernity, that of the idea of the *sati* have been evoked and the resultant was the discovery of *Sati Jaymati*.

The general attitude towards the West and western education can be seen gradually changing in the beginning of the twentieth century as reflected in some of the articles published in the journals like *Banhi* and *Usha*. A group of thinkers started believing that modern western education for women is not something to be resisted but to be appropriated with the incorporation of Indian values that might serve the requirements of the contemporary times. The strategy was not to
violate the traditional norm of women’s domesticity and spiritual space but to modify it with the new and progressive ideas coming from western education. The field of women’s education becomes a space of incorporating western ideals into the traditional worldviews. Nagen Saikia argues that the group of young students studying in Calcutta and engaged in the formation of Asomiya Bhasha Unnati Sadhini Sabha and the publication of *Jonaki* were among those who tried to look at women’s issues from a different, ‘liberal’ and ‘humanist’ point of view. A strong nationalist spirit in one hand and the influences of Western Romanticism in the form of liberal thoughts, human perspectives and idealistic worldviews of life in the other hand – all contributed to the development of a new intellectual spirit. (Saikia *Adhyan* 63 - 67) Such spirit was reflected in their attitude towards women. Lakshminath Bezbaroa, the greatest exponent of this age, was an ardent supporter of women’s education and his attitude towards women’s education is well reflected in his characterization of Jaymati.

**Jaymati Kunwari in literature:**

After Ratneswar Mahanta’s introductory writings of Jaymati in *Jonaki* in 1992, the character drew immense attention from the contemporary learned people in Assam. Padmanath Gohainbaruah and Lakshminath Bezbaroa wrote historical plays on the character in 1900 and 1915 respectively. Noted historian Benudhar Rajkhowa wrote “Jaymati Kunwari” – a historical account on the character of Jaymati on the basis of oral literature in the second decade of the twentieth century. In the beginning of the twentieth century, poet-artist-dramatist Indreswar Barthakur drew portraits of Jaymati, along with Gadapani and Lachit Barphukan, for Padmanath Gohainbaruah’s *Buranjibodh.* Surjya Kumar Bhuyan wrote about the historicity of the character of Jaymati in the second part of his book *Asom Jiyari* in 1935. Jatindranath Duara and Bagmibor Nilamani Phukan discussed about Jaymati in their article “Jayateertha”. Benudhar Sharma wrote a series of articles under the title “Jaymatir Maranottar Pariksha” (“Postmortem Examination of Jaymati”) in the magazine *Manideep* where he raised several questions over the originality and historical authenticity of the character. His writings catapulted the publication of several essays supporting the historical actuality of Jaymati by writers like Bhuban Chandra Handique,
Manikchandra Borgohain, Sarbananda Rajkumar, Leela Gogoi, and Kanak Phukan. Of late, historian Lakshmi Nath Phukan has raised questions regarding the fictional nature of Jaymati Kunwari in the history books, especially written by Surjya Kumar Bhuyan. Supriti Phukan and Sarat Kumar Phukan’s book *Jaymati Kunwari* (2010) is an attempt to assert the actuality of the character in the history of Assam.

The character of Jaymati has been represented in numerous poems composed in Assam since the beginning of the twentieth century till today. Among her earliest verse representations, Surjya Kumar Bhuyan’s “Jaymati Upakhyan” is a significant composition. Along with Surjya Kumar Bhuyan, his newly married wife Lakshyeswari Bhuyan composed a poem in 1917 on Jaymati describing her as a virtuous *sati* in the line with Sita, Damayanti and other Hindu mythological *satis*. Her poem was included in the poetry collection called *Nirmali* (1951) published by Surjya Kumar Bhuyan. Padmavati Devi Phukanani also composed a poem titled “Jaymati”. Poet Dadhiram Chetia published a poem “Gadadhar Singha” in 1924; this poem was composed in the convention of Vaishnavite religious texts in Assam. Poet Ganesh Gogoi composed a poem titled “Jaya” on Jaymati Kunwari where he deified the ‘sati’ to the level of a goddess. Binanda Chandra Baruah wrote a poem titled “Jaydol” in memory of Jaymati. Jyotiprasad Agarwala composed a poem “Jaymatir Atmar Ukti” where he presented Jaymati as a symbol of inspiration for the class of downtrodden people suppressed by the evil exponents of power and authority. Besides all these poems, magazines like *Banhi*, *Usha* and *Ghar Jeuti* published numerous poems composed on Jaymati. In 1955, Jajnoram Gogoi wrote a long poem on Jaymati titled “Amar Jaya” which he published in the form of a book. He addressed Jaymati as a ‘*satyagrahi beerangana*’; and his writing was inspired by Gandhian ideals of non-violence. In 1958, poet Chandrakanta Borah wrote a long poem in the form of a book titled *Satir Sadhana*. This poem was also inspired by Gandhian ideals of non-violence.

Besides these poems, several songs have been written on Jaymati Kunwari. Ganesh Gogoi’s “Satir Samadhi bhumi tezere rangoli aji”, Jyotiprasad Agarwala’s “Luitore pani jabi o boi”, Bishnu Prasad Rabha’s “Jaydeulor...”
kalachite kulitiye kino gay” and “Jaya nai Jaya nai” are some of the famous songs written on the character. Jyotiprasad’s song, included in his film Jaymati, is soaked with strong nationalistic sentiment. Bishnu Rabha’s songs try to glorify the character’s contributions for the country. At the end of the twentieth century, Zubeen Garg, in one of his albums, sang a song “Bahgahardeu mor xonar xoleng tumi” dramatizing the conversations between Jaymati and Gadapani at Jerenga Pothar. This song concentrates in exploring the mutual love between Jaymati and Gadapani.

During the first few decades of twentieth century, Karmabeer Nabin Chandra Bordoloi and Radhanath Phukan jointly wrote a play on Jaymati Kunwari and performed it on stage. The exact date of the play cannot be determined as the play is unavailable now. Noted poet Ganesh Gogoi composed a short play Jerengar Sati in the 1920s while Nakul Chandra Bhuyan wrote a play Gadapanir Sesh Siddhanta in 1923. In the 1930s Lakshidhar Sharma wrote a play on the story of Jaymati Kunwari in Abahan. In the 1930s, two major works on Jaymati was composed – Dandinath Kalita’s Satir Tez and Jyotiprasad Agarwala’s film Jaymati Kunwari. Besides them, playwrights like Uttam Baruah and Jeebeswar Gogoi have also written plays on Jaymati Kunwari.

Regarding the representation of Jaymati Kunwari in literary and artistic works, very little critical analysis has been done. In most of the critical works done on the texts of Jaymati Kunwari, the politics of representation of the character has not been addressed directly. Jaymati’s representation has been discussed in connection with other thematic discussions. Hiren Gohain observed that Bezbaroa’s representation of Jaymati Kunwari was inspired by Sankardeva’s Vaishnavism and Western Romanticism. For Dr. Gohain, Bezbaroa’s representation of Jaymati is expressive of his faith in “an independent, lively and natural humanity” (293) which was a result of the influence of Western Romanticism on Bezbaroa. Devabrata Sharma attempts to show how Jaymati Kunwari has been used by Ratneswar Mahanta in a project to establish the ‘ideological dominance’ (motadarshagata adhipatya) of the upper class Hindu Brahmins over the Ahoms in Assam. (322) He further argues how Padmanath Gohainbarua wrote his play on Jaymati for the purpose of developing Ahom
nationalism and maintaining a correlation with the middle class Assamese society. (322) Manjeet Baruah in his book *Frontier Cultures* refers to the early representations of Jaymati Kunwari in historical and literary texts in his study of the transformation of the Tibet-Brahmaputra-Myanmar worldview into the Indo-Gangetic worldview in the Brahmaputra Valley. I shall develop my chapter on the Jaymati Kunwari in the context of gradual Aryanisation of the Valley on the basis of Baruah’s initial studies. One of the most noteworthy contributions to the politics of Jaymati’s representation in literary and other cultural texts is made by Dr. Aparna Mahanta. She has engaged a chapter of her book *The Journey of Assamese Women* to study the development of the character from an apparently unknown character to a popular household name in Assam. Her study involves a critical understanding of the development of the character as a *sati*, a national hero, an ideal mother, at different socio-cultural and political contexts of her representation. This present research project is highly benefitted from Mahanta’s critical insight into the process of evolution of the character.

**About this thesis – Themes and Methodology:**

The chief aim of this research project is to understand the inherent politics behind the representation of Jaymati Kunwari in different literary, theatrical, cinematic as well as historical texts at different times by different writers/artists. The meaning of the term ‘politics of representation’ has already been discussed in the beginning of this introductory chapter. Our understanding of the texts on Jaymati Kunwari will be guided by Hayden White’s idea that historical narratives, like literary texts, are products of the writer’s own interpretation of the events and facts that the writer narrates. So historical narrations, like literary artifacts, are conveyer of individual interest; this individual interest of the writer might be guided by his/her ideological concerns, which may be conditioned by his/her prejudices over race, religion, gender, nationality, political views, and cultural affinities and many other factors.

Our discussion of the texts and the historical and socio-cultural moments will be guided by new-historical methods of literary and historical criticism. As such, we shall enquire the nature of the socio-cultural and political environment
of the literary and cultural texts at the moment of their production in order to understand the nature of their representation. We shall hold that the represented character’s (Jaymati’s) “personal identity – like historical events, texts and artifacts – is shaped by and shapes the culture in which it emerges.” (Tyson 290) (emphasis mine) We shall try to understand how the socio-cultural environment conditions the development of the character of Jaymati in a particular form and how the character contributes to the development of the environment of its construction. For our detailed discussion, we shall select certain ‘major’ texts as representative of its time of production. Our selection of the major texts will be guided by the influence the texts have in the development of the character of Jaymati as well as on the basis of their contribution to the socio-cultural environment of their production. So basically we shall concentrate upon Ratneswar Mahanta’s writings, Padmanath Gohainbaruah’s play, Lakshminath Bezbaroa’s play, Surjya Kumar Bhuyan’s long poem, Dandinath Kalita’s play, Jyotiprasad Agarwala’s film, Manju Borah’s film and Juri Borah Borgohain’s novel on Jaymati Kunwari. Besides, wherever felt necessary, our study will include poems, essays, lectures as well as songs written at different times on Jaymati Kunwari in order to understand the context and the politics of character’s representation.

The chief aims of this research project are divided into four thematic concerns. Jaymati Kunwari, who is a princess of the Ahom dynasty, with its root in China, saw her first print representation in the avatar of a sati – an Aryan Hindu woman. Our first thematic concern will be based on this Aryanisation of the character. We shall try to locate the representation of Jaymati Kunwari in the long process of Aryanisation of the Brahmaputra Valley, which can be further understood as the gradual transformation of the Tibet-Brahmaputra-Myanmar worldviews into the Indo-Gangetic worldviews. At the same time, our first thematic concern will accommodate the contribution of Jaymati’s characterization to the long process of Aryanisation of the region. Our second thematic concern is the development of Jaymati as a sati in the context of the conflict between modernity and tradition. Our third thematic concern regarding Jaymati’s representation is the idea of Jaymati as a socio-politically empowered
woman. Our fourth thematic concern is to understand Jaymati as a product of different narratives of nationalisms in Assam and the contribution of the character as an agent in the development of these nationalistic discourses. It has to be clarified that this thesis does not come to any finality or conclusion regarding the portrayal of Jaymati in literary and cultural texts. This thesis will be descriptive in nature in the sense that it will engage in the analysis of the discursive relationship of the character of Jaymati with its socio-cultural background. Rather than coming to a conclusive end with definite findings, the thesis will concentrate in understanding the process of the character’s engagement with its context in its literary and cultural representations.

**Description of each chapter in brief:**

This thesis consists of six chapters including the Introduction as the first chapter and Conclusion as the final chapter. The central topic of enquiry in this thesis – the politics of representation of Jaymati Kunwari in literary and cultural texts – will be discussed in the remaining four chapters. Each chapter will be developed on one central theme connected to the representation of the characters. However, it has to be clarified here that though the objects of study have been divided into four different thematic concerns, the themes are intricately connected to one another; and at times they are contributory to the development of one another. As our study will try to locate the representations of the character, with reference to the specific themes, in the socio-cultural context, it may often seem repetitive. The most possible attempts will be made to avoid unnecessary repetitions; and sometimes in order to evade possibility of being obscure or ambiguous, certain details are repeated.

The second chapter of this thesis titled “Jaymati Kunwari and the Politics of Aryanisation: the Transition from Tibet-Brahmaputra-Myanmar Worldviews into Indo-Gangetic Worldviews” will try to situate the history of Jaymati’s historical and literary representations in the larger context of Aryanisation of Assam or the Brahmaputra Valley. It will explain how Aryanisation of the region can be viewed as part of the gradual transformation of the Tibet-Brahmaputra-Myanmar worldviews into the Indo-Gangetic worldviews and try to locate the
development of the story of Jaymati in the context of the gradual Aryanisation of the Brahmaputra Valley and the surrounding hills. Such a study of cultural transformation of a region over millennia is a very challenging task for it entails interdisciplinary studies engaging anthropology, linguistics, cultural studies, history, literature, religion, cosmology, economic and political studies and many more. The complexity of the demographic, linguistic, cultural, political, economic, religious and social structures in the Brahmaputra Valley and the surrounding hills together known as the North East India cannot be addressed within a small research project like this. Besides, not much investigation has been done on this process of cultural transformation of the region. A single chapter in a research dissertation cannot do justice to such a vast topic. But the theme of our research – politics of representation of Jaymati Kunwari – cannot be addressed properly if such a topic is overlooked. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to comment that the Sati Jaymati, as projected in most of the literary and cultural representations, is a product of such cultural transformations. In most representations, as we shall find out in our discussions of the texts in this thesis, Jaymati Kunwari is no more a representative of the Tibet-Brahmaputra-Myanmar worldviews but an Aryanised woman adhering to the Indo-Gangetic worldviews.

The third chapter is titled as “Sati Jaymati: Discovering and Reconstructing the Sati”. This chapter will try to understand the social context of Assam during the late nineteenth century when Jaymati Kunwari emerged as an ideal wife and a sati. While understanding the idea of sati in the context of Assam, the chapter will concentrate on the process of the development of sati in Bengal as a cultural resistance to Western modernity and colonisation. The process of the development of Jaymati Kunwari as a sati is intricately connected to the influences of Western modernity and the spreading of modern Western education and the unprecedented streams of change brought by it into the socio-cultural lives of people in Bengal and Assam. The discovery of Sati Jaymati is a product of the conflict between tradition and modernity where the social space for the feminine is relocated on the basis of Hindu scriptural norms. However, Jaymati Kunwari is not a blind appropriation of the act of sati prevalent in Bengal at that time. This chapter will try to understand the strategies adopted by the
writers writing on Jaymati as well as their inherent politics in appropriating the sati in Jaymati in their works.

The fourth chapter is titled as “Jaymati Kunwari and the Narratives of the Empowered Woman”. This chapter will investigate how writers like Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Dandinath Kalita have used the story of Jaymati Kunwari in the portrayal of a modern, empowered woman. Bezbaroa’s portrayal of Jaymati draws the image of a socio-politically and intellectually empowered woman. In such portrayals, the traditional ideas of the ideal wife have been challenged. The initial representations of the character will be examined in the context of the development of women’s education in Assam. The contributions of magazines like Banhi and Usha and the popular women’s magazine Ghar Jeuti in producing the narratives of women empowerment in connection with Jaymati during the 1920s will also be evaluated. The entry of Gandhi into the political sphere of Assam in 1920 was an incident of great significance in the sense that, following his command, many Assamese women took part in the nationalist movement for Indian independence. Such participation of women in political affairs drastically affected the representations of Jaymati Kunwari in the 1930s. Motherhood and patriotism became part of the rhetoric of women empowerment. This chapter will analyze how the character of Jaymati Kunwari was used in the constructing the socio-politically empowered Assamese woman.

The fifth chapter titled “Jaymati Kunwari and the Narratives of Nationalisms” will situate the literary and cultural representations of Jaymati under different discourses of nationalisms in Assam. The story of Jaymati Kunwari’s self sacrifice for the state has been appropriated by different writers as means to promote their nationalistic concerns. Padmanath Gohainbaruah was seen negotiating between the Ahom and the Assamese identity of Jaymati and applying the character of Jaymati as a means to make ‘Ahom’ as a synonym for ‘Asom’. Whereas Lakshminath Bezbaroa was concerned about developing a sort of cultural nationalism for building a ‘greater Assam’ out of her story, Surjya Kumar Bhuyan tried to contextualize her in the context of Indian nationalism developed against colonialism. Jyotiprasad Agarwala also, in his film, tried to fit Jaymati in the context of the struggle for Indian independence and utilized her
story in order to permeate strong national sentiments. But he strongly asserted the Assamese identity of the character in his film. On the other hand, Manju Borah’s construction of Jaymati Kunwari can be viewed in the context of the development of the sub-national identities in Assam. The grand narrative of the greater Assamese nationalism in Bezbaroa or Jyotiprasad is contested and subverted as Manju Borah’s Jaymati appears to be more Ahom than Assamese. Jaymati’s representations in the twentieth century not only bear witness to the development of Assamese cultural nationalism and the ‘greater Assamese’ identity as well as its gradual defragmentation but also get conditioned by such shifts in the formation of national narratives. Manju Borah’s application of Chinese music, images of dragons in her film is an attempt to assert the Ahom identity over the Assameseness of the character; in other words, it is also an attempt to look back at the once predominant Tibet-Brahmaputra-Myanmar worldviews conditioning the lives of people in the Brahmaputra Valley.
Notes:

1. The name is also spelt in many different ways like ‘Jaymoti’, ‘Joymati’, ‘Joymoti’ etc. In this research project, the researcher has followed the way Ranjit Kumar Dev Goswami spells the name. See Dev Goswami. “Bezbaroa: 150 years” in Lakshminath Bezbaroa: The Sahityarathi of Assam.

2. The biranjis or chronicles were written or commissioned and maintained by certain royal families or clans in the pre-colonial Assam. They basically documented the past and, in certain occasions, the present events too. Written in either prose or verse, they are found in both Tai-Ahom and Assamese language. This tradition of recording the past continued till the close of the 19th century when a gradual shift in the process of documenting history took place. The Western influenced ‘modern’ ways of history writing took over the earlier tradition.

3. See A. Mahanta 63 and Phukan et al. 95

4. It is an indigenous method of historical, religious or literary documentation in the ancient times in Assam. Leaves of a particular plant saanchipat as well as leaves of different palm trees and also barks of certain trees were used as the material to write on. These manuscripts serve as important documents for archaic studies in Assam.

5. See Surjya Kumar Bhuyanr Jeebani Sahitya. 265


7. See Tumuli 56-60.

8. See A. Mahanta 63.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid. 67.

11. See Jonaki 331.

12. See Saikia Asomiya 362

13. “How does Gandhi understand civilization if not as a people and their practices? Perhaps a look at the original Gujarati text will untangle this seeming puzzle. In the 1909 Gujarati text, Gandhi uses the terms ‘sudhāro’ (good practices/improvement) and ‘kudhāro’ (bad practices/deterioration) to refer to what he later translates as Indian civilization and Western/modern civilization, respectively.” (Ashar 255)

14. This study will address these re-articulations with reference to Jaymati Kunwari in the third and the fourth chapters.
15. We shall analyze the development of cultural nationalism in Assam and the development of the idea of a greater Assam as a socio-cultural entity in the beginning of the twentieth century in the fifth chapter of the thesis.

16. See Barpujari 8.

17. ibid

18. See Guha 125.

19. ibid

20. See A. Mahanta 10.

21. A ‘meet wife’ or ‘meet companion’ was the desired companion for a ‘gentleman’. She must be able to run the household smoothly and look after the comfort of her husband, kids and other family members. At the same time she should have the intellectual capacity to support or share her husband’s intellectual pursuits. See Gunabhiram Barua 71.

22. See A. Mahanta 21

23. ibid.

24. Most of the information regarding literary representation has been taken from Supriti Phukan and Sarat Kumar Phukan’s book *Jaymati Kunwari* (2010). Some of the books and literary works on Jaymati Kunwari are not available now.

25. See Phukan et al. 142.
Works cited:


