

Nationalism and Feminization of Land: Assam and the Politics of Motherhood

Jyotishman Baruah*

Teaching Associate, Gauhati University Institute of North East India Studies, Gauhati University, Assam, India

Akhil Ranjan Dutta

Professor, Department of Political Science, Gauhati University, Assam, India

*Corresponding Author Email: jyotishmanbaruah@gauhati.ac.in

Abstract: *In the quest for nationhood, nationalists often weave together language, religion, and shared territory to forge a united identity among people within a defined region. Within this framework, the territorialisation of memories and the cultivation of collective attachment have become increasingly significant in nationalist discourse. In Assam, the land is frequently personified as a mother, referred to as “Asomi Aai” (Mother Assam), and the slogan “Joi Aai Asom” (Glory to Mother Assam) has often been used by nationalist and student organisations during times of crisis, particularly during the 1960, 1972, and Assam movements. However, this led to a challenge for Assam’s multifaceted identity landscape, as Assamese nationalist organisations often promoted a chauvinistic attitude which alienated non-Assamese/tribal people. Against this backdrop, this article raises the question: Has the appeal to the common people under the banner of “Joi Aai Asom” been successful in protecting the demands of Assam, or has it led to fragmentation within the very fabric of their aspirations? The article also investigates whether the Hindutva has appropriated the concept of “Joi Aai Asom” and instrumentalised gender, particularly in the name of women’s welfare, within broader nationalist discourses.*

Keywords: Nationalism, territory, motherhood, Assam, Joi Aai Asom, Hindutva.

INTRODUCTION

Nationalism is a complex phenomenon characterised by opposing tendencies of integration and separation. It encompasses both rational and irrational aspects, as well as democratic and undemocratic features, and can manifest in either exclusive or inclusive forms. Because of these contradictions, Heywood (2013) describes nationalism as having a “schizophrenic” political nature. While some interpretations argue that nationalism is constructed by elites or minority groups (Hobsbawm 1990), others view it as a mass phenomenon (Connor 1990). Consequently, nationalism remains a contentious concept.

In Assam, Nationalism emerged as a mass phenomenon fuelled by a growing awareness of exploitation and opposition to various decisions made by the colonial government. Both within and outside Indian territory, the creation of a real or imagined homeland has been a central part of nationalist discourse in Assam. This national imagination situates land as an important criterion for creating collective attachment within the territory. Influenced by romanticism, nationalist thinkers converted the land of Assam to a poetic explanation. The architects of Assamese cultural nationalism- Lakshminath Bezbaroa composed *O Mur Apunar Dex* (O My Endearing Motherland); Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, whose dramas *Sonit Kuwori*, *Lovita* drawn a picture of exploitation and emancipation of the land; Bhupen Hazarika composed “Mother, what offering can I make at your feet?”—plays a crucial role in shaping this emotional and cultural attachment to the homeland.

Since the 1940s, nationalist organisations have worked to protect the land of Assam in the name of “Asomi Aai” (Mother Assam). After India’s independence, Assam’s boundaries were redrawn multiple times in response to demands for separation by smaller nationalities (Baruah, 1999). During and after the Assam Movement, Assamese nationalism witnessed episodes of violence, intergroup clashes, and the emergence of extremist organisations.

At this onset, the article seeks to investigate: Has the appeal to the common people, especially Assamese, under the slogan “Joi Aai Asom” (Glory to Mother Assam) been successful in protecting the demands of Assam, or has it led to fragmentation within the very fabric of their aspirations? The article also seeks to examine whether the consolidation of Hindutva has appropriated the concept of “Joi Aai Asom” and instrumentalised gender, particularly in the name of women’s welfare, within broader nationalist discourses.

EXPLORING LITERATURE: DEBATES ON FEMININE FORM OF NATION

One of the important tasks in any research work is to find existing literature on the research subject. This research work examined the debate on nationalism in Assam, with a special focus on feminist writings on nationalism.

Sanjib Baruah's "India Against Itself: Assam and the politics of nationality." (1999) explains the connection between the idea of homeland and nationalist narratives by analysing the emergence of sub-nationalism in Assam, which over time took a militant turn and began contesting other smaller nationalities. "Nationalist upsurge in Assam" edited by Arun Bhuyan (2000) is a collection of different articles written by scholars including Amalendu Guha, D.P. Barooah, Anuradha Dutta, S.K. Barpujari et al. investigated the nationalist upsurge in undivided Assam from colonial penetration to 1947. Udayon Misra's "**The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation-State in Assam and Nagaland**" (2000) explains the political and cultural assertion of Assam briefly starting from Burmese invasion in Assam to contemporary outbreak of insurgency and secessionist movement in Northeast India. "Nationality Question in Assam: The EPW 1980-81 Debate" (2006), edited by A. Ahmed contains the intellectual debates on Assam movement in the EPW, that witnessed the emergence of two opposite views: one view claimed that Assam movement was a peaceful, democratic and Gandhian movement, while other, leftists claimed that it had intolerant, fascist and chauvinist attitudes which was detrimental to the composite society and the "deadly enemy" of all racial and democratic forces of the state.

Moreover, the researcher is benefited by Gohain's "Origins of the Assamese Middle Class", (1973), Guha's "Origins of the Assamese Middle Class: A Comment," (1974), Prafulla Mahanta's Asamiya Jatiyatabadar Utsha Prasanga (1994), Sanjib Baruah's "Durable Disorder: Understanding the politics of Northeast India" (2005) and "In the Name of the Nation" (2020), Guha's "Planter-raj To Swaraj Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947" (1977), Akhil Gogoi's "Axomiya Jatiyotabad: Swadhikar Pratisthar Sangram" (2018), "The last battle of Saraighat: the story of the BJP's rise in the Northeast" (2017) by Sethi and Shubhbrastra, H.B. Sarma's "Eta Xopunor Pam Khedi" (2021).

Already published research/academic works on nationalism in Assam are more oriented towards the study of insurgency, separatist movement, migration, and citizenship. The study of cultural nationalism with a special focus on gender and feminine form has rarely been discussed within the discourse on nationalism in Assam. This study seeks to bridge that gap by offering an analysis of how the concept of motherhood is important for understanding the nationalist discourse in Assam.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research on any topic requires distinct methods and techniques. The present study was qualitative and analytical in nature. It intends to decipher the nationalist debate on Colonial Assam and its multiple layers and contestations. Therefore, this methodology was designed to capture the

historical complexities and dynamics that shaped cultural nationalism in Assam.

The study is primarily based on secondary sources, including books, articles, research papers, e-journals, as well as extensive references as available in literature on the concerned area of study. These materials provide the necessary historical depth to understand nationalist and political shifts during the study period.

In addition, unstructured interviews were conducted with persons belonging to the period or persons having extensive knowledge and personal experience in the field of nationalist discourse in Assam's history and nationalism. These interviews provided nuanced perspectives that enriched the researcher's ability to gather detailed information which was otherwise unavailable.

This research employs content analysis to examine textual materials. Historical documents, literary works, political writings, and archival records were analysed to discuss debates and contestations.

In short, a combination of secondary source analysis, unstructured interviews, and content analysis is particularly suited for a historical investigation of cultural nationalism.

FEMINIZING LAND: ASSAM, ASOMI AAI AND JOI AAI ASOM

The notion of the nation as sacred entity, often personified as a father or a mother is a powerful and "when a relationship as emotional as that of a mother and a child is being considered, all other concerns become subservient to these emotions" (Sethi and Shubhbrastra, 2017).

According to Smith (2008), a nation emerges when the memories and history of a community are linked to specific places. This leads to the concept of "sacred territory" or the sanctification of the homeland. This raises important questions: Why are landscapes so frequently viewed as not just "ours" but also "sacred?" Smith (2008) argued that land which has been touched by the footsteps of prophets, sages, and saints, and has heard their teachings, often becomes sacred and distinct from the surrounding areas and everyday life. This sanctification process can also be applied to the examples and deeds of ethnic heroes, heroines, and notable figures, inspiring reverence and emulation among their descendants. Within a homeland, certain sites may carry a heightened sense of holiness, evident in concepts like standing on "holy ground" or the presence of reported miracles; for instance, rivers, mountains, cities, temples, battlefields, excavations, museums, etc. Once these lands are sanctified in such ways, Smith argued that the homeland itself becomes a powerful cultural resource for nurturing a sense of national identity.

In India, during the time of the Bengal partition, Abanindranath Tagore painted an image of Banga Mata or Bengal Mother. Within Indian territory, some states have personifications that reflect a maternal figure. For example, Tamil Nadu is often referred to as "Tamil Thai" meaning "mother Tamil", which symbolises the protecting qualities of Tamil language and culture. Moreover, Kerala, Punjab, Bengal, etc., are often personified with a mother figure.

In Assam, the land is often personified as a mother, "Asomi Aai" (Mother Assam), and frequently promoting the

phrase “Joi Aai Asom”, Joi Aai Asom evokes emotional and protective sentiments. The image of “AsomiAai” is reinforced through folk songs, poetry, visual arts, and literature. This imagery is used to rally people to protect their cultural and territorial integrity and preserve cultural traditions, language, and values. Scholars have significantly contributed to the nationalist imagination through their literary works, often invoking the imagery of motherhood.

Lakshminath Bezbaroa, the architect of Assamese language and literature, composed “O Mur Apunar Dex,” which was adopted as the Assam’s state song in 1927, reflects love, devotion, and reverence that the people of Assam have for their homeland. Bezbaroa wrote, “No-where in the world, you can ever find, even if you scour through life; O’ my land of birth, O’ my mother Asom, let me have one, look at your face, my heart has not been sated” (Indian Review, 2011). It transcends linguistic, ethnic, and religious differences, serving as a unifying force that brings together individuals from diverse backgrounds under the umbrella of Assamese identity.

The connection between the idea of the homeland and nationalist narratives can be inter textualized by analysing Bhupen Hazarika’s songs. Sanjib Baruah correctly observed that by using his songs, one can construct Assam’s (1999) unofficial history. He writes,

The idea of the nation as a mother is a familiar motif in national narratives. This motif appears constantly in Hazarika’s music. The mother motif achieves a number of things: it makes the connection of a people to its homeland primal; the implied idea of a common womb gives members of the nation a sense of shared origins that minimises difference. In Hazarika’s song ‘Mother, what offering can I make at your feet?’... the relationship gets imbued with the sacredness of the symbolism of the mother goddess and the sacred obligation to repay through sacrifice (Baruah, 1999, p. 88).

This maternal personification of the land has served as a symbolic anchor of collective attachment, emotional solidarity, and nationalist sentiment, which became so strong during the 1940s Assamese nationality question.

The 20th century Assam, especially the 1940s, witnessed an increasing influx of Bengali-speaking migrants from East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh), encouraged by Sadullah’s “Grow More Food” policy to bring peasants into the Brahmaputra Valley. This complicated the dynamic/s of identity and belonging in the region. Nationalist organisations such as Xangrakshiki Xobha and Axom Jatiyo Mohaxobha strongly resisted immigration to save Asomia. Nationalists used the maternal symbol to rally public support, especially among youth.

Due to “unrestricted immigration” (Baruah, 1999), advocated by Bhasani, Assamese leaders feared loss of land, language, and identity, leading to calls for protection of Assamese culture and land, often described as a kind of maternal inheritance under threat. Furthermore, when the Grouping System wanted to group Assam with East-Bengal, strong movement were launched throughout Assam. These

growing concerns led to stronger emotional appeals in terms of protecting the motherland, though not yet organized around mass slogans like “Joi Aai Asom.”

Leaders like Gopinath Bordoloi emphasised the safeguarding of Assamese identity, and this sentiment was echoed in cultural terms, where “AsomiAai” was invoked in literature and public discourse to emphasise belonging and protection. Finally, the Cabinet Mission’s plan scrapped, and Assam became part of India after partition.

In the aftermath of India’s independence, Assam experienced a significant surge of nationalist uprisings, notably in the years 1960, 1972 and in the Assam Movement from 1979 to 1985.

In 1962, during the war with China, Nehru’s statement, ‘My heart goes out to the people of Assam’ was met with genuine expression of pain and hurt, which played a proactive role in popularising secessionist thought among the new generations of Assam (Mahanta, 2013, p. 34). Hazarika articulated a similar sentiment in the song “Buku hum humkare, murAai” (My chest aches, my mother), which directly addresses *AsomiAai* and “narrates the cry of a helpless son calling out to his mother and resigning himself to the fate that awaits Assam” (Sethi and Shubhrastra, 2016, p. 22).

During the Assam Movement, which was the result of illegal immigration from Bangladesh, the cultural foundation, which was established by Bezbaroa, Hemchandra Barua, Agarwala, Bishnu Rabha, Ambikagiri Raichoudhury; was revived and amplified, linking contemporary political demands with older traditions of regional pride. Songs, poems, banners, and speeches during the movement often began or ended with “Joi Aai Asom”, making it a cultural chant as much as a political slogan. For instance, the song “Asom amarrupohi” (Our beautiful Assam) of Hazarika and various folk performances romanticised the motherland, portraying her as vulnerable yet glorious.

Hazarika, during that period, composed “Bohag is not just a season”, where he said, “the nation is cleansed in Bohag, changing the soiled clothes, the *bardoisila* inspires all in the struggles of life, breaking the vive-grip of sorrow” (Deka, 2011, p. 285). Moreover, he composed “Ah aholai ah”, where he urged the people of Assam to fight against evils; “Akou jodijabolagexaraig hatoloi” (If I have to go again to Saraighat).

Protecting “Mother Assam” thus became synonymous with asserting the rights of sons of the soil, especially in matters of land, employment, and identity. This symbol helped create a pan-Assamese identity, especially during the Assam Movement.

DYNAMICS AND CHALLENGES

Along with others in Assam if we do not save

Where will we save?

If I say I love my mother

Does it mean I hate others’ mothers? (Hazarika, 1968)

The nationalist and extremist have forgotten the inclusiveness shown by Jyoti Prasad Agarwala and Bishnu Rabha. Promoting Assam as a mother figure to the phrase

“Joi Aai Asom” led to a challenge for Assam’s multifaceted identity landscape in the post-Assam Accord period. Assamese nationalist organisations often promote a chauvinistic attitude, with the sole focus on promoting Assamese language and culture. While it serves to unite Assamese people, it also leads to othering and alienating non-Assamese people. This disconnect has led to a fragmentation of aspirations, whereby different ethnic, linguistic, and regional communities have begun to pursue their own separate paths of identity assertion and development demands.

When the voices of minorities are not adequately represented in the dominant narrative, there is a risk of creating divisions and fragmentation. For example, the Bodo movement of the 1980s can also be seen as a response to this phenomenon. In 1979, the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), a militant insurgent organisation, formed and later demanded an independent/sovereign Assam. Tribals were in trouble because they felt that ULFA “represents only the upper caste Assamese... [so] ULFA has no right to demand Assam’s independence” (Baruah, 1999, p. 172). This resulted in the creation of the Bodoland Territorial Council (2003).

By the late 1980s and the 1990s, Assam traversed a turbulent journey and experienced instability. This period marked one of the darkest phases in the state’s history, characterised by the rise of insurgency, unemployment, failed regional parties, state-sanctioned military responses, secret killings, and bombings.

JOI AAI ASOM WITH BHARAT MATA KI JAI

In 2014, Narendra Modi, in his first visit to Assam, began his speech at Guwahati, the capital of Assam, with the slogan “Joi Aai Asom” and ended it with “Joi Aai Asom” and “Bharat Mata Ki Jai” (Long live Mother India). Through his political imagination and rhetoric, Modi touched on the hearts of Assamese pride by citing Assam’s cultural pride and heroes. Now, the Hindutva forces are very critical of Assamese linguistic aggressive nationalism and advocating “a composite and liberal society” (Sarma, 2021). They pointed out that the fragmented Assam or “divide Assam 50/50” (Baruah, 1999) is a result of aggressive linguistic nationalism.

Beyond symbolic expressions like “Joi Aai Asom” or “Bharat Mata Ki Jai”, the government has made concerted efforts to translate rhetoric into reality. At present, the government has placed strong emphasis on women’s empowerment as an essential pillar of holistic growth and inclusive social development. H.B. Sarma, the incumbent Chief Minister of Assam, argues that women who are educated and conscious of their choices, potential, and importance can live dignified and productive lives (Sarma, 2024). The government has introduced and is implementing numerous welfare schemes specifically focusing on women’s health, education, financial independence, and social security. Schemes such as the *Arunodoi* Scheme, which provides direct financial assistance to women from economically disadvantaged families; *Arundhati* (now discontinued), which offered incentives for the registration of marriages and support for women’s rights, reflect a practical commitment to gender equity; *Lakshpati Baideo*, aimed at empowering women entrepreneurs and enhancing

rural livelihoods; and the *Nijut Moina* Scheme, focused on educational support for girl students, further underscore the government’s multidimensional approach to improving the status of women. Locating women as Lakshmi (the Goddess of wealth), Sarma argues,

We have decided to provide schemes to widows, physically disabled persons, unmarried girls, and families with daughters who have returned from their husbands’ homes. As a result, families are compelled to consider these women/girls as Lakshmi because it is through them that the family becomes eligible to benefit from government schemes (Sarma, 2021).

The CM also claims that the establishment of colleges and universities, along with initiatives such as *Nijut Moina*, would reduce child marriages and the dropout rate among girls. Sarma further states that the Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) has improved significantly. Assam has achieved a substantial reduction in its MMR, which dropped from “480 in 2006 to 110 in 2025 (Sarma, 2026). Sarma said during the 15th Assam Legislative Assembly Budget session in 2026.

However, despite these positive initiatives, the effectiveness and long-term impact of these schemes are still critically examined. Research on this theme continues to evaluate the outcomes, assessing whether these programs truly reach the intended beneficiaries, breaking structural barriers, and catalysing lasting social change.

CONCLUSION

People have gradually lost faith in Assamese nationalism, which is primarily led by regional organisations that have fostered a chauvinistic attitude and militant turn in the long term. This resulted in the alienation of tribal communities from mainstream Assamese nationalism, creating an opportunity for Hindutva forces to gain a foothold in Assam. These forces have attempted to draw indigenous and tribal communities into their fold.

When the BJP indicated a willingness to accept Bengali Hindus from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, which led to the passing of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), the decision sparked a massive movement against the CAA. The anti-CAA protests contributed to the emergence of two regional political parties, Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP) and Rajior Dal. Despite widespread strikes and protests against the CAA, voters ultimately supported the BJP in the 2021 Assembly election. The AJP contested 82 seats and won zero seats; Akhil Gogoi, the founder and president of Rajior Dal, won the election as an independent candidate.

Thus, the objective of this paper is clear: the appeal to the common people under the banner of “Joi Aai Asom” in the current political scenario has not been successful in addressing the demands of Assam, resulting in the fragmentation of popular aspirations. Again, the consolidation of Hindutva in Assam appears to have strategically appropriated the emotive slogan “Joi Aai Asom,” which is rooted in Assamese sub-nationalism, and rearticulated it within a broader Hindu nationalist framework by merging “Joi Aai Asom” with “Bharat Mata Ki Jai.” In doing so, it reframes the cultural symbol of the motherland through a gendered lens that links women’s

welfare/protection and maternal mortality-rate and education. Women's welfare schemes, thus, are not merely developmental initiatives but also political instruments that reinforce the idealised roles of motherhood and cultural guardianship, embedding gender within an expanded nationalist discourse aligned with Hindutva ideology.

The appeal "Joy Aai Asom", however, continues to reflect concerns in other spheres, such as ecological issues and cultural pride, particularly when the Assamese perceive that government decisions are contrary to the interests of the commons. For example, the "Save Tree" protest at Digholi Pukhuri in Guwahati demonstrated environmental concern, where students invoked the slogan "Joy Aai Asom" to express unity among the Assamese people. Therefore, further research should be conducted to explore these dimensions in greater depth.

REFERENCES

1. Baruah, S. (1999). *India against itself: Assam and the politics of nationality*. Oxford University Press.
2. Connor, W. (1990). When is a nation? *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 13(1), 92-103. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.1990.9993663>
3. Deka, B. (2011). *Dr. Bhupen Hazarika: A legend*. Orchid Publication.
4. Hazarika, B. (2011). *Moi etijajabor*. S. H. Saidhik Nyash.
5. Heywood, A. (2013). *Political ideologies: An introduction* (5th ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.
6. Hobsbawm, E. (1990). *Nations and nationalism since 1780*. Cambridge University Press.
7. Indian Review, (2011, April 20). *O mor apunardesh*. <https://indianreview.in/poetry/o-mur-apunar-desh/#:~:text=O%20Mor%20Apunar%20Desh,and%20this%20perplexed%20the%20critic>.
8. Mahanta, N. G. (2013). *Confronting the state: ULFA's quest for sovereignty*. Sage.
9. Sarma, H.B. (2021). *Eta saponarpam kbedi: Asomorunnoy onarusuraxyar 25 ta nirnayokbuktitarxongkolon*. Saraswati Printers.
10. Sarma, H. B. (2024). A New Assam. In T. A. Singha & A. Pittie (Eds.), *Modi's Northeast story* (pp. 1-15). Rupa Publications.
11. Sarma, H. B. (Presenter). (2026, 19 February). *At the #AssamBudget session 2026 of the Assam Legislative Assembly*. Himanta Biswa Sarma. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/live/AD2fYBZmc-s?si=gfpQBLhEJcfXxIUq>
12. Sethi, R & Shubhrastha. (2017). *The last battle of Saraighat: The story of the BJP's rise in the Northeast*. Penguin Random House.
13. Smith, Anthony D. (2008). *Cultural foundations of nations: hierarchy, covenant and republic*. Blackwall Publishing.