

# History, Memory and Legend: Contextualizing *Joymoti Utsav* in Assam

Suranjana Barua<sup>1</sup> & L David Lal<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor in Linguistics, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Information Technology Guwahati, Bongora, Guwahati, Assam, India. Corresponding author.

Email ID: [suranjana@iiitg.ac.in](mailto:suranjana@iiitg.ac.in)

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor in Political Science, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Information Technology Guwahati, Bongora, Guwahati, Assam, India.

Email ID: [david@iiitg.ac.in](mailto:david@iiitg.ac.in)

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## Abstract

This paper traces the inception, emergence and relevance of the celebration of a historical figure of Assam – Joymoti – as the Joymoti Utsav (Joymoti Festival). With the first attested public celebration of the festival in Upper Assam in 1914, Joymoti Utsav was a landmark public celebration on multiple counts. Firstly, it created a *feminist and nationalist consciousness* in the region through its celebration of Joymoti – an Ahom princess; secondly, it marked public support to celebration of *an ideal female figure* whose qualities and character women were encouraged to aspire to; thirdly, it followed and also spearheaded *a socio-cultural movement* that found expression in literature and arts including the first Assamese movie *Joymoti* in 1934; fourthly, it brought together people and organizations *in the making of a legacy* that gave direction to the feminist movement in Assam thereby establishing it as a major socio-cultural feminist festival of Assam. This paper traces the emergence of this iconic festival in Upper Assam, its role in establishing feminist ideals, carving out a distinct regional history and nurturing national sentiment, its depiction in various literary genres of the 20th century and the current relevance of the festival in Assam. In doing so, the paper locates *Joymoti Utsav* in a socio-historical perspective in the context of Assam while crediting it with creating a feminist consciousness in the public discourse of early twentieth century Assam.

## Keywords

History, Memory, Joymoti Utsav, Feminist Consciousness, Assam Nationalism.

## 1. Introduction: History, Identity and Collective Memory of the Past

Past is always a contested space, sometimes it is remembered with much glorification and sometimes it is carefully forgotten. As Seneviratne (1997: p. 7) states, history might not be necessarily regarded as facts since facts of the past may be *imaginings based on our present*. Mostly, events of the past are interpreted in the present day ethnic and other group identities, aspirations and values (Narayan, 2008: p.178). Known facts of the past mix with myth and fantasy to create a unique purpose. Gordon (1995) and Hutton (2016) depict invocation of a selective past through symbols, myths and legends that are re-invented to present an actual communicative



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power to the marginalized groups in society. Women, Blacks, Aborigines, Dalits, Poor etc. always struggled to script their history for the common audience. Until recently women in folklore or oral traditions were ignored by scholars working on this field. Increased interest to explore the lives of women in popular narrative and emergence of dedicated women scholars exploring women protagonists resulted in the documentation of women centric oral narratives (Jordan and De Caro, 1986: 501).

Women have played multiple roles in shaping the society that we have come to know yet there is a monolithic imaging of women in oral and written histories. Western scholars have shown that in the European history, there is an overwhelming presence of 'male heroes' and stories of male virility and strength (Shubert, 2012: 280). It is no different in India. Multiple folklores, mythical characters from popular cultural and religious writings often portray men as the protagonist. This paper would attempt to critically explore the representation of a lesser-known woman who remains conscious in public memory even after many centuries. Stories of lesser-known women are epitome of their valor, fearlessness and gallantry. Unlike the 'frozen iconisation of classical or high tradition texts, lesser-known women characters such as Kannagi, Alli Arasi, Akkadevi, Rani Rudrama Devi, Rani Mangammal, Tarabai, Rani Lakshmbai and many more occupy the transformational qualities as they are represented in oral narratives, textual representations and its dramatized performances (Ramaswamy, 2010: p. 129). Badri Narayan (2006) in his work on Dalit Virangna highlights the invented oral narratives about the courageous Dalit women warriors such as Jhalkaribai and Udadevi to construct a new Dalit identity, political language for mobilization and to claim the socio-political space in the society.

In a similar vein, Joymoti, a female protagonist who resisted the tortures of mighty power in Sibsagar, Assam is a living legend. The story was conveyed from a generation to another orally and recorded in Sanchi bark. With the arrival of print, it gradually circulated in extant Assamese newspapers and periodicals as well as in the fledgling women's writings. In the beginning of the twentieth century with the national movement acquiring a significant turn, Assam too desired to remove the tag of a frontier region and wanted to contribute in the cause of independence. Joymoti Utsav began formally in 1914 and it articulated the regional history of Assam. Joymoti - a princess of Ahom kingdom and her dissent, courage and sacrifice were celebrated. Further the story acquired an iconic status with the film 'Joymoti' in the 1930's. What makes Mahasati Joymoti an important living legend is her relevance in the contemporary Assam society. Each year, Joymoti Utsav is celebrated in Sibsagar: her story is enacted and re-enacted in public life. Joymoti Utsav employed a historical narrative to develop a conversation between the present identity and its past through fairs and gatherings annually in Assam and more so in Sibsagar. These celebrations helped mobilize the women and men of Assamese society in the struggle against colonial power and to project a courageous history of the people of Assam.

This popular cultural anecdote raises a few significant questions: Firstly, what does the memory of Joymoti's martyrdom that occurred in 17th century represent? Is it a tale of a woman's resistance to power? Does it tell us about her courage? Or, does it represent an ideal 'Sati' wife who shall be 'silent, chaste and self-sacrificing' protecting her husband? How is she represented today in the memory of Assamese public?

The oral narrative history of Joymoti talks about the aspirations and dreams of a woman intended to create a collective consciousness in the society against domination and suppression. This oral narrative is often ignored from the larger 'history' established by western academic historians since it does not have written records registered in dominant literatures. This paper assumes that the narratives of Joymoti and the Joymoti Utsav are an attempt to form a collective consciousness of women who are often marginalized from the mainstream history of Assam and also an attempt to discover an icon to represent Ahom history. Moreover, Joymoti Utsav creates and communicates the past as a constant conversation with the present – this annual celebration is not a celebration of a mere fictional past but it is living the iconic act of a brave woman. The narrative of Joymoti challenges the dominant colonial notion about the Assam region. The colonial records mentioned Assam as a land of rakshasa, hobgoblins and various terrors. Saikia (2006: p.33) argues colonial literature represented people of Assam possessing 'ferocious manners', brutal tempers' who are 'fond of war, vindictive, treacherous and deceitful'. Further, she mentions British administrators placed the region outside the lineage of Indic culture and Aryan history, a group living without any history. However, local history of Assam deviated from the colonial understanding. Historical narratives such as Joymoti and her sacrifice emanate from pre-modern chronicles called *Buranjis* that challenge the savage history of Assam and Assamese people.

Thus, this paper offers an analysis of the past event as an important feature for constructing the present and future. Further the life of Joymoti and recreation of her valor through Joymoti Utsav is a creative way to communicate to the younger generation of Assamese society in particular the women in Assam. The turn of events in the twentieth century engulfed Assam, otherwise a marginalized land, within the nationalist imagination. Assertion of Assamese identity, telling the unwritten past to a larger audience, presenting the stories of courage from the past for the liberation from colonial power, exploring liberation for the women were the key objectives. A quest for a new historical meaning of Joymoti otherwise limited in oral imagination through Joymoti Utsav- attempts to carve a future against colonial power, constructs a regional identity that provides the community the self-respect, new assertive consciousness. Significantly, Joymoti Utsav focused on women audiences who were otherwise treated as passive subjects- marginalized in society and politics of Assam. Women identified the importance of Joymoti life history and selflessness to claim the spaces of history that disposed them in which they always existed (Turner, 1990: p.4).

## **2. Joymoti in History: Evidence from *Assam Buranji***

Joymoti was an Ahom princess – daughter of Laithpena Borgohain and Chandradaru and the wife of the Ahom Prince Supaatpha or Gadapani – during the reign of Sulikpha (1679-1681 AD). Sulikpha was also known 'Lora Roja' (boy king) as he was installed as a puppet king at the young age of 14 by the powerful Ahom Minister Laluk Sola Barphukan. Laluk Barphukan, an extremely ambitious and cunning Prime Minister, undertook a sinister plan to make all possible stakeholders to the throne physically unfit so that they could not usurp the throne by overthrowing Lora Roja. The Ahom kingdom was beset with damaging political intrigue and conspiracies to assassinate and maim all probable contenders to the throne. Joymoti came to know that Sulikpha's soldiers were on the lookout for Gadapani and, with astute political insight, she persuaded her husband to flee to the adjoining Naga hills and save his life and political future of the Ahom kingdom.

Joymoti – a mother of two young boys and a girl while being pregnant with her fourth child – had to face torture when she refused to divulge her husband’s whereabouts.

“She was tied and flogged in an open field, known as Jerenga Pathar, till her death but did not utter a word about Gadapani’s whereabouts. For her, Gadapani was not only her husband but the probable savior of the kingdom.” (Sharma, 2013: 5)

Tortured by the royal soldiers for 14 days, Joymoti witnessed her 5-year-old daughter killed by the *Chaudang* (royal executioners; *ibid*) before herself succumbing to death while tied to the jerenga (thorny tree from which Jerenga Pathar drew its name). Joymoti thus not only sacrificed her own life but that of her daughter and her unborn child’s lives to save her husband and end the misrule in her kingdom. Gadapani ultimately laid stake to the throne and became the king with the support of other Ahom minister assuming the name Gadadhar Singha (1681-1696). He established the rule of the Tungkhungia clan of Ahom kings that ruled the Ahom Kingdom till its climactic end at the beginning of the 19th century with the Treaty of Yandaboo (1826). His son Sukhrunpha or Lai succeeded Gadadhar Singha on the Ahom throne as the powerful Rudra Singha (1696-1714) who later built the Joysagar Lake at Sibsagar in 1697 and the Phakuwa Dol with a golden idol of Joymoti in 1703-04 to perpetuate the memory of his heroic mother.

This historical narrative of the supreme courage and heroism of an Ahom princess might seem remarkable but in the overall history of the great Ahoms who ruled Assam for nearly 600 years the episode bares finds mentions. A very reliable source of record for this long rule of the Ahoms are the *Ahom Buranji* (chronicles) about which noted historian S.K.Bhuyan mentions:

“They primarily deal with the reigns of the Ahom rules of Assam who exercised their domination for six hundred years from A.D 1228 to 1826. But they also afford glimpses of Shan rulers and princes prior to their advent to Assam.” (Bhuyan, 1945: xi)

The Buranjis were inevitably compiled under explicit orders of the King and high dignitaries of state for “they alone could grant access to state documents on which the chronicles had invariably to be based” (*ibid*: xii). Originally written in Ahom and later Assamese, Buranjis were typically written on strips of Sanchi bark and carefully preserved with their knowledge being more or less an obligatory part of education and culture as well as marriage rituals of the Ahoms.

There are fleeting mentions of Joymoti in at least two Buranjis – the first being the *Tungkhungia Buranji* which chronicles 145 years of the Tunkhungia sovereigns of Assam from 1681 (ascendency of Gadadhar Singha) to 1826 and which first appeared in print in 1933 courtesy the Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta. The English translation is based on the Assamese Buranji of Srinath Duara Barbarua “the compilation of which was commenced on March 6, 1804, during the fifth year of the author Barabaruship” (Bhuyan, 1933: viii). Bhuyan specifies that Srinath’s chronicle “represents only the events of 55 years from 1751 to 1806” specifically “paragraph 1, the first 27 lines of paragraph 2 and paragraphs 83 to 342 of this book” (Bhuyan, 1933: vii-ix). The rest of this translated Buranji – including the history of the Tungkhungia King Gadadhar Singha, his successors Rudra Singha, Siva Singha and Pramatta Singha i.e. the period from 1681-1751 including the proceeding eleven years of anarchy and misrule between 1670-1681 was compiled by Bhuyan himself “from numerous contemporary Buranjis in the language and manners of the old chronicles (Bhuyan: *ibid*).

It is thus pertinent to note that the first instance of the mention of Joymoti in the Tungkhungia Buranji is one that the editor himself has compiled from Buranjis other than Srinath Barbarua's Buranji. *Joymoti makes a nameless appearance in this historical record* as the wife of Gadapani as follows: "...the prince out of fear for the Barphukan had kept his two sons in a Naga village. His wife breathed her last with a child in her womb in the midst of punishment and torture." (Bhuyan, 1933: 14; italics added)

Bhuyan categorically names this 'nameless' wife of Gadapani in the historical Buranji record *in a footnote* accompanying the above quote:

"In another chronicle in which we get this reference to the martyred princess Jaymati. – 'At that time, the Buraphukan, after informing the King, caused the murder of the two brothers of the Bahgaria Gohain at Kaliabar. He then instituted a search for royal princes and killed those whom he could not find. Not having found the Burha-rajā (Gadapani), he caught hold of his wife and caused her death in the midst of punishment.'" (ibid' quotation in original; italics added).

The other chronicle that Bhuyan refers to in the above footnote is possibly the Assam Buranji or 'A Chronicle of Assam from the earliest Ahom Kings to Swargadeo Gadadhar Singha'. This Buranji was from an old Sanchi manuscript and was published as a bilingual book in 1945 with an extensive introduction and an added analysis chapter in English by Bhuyan. Here too, the actual Assamese portion of the Buranji has a nameless reference to the "Aaikuworideo" (term of address for 'mother-princess') who died in peace with womb (Bhuyan, 1945: 121) and as "Gadapani's wife" in the English analysis chapter: "Gadapani's wife died in the midst of punishments and tortures while she carried a child in her womb" (Bhuyan, 1945: 150)

Significantly, Joymoti is explicitly named, *again in a footnote* by Bhuyan, accompanying the above cited line thus:

"This reference to Princess Jaymati, the popular Assamese heroine who sacrificed her life for the sake of her husband, constitutes one of the two solitary instances where mention is made of her immolation." (ibid).

It raises some significant questions, how did a nameless princess referred, at best, as the wife of an Ahom Prince in Assam Buranjis, and expressly named only in footnotes in historical texts, come to have a festival named after her? Under what circumstances did celebrations around the sacrifices, courage and martyrdom of this historical figure become a leitmotif of feminist movement in Assam justifying women's participation in the public and nationalist movement? In the following sections, we trace the emergence and circumstances of creation of this mythic 'Sati Joymoti' in public consciousness in Assam.

### **3. Joymoti in Memory and Literature of Assam: The Sati Ideal**

The narrative of Joymoti as a female protagonist emerged from the footnotes to the various articulations of public imagination in Assam. In a deeply insightful and incisive chapter on 'Apotheosis of Joymoti Konwari: The Making of a Myth', Mahanta (2008), notes:

"The rise of the cult of Sati Joymoti and the celebration of the event all over Assam in the early decades of the twentieth century is linked to the spread of nationalism and its impact

on the social attitudes and ideas about women and women's place in society in pre-independence Assam. It also reveals some of the social tensions prevailing in Assamese society due to ethnic diversity and economic backwardness which had been aggravated under the British occupation." (Mahanta, *ibid*: 61-62)

This metamorphosis of Joymoti - from a historical figure to a cult associated with Sati or chastity and ultimately its appropriation of nationalism and ethnic discourses can be analyzed from a standpoint of historico-literary writing in colonial Assam. The legend of Joymoti first finds mention in printed word in the last decade of 19th century in an article titled '*Joymoti Kuwari*' by Ratneswar Mahanta (Mahanta, 2008; Sutiya, 2017). As Mahanta (2008: 63) notes, the major theme of writings in Ratneswar Mahanta was about the "ideal Hindu woman". Ratneswar was a staunch critic of women's education on the grounds that it would "turn them away from traditional duties of the Indian woman and make proud, luxury loving and uncaring of elders and in-laws (*ibid*). The very first mention of Joymoti Kuwari appears in his article series on '*Moamaria Bidroh*' (the Moamaria Rebellion). Since Mahanta was not a historian, his approach to history was primarily moralistic and, given his conservative position with regard to women's education, his series often had female examples from Assamese history both good and evil in character. In the series on '*Moamaria Bidroh*' too - which primarily dealt with the sectarian peasant revolt against the Ahoms occurring in the last decade of the 18th century causing the Burmese invasions and ultimately the British entering Assam - Mahanta finds the 'evil women' like Phuleswari and Radha-Rukmini. Queen Phuleswari was the wife of King Sutanphaa whose fanatic adherence in Shaktism antagonized many and caused tremendous socio-political upheavals including the Burmese invasion of a rapidly declining Ahom kingdom (see Gogoi 2016 for an alternate account). The rebels purportedly also had a woman leader - Radha-rukmini (wife of a rebel leader) - a skillful archer and whose appearance in the battlefield allegedly rattled the Ahom soldiers who thought her to be the battle-goddess incarnate '*Ranachandi*'. It is as a *counterfoil* to this kind of battle-crazed, scheming, aggressive and dominating women that Joymoti makes an appearance in print in the pages of *Jonaki* in 1893 in Ratneswar Mahanta's article.

"Among all the evil scheming, conspiring women of Ahom history, he had at last found the one "good" woman, the ideal woman, the "nari adarsh" fit to be put in the same plane as Saviti and Damyanti of Hindu lore." (Mahanta, 2008a: 67).

Ratneswar, even though possibly driven by this moralistic urge of representing an ideal chaste woman in Ahom and Assamese history, however, makes a major error in the presentation of the historical Joymoti:

"He made the mistake of placing Joymati who belonged historically to the late 17th century in a narrative of the late eighteenth century... Mahanta makes Joymati the wife of King Laksmikanta Singha who had been captured by the Moamaria rebels and imprisoned in the very temple on the banks of the very lake that had been supposedly dedicated to Joymati herself." (Mahanta, 2008a: 67).

Notwithstanding this error which Ratneswar Mahanta found out himself and later attributed to his dependence on an article called '*Abalar Atmadan*' (A woman's self-sacrifice) published in a Bengali magazine called *Pakshik Patrika* from Bengal (*ibid*), the historical Joymoti was on her way to becoming a celebrated literary figure. The legend achieved great popularity

when the noted writer Rai Bahadur Padmanath Gohain Baruah wrote his Assamese play titled 'Joymoti' in 1900.

With the nationalist sentiment and the initial women's consciousness of the early twentieth century gaining momentum, the Joymoti narrative took on "*Bir Pujā*" (Hero-worship) overtones (Sutiya, 2017: 126). Gohain Baruah's Joymoti is the "incomparable Mahasati"

"who is seen narrating stories of the great veers (heroes) to her sons to inspire them to excel in the art of war. In his Joymoti Kunwari (1915), Lakshminath Bezbaroa made his own additions to this idealized picture. His Joymoti is inspired by the Vaishnavite ethos, and is often singing naam. She seems pivotal to her family and often counseled by Gadapani, her husband; astute enough to show him the right direction, but ever mindful of her own space at her husband's feet." (Chaudhuri, 2014: 104)

These characterizations of Joymoti are in Seneviratne's (1997) sense imaginations based on our present. The transition from a historical figure who barely finds mention in the *Buranjis* by her actual name "to a nebulous icon, an object of worship begins with her virtual erasure from the physical plane" (Mahanta 2008: 69) has begun. With this foray of the legend of Joymoti into popular literature, she has transmorphed into a divined goddess.

"A whole Joymoti literature emerges in Assamese literature centering on the apotheosis of a woman into a goddess (devi) through the practice of pati-brata dharma (ideal of female chastity)." (Mahanta 2008a: 69)

When the literary stalwart and father of Assamese literature Lakshminath Bezbaroa wrote his play Joymoti Kuwori in 1915, it began to be staged on various occasions and Joymoti made further inroads into the popular consciousness so much so that the first Assamese movie Joymoti made by Jyoti Prasad Agarwala in 1935 was on Princess Joymoti as the story is "very close to the heart of the Assamese people" (Sharma, 2014: 46). Agarwala's talkie *Joymoti* had a script based on Bezbaroa's play and in fact, in his essay titled 'Joymoti Akhyan' (Agarwala, 2017: 906) Agarwala catapults the Joymoti narrative beyond history to popular nationalist imagination tellingly shifting from prose to poetry at the end of his essay. His lines below reflect not just the Sati ideal – the loyal wife who suffers for the good of the husband – but also interweaves the nationalist discourse: Joymoti dies *also* for the "good of the nation". Ultimately, his poetic lines seal in this latter discourse by invoking the iconic symbol of the mighty Brahmaputra (Luit) which flows through not just Joymoti's but other nations too only to talk about her courage.

"Joya bore all tortures and afflictions for the good of her husband and for the good of her nation and, one day, she melded in the golden and hoary light of the setting sun..."

*It is to tell the story of that courage*

*In this and other nations*

*That the waters of the Luit*

*Flowed far and wide*

(Agawala 2017: 906; trans. current authors)

This willing invocation of the nationalist discourse by Agarwala was not unintentional: as noted by Rajkhowa (2015),

“When Jyotiprasad’s *Joymoti* was released in 1935, the idea of the nation itself was going through a crisis of redefinition. At this point, the linguistic– national identity of “Assamese” had to contend with questions of popular sovereignty that intensified anti-colonial nationalist agitation had brought in its wake. And the cinema reframed such issues through its particular ontological dimensions.” (Rajkhowa 2015:109; see also Ara, 2020 and Baishya, 2017).

The process of idealizing Joymoti into Sati (un-)wittingly started by Ratneswar Mahanta had undergone a literary trope of divinity and shaped the nationalist and feminist consciousness:

“By removing Joymati from her historical context and endowing her with elements of the divine, Mahanta succeeded in creating a cultural icon that transcends his own nineteenth century bounded, and consequently narrow, vision of feminine character to become one capable of serving the quite different needs of various actors in the historical scene such as emergent nationalism or the awakening consciousness of Assamese women in the first part of the twentieth century.” (Mahanta 2008a: 70; italics added).

In the next section, we will attempt to trace the transformation of the Sati narrative into the nationalistic ideal and feminist consciousness through an analysis of the first celebration of Joymoti Utsav in 1914.

#### **4. Joymoti Utsav, Divinity and Feminist Nationalist Consciousness**

A detailed report about the celebration of Joymoti Utsav was published in Laksminath Bezbaroa edited *Banhi* (6th year; 6th Issue 6, Bohag 1837; circa April-May 1915), by an anonymous ‘Darshak’ (‘audience’ – it can be surmised it was written by the editor himself) gives a vivid description of the celebrations that ensued during the first Joymoti Utsav held by the Joysagar Lake, the landmark of Sibsagar on 6 April 1914. The report begins with the writer stating that it was not required to state extensively regarding Joymoti’s self-sacrifice and that such chastity and courage were rare (Bezbaroa 2019: 1126). Significantly the report rues that there was not much extant literature in Assamese on Joymoti’s life history although there were quite a few in the Bengali language. The report further states that Joymoti had been staged “many times” at the Minerva Theatre in Calcutta which implies two things: firstly, the pan-national appropriation of the Joymoti legend with celebrations taking place beyond Assam and secondly, the translation of the Joymoti narrative into another language (Bengali). Given this then, Joymoti already had an appeal beyond Assam and had made its mark in the performing arts.

The *Banhi* Report further states that Joymoti Utsav was already under way for the past two years and the Sibsagar Town Club had taken the responsibility of organizing the same. The Sub-division Office of Sibsagar had given all students of girls’ schools a half-holiday to enable them to participate in the festivities and that people of all communities including “Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Assamese, Bengali, Marwari, Biharis” (Bezbaroa, 2019: 1126) participated spontaneously in this event. The festivities began with a song. Thereafter the Chairperson Radhikanath Sharma enumerated on the aims and objectives of the festival. It is important to note that Sharma, a



teacher and a noted social activist of Sibsagar – who had in fact first proposed the celebration of Joymoti Utsav by organizing a tea party earlier during Magh Bihu of 1914 by the Joysagar Lake – had formally laid down the aims of the Utsav. His fellow organizer Kuladhar Chaliha had reportedly reduced a large section of his audience to tears with his speech. A section of his speech – as reported in *Banhi* is given below:

“This sky-piercing doul and this underworld touching Sagar indicate the height of Joymoti’s character and the depth of her heart and she seems to say from atop that doul – “Sisters! You too show devotion to your husband and think of your husband’s well-being. If required, do not hesitate to give up your life for your husband –there is great happiness and peace in such death. Such a deed can bring about the wellbeing of society and the race. Selfless sacrifice in the service of great and pious aim is praiseworthy and beneficial.” (Bezbaroa, 2019: 1126; italics added; trans. current authors).

Chaliha’s speech with an exhortation seemingly coming from Joymoti herself as reported in *Banhi* provides an interesting study of discursive strategies, both verbal and printed, for establishing both nationalistic and womanly virtues – the impact on the listener is emotive while on the reader, it is iterative. It is surmised here that both the speech and the writing along with all such literature to follow in the decades after this epochal public celebration gave further reiterative makeovers to the cult of Joymoti. When Indreshwar Barthakur unveiled a portrait he had painted on Joymoti being tortured by the Chaudangs, the women had broken into spontaneous ululations. Thereafter young girls had made their way to the Joysagar and had strewn flowers in the water in the name of Joymoti. The women partook of water from the lake as “*shantijal*” (peace water) and tied the flowers as “*nirmali*” (flowers proffered to deity and hence deemed blessed) into their buns. These reported actions indicate the divinization of Joymoti as well as the performative religio-ritualistic makeover to the observation of her memory during the Utsav. The women sang several naams after which an essay competition was arranged on Joymoti. The festivities ended with the staging of Joymoti in the Town Club premises in which women audience filled the hall.

The *Banhi* Report ends with the writer noting that the women, though the weaker race, could sacrifice everything with a smile for the sake of duty and love. Crucially the last paragraph of the report also puts forth an opinion: “If Joymoti had not been Assamese but had belonged to some other nation or race, she would have been deemed a goddess and would have been propitiated to daily.” (ibid: 1127; trans. current authors). The report highlighted that the Utsav for the first time brought men and women together publicly and it should continue to show a greater aim to the Assamese people and should enable them to pass the test of self-sacrifice.

The ‘*Darshak*’ who has written the *Banhi* report is the nameless and faceless audience – the public – and when the ‘*Darshak*’ wishes for Joymoti to be to be propitiated, it has heralded a self-serving narrative pushing multiple agendas, firstly, divinizing Joymoti through the Sati ideal, secondly, bringing about a feminist consciousness of Joymoti as an icon, thirdly, a performative angle through staging which would have had its own agendas and problems. These stagings were to draw on nationalist and political narratives of their own of which Chaudhuri (2014) writes:

"When performance provides flesh to a political and nationalist grand narrative, the result would almost always use the visual and emotive memory of its audience to somehow concretize and thereby give a kind of stability and legitimacy to the given narrative. Thus evolved the mythology /history of Joymoti within a space that was both traditional and modern..."and both carriers of patriarchal ideology..." (Chaudhuri, 2014: 104-105)

### **5. The Role of Assam Mahila Samity and *Ghar Jeuti* in Joymoti Utsav**

The description of the festivities in *Banhi* set the pattern for latter celebrations: Joymoti Utsav became an annual affair in Sibsagar. Initially, as mentioned earlier, the Town Club took charge of the celebrations for the first two years after which the Ahom Association was entrusted with the responsibility to organize it. The latter did not do full justice to the task and a co-educational school named the Phuleswari Institution took charge. It was in 1919 that the newly formed Sibsagar Mahila Sanmilani – an organization by and for ladies – took over the responsibility of organizing it and continued it right up to the nineteen thirties (Mahanta, 2008a:71). The Utsav significantly became an all-Assam event when the Assam Chatra Sanmilan (Assam Students' Association) took a resolution in its Nagaon Conference to organize state wide Joymoti Utsavs along with Chilarai and Lachit Utsav. "By the 1920s virtually the entire Brahmaputra valley celebrated the Jaymati Utsav. The Assamese community that resided in Calcutta also did so." (Sharma, 2011: 229).

During one such Joymoti Utsav celebrated in Calcutta in 1928, the students invited Aidew Gobindabala Choudhury, one of the granddaughters of the last Ahom King, to preside over the occasion. Apart from the president, all other speakers at this convention were men and an editorial in *Milan* – the student's magazine – reported that apart from Sibsagar where both men and women participated, the branches had not been very successful in the celebrations. The reason for this was that "*women in the towns of Assam still did not go out in public or attend public meetings except in Sibsagar, where the convention had been broken by the Joymoti Utsav.*" (Mahanta, 2008a: 72; italics added).

The level of public participation in Sibsagar can be gauged from the report of the 1929 Joymoti Utsav celebrations published in *Ghar Jeuti* (Mahanta 2008b: 475-480). The first Joymoti Utsav of 1914 had only one essay competition. The 1928 Sibsagar Joymoti Utsav had as many as 19 prizes in acting, songs, recitation, weaving, yarning, and boat race. Additionally, there were 40 winners of consolation prizes. These activities point towards the rising socio-cultural clout of Joymoti Utsav in Sibsagar as a public event among the younger generation.

A few developments in the 1920s promoted presence of women in the public sphere: first was the arrival of Gandhi in Assam, second was the formation of the Assam Mahila Samity (Assam Women's Association) as a pan Assam organization in 1926 at the behest of the firebrand feminist icon Chandraprabha Saikiani (Goswami, 2020, Borah 2021, Barua and Lal, 2021). Third, 1927 saw the publication of the first women's magazine *Ghar Jeuti* from Sibsagar that awakened the consciousness of women towards public participation of women. While the former two events were to act as a catalyst for organizing all women's associations into a singular entity legitimizing

women's entry into the public realm (see Sharma 1993/2013, Mahanta 2008a for detailed discussion), the latter was to provide a regular outlet for women's writing.

As Assamese women sought admission into the public sphere, Joymoti was their calling card (Sharma, 2011: 228) and *Ghar Jeuti* provided yeoman's service in providing a platform for a plethora of women's writing on Joymoti. A few words on the origins of *Ghar Jeuti* are in order here: *Ghar Jeuti* owed its existence to the enterprise, passion, patronage and sponsorship from the household of one of the foremost reformists, tea industrialist and lawyer Rai Bahadur Kali Prasad Chaliha. His son Tara Prasad Chaliha, an England returned planter was one of the organizers of the Joymoti Utsav at Sivasagar (Sharma, 2011: 229). It was from the Chaliha household that *Ghar Jeuti* drew initial fuel with Tara Prasad sponsoring the first women's magazine; the daughters of the household including Kamalaya Kakoti, Labanya Prabha Barabara, Hiranya Prabha Barua and Dr. Nirjala Chaliha becoming regular writers. *Ghar Jeuti* saw the light of day in October 1927, with Tara Prasad's wife Kanaklata Chaliha and later his sister Kamalaya Kakoti becoming the editors of a women's magazine *Ghar Jeuti* (Sharma, 2011: 229 wrongly ascribes Kamalaya as Tara Prasad's wife). Both these remarkable women went to great lengths to bring out a magazine whose aim was to "bring the women of Assam onto the same platform; collect multiple perspectives and determine the correct path for women's education" (Mahanta 2008b:13; trans. current authors). As mentioned earlier, there was an essay competition on Joymoti at the first celebration itself.

"An essay on this heroic theme was an act of filial piety that simultaneously sought to appropriate a historical tale of bravery and sacrifice for the present. The Joymoti story was an ideal vehicle for modernizing young women who needed to display virtue as well as talent." (Sharma, 2011: 230).

Over the years, various essays however appropriated and represented Joymoti in various discourses: example the essays/ articles in the 2nd year of the 8th issue of *Ghar Jeuti* appropriated the Joymoti narrative for the cause of revolution, education, likening Joymoti to Sita.

Apart from reports on the Joymoti Utsavs over the years, *Ghar Jeuti* was to see an explosion of literature from women as well as men various, poems, essays glorifying Joymoti and even the Editor Kamalaya Kakoti set the tenor by conjoining the roles of the Editor of *Ghar Jeuti* and organizer of Joymoti in her appeal dated 8 March 1928 with her appeal to the public for participating in the upcoming Joymoti 'national festival' on 1 April:

"On the occasion of this festival, there will be boat race, songs, recitation, essay-reading, portraits of Joymoti and Godapani, speeches on women's welfare, exhibition on the artistic work of women and girls etc. at Joysagar. Hence we cordially appeal to all men, women, boy and girl students who are appreciative of Sati that they should participate in this national festival to the exclusion of caste and creed and encourage us too in this task." (Kamalaya Kakoti, Editor; in Mahanta 2008b: 116; trans. current authors)

The spontaneous celebrations took ritualistic overtones and coagulated over time. However, as the preceding and the current section have shown, the cult of Joymoti and the tenor of the festivities evolved during the Utsav in multiple cities across decades. For Assamese women, Joymoti Utsav, the Assam Mahila Samiti and the publication of *Ghar Jeuti* as a magazine by and

for women, had an interconnected past and co-dependent development. While *Ghar Jeuti* has long ceased to be printed, both the celebration of Joymoti Utsav and the Assam Mahila Samity's existence till date speaks volumes for the way history and collective memory have forged a unique identity for Assamese women. For a more detailed analysis of the journey of Assamese women from 18th to 20th century, see Mahanta (2008a), Sharma, Deka (2013), 1993/2013, Dutta (2016).

## 6. Legacy and Contemporary Relevance of Joymoti

The legend of Joymoti was initially created through memory and monuments built and dedicated to her memory by her son King Rudra Singha. Joysagar Tank – one of the largest man-made in India – in 1697 and also the Fakuwa Dol, a pyramid shaped *dol* which is a *moidam* or grave of Joymoti with her gold idol placed inside the temple was symbolic to the women hero. These landmarks became the venues for the celebration of Joymoti Utsav later and added to her allure as an object of worship,

“According to the patriarchal view, the “good woman” is neither seen nor heard and the transformation of Joymoti, the life and blood woman, into a nebulous icon, an object of worship begins with her virtual erasure from the physical plane.” (Mahanta 2008a: 68-69).

The Joymoti legend has been adapted to other artistic fields with various interpretations of her life and character. As stated earlier, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala made the first Assamese talkie. He mixes myth, legend, history and memory in the creation of a character who embodies Ahom royalty as well as Assamese stoicism.

“Joymati of my film neither speaks much at the royal court, nor speaks publicly in any place. She is represented as a stoical “*alpa-bhashini*” Assamese aristocratic bowari who maintains silence, speaks only when required, proves herself through her actions. ...I have sketched out the character of Joymati following my understanding of the Assamese woman. Silence is one of the features of the Assamese character. It is the quality that I have tried to highlight in my portrayal of Joymati.” (Agawala as translated in Chaudhuri, 2014: 106)

The glorified silence in Agarwala's Joymoti get a feminist interpretation in the 2006 movie by Manju Borah whose Joymoti is not prone to silence at all. “Unlike Jyoti Prasad's Joymati, this woman does not keep silent; she speaks with precision and establishes the sanctity of her personal space” (Chaudhuri, 2014: 108)

In a twist of fate and a matter of real emulating reel, Aideu Handique, the first Assamese heroine who played the character of Joymoti on screen “was socially ostracized for three years by the villagers for acting in a film” (Sharma, 2014: 52). She had to remain unmarried as no alliances came her way for having portrayed a married woman.

“That she suffered immeasurably in real life after having played the role simply reinforces the fact that the audience of the time clearly held double standards: they lapped up the represented image and shunned the vehicle of the said representation.” (Chaudhuri, 2014:107)

The enduring legacy of Joymoti in its silver screen avatar Joymoti was made in 1934 and premiered in Calcutta on 10 March, 1935 with a premiere show in Assam by a mobile unit outside

Kamrup on 20 March, 1935 Natya Mandir. In a major subversion of the Joymoti narrative of heroism, Aideu Handique never saw herself on screen till 60 years after she acted in it:

“I had to touch Phunu Barua (Gadapani), lay my head on his lap as he was my husband in the film, and I was extremely shy and ashamed to see myself doing all that... I wondered what my relatives would say...I was really ashamed” (in Sharma, 2014: 52)

The price Aideu pays for playing Joymoti on screen is almost as high as the historical Joymoti. In spite of the obvious patriarchal and misogynistic cruelty in this usurpation of a woman’s legend to the detriment of the woman playing her role in contemporary society, the legacy of Joymoti Utsav thrives both in popular culture, literature as well as the annual Utsav itself to this day which questions whether:

“perpetual return to Joymoti is itself symptomatic of anxieties that are constitutive of the affective claims of Assamese nationalist discourse. Is perhaps the need to periodically resurrect Joymoti – be it at annual day, school functions or “professional,” ticketed live performances – not so much an indication of the tired despondency of Assamese nationalism, but the very sign under which it is able to perpetuate itself?”(Rajkhowa, 2015: 107)

## 7. Conclusion

Conspicuous by absence with virtually no mention by her name in history (Buranjis), Joymoti is resurrected by the physical landmarks created by her son Rudra Singha (the Joysagar Lake, Fakuwa Dol); by her appropriation by feminist associations including the Assam Mahila Samity; by the myths, legends, performative arts and awards (such as State Government’s annual ‘Sati Joymoti Award’ to women of excellence in different fields) in her name and most importantly by the celebration of her courage, chastity and martyrdom in the Joymoti Utsav. The appropriation of Joymoti served multiple agenda and she has been “constructed and reconstructed at crucial junctures of Assam’s history, and these constructions were quite literally, ‘man-made’ to feed the changing need of that specific context.” (Chaudhuri, 2014:102). As seen in this paper, for Ratneswar Mahanta in the eighteenth century, Joymoti was the depiction of an ideal good woman contrasted with evil schemers in the royal Ahoms; for the likes of Bezbaroa who himself hailed from Sibsagar and Padmanath Gohain Baruah, Joymoti proffered an opportunity to present the heroic women figure in literature; for Jyoti Prasad Agarwala and Manju Bora, Joymoti made for an appealing story that could be captured on celluloid; for Chandraprabha Saikiani, the editors of *Ghar-Jeuti* and the Assam Mahila Samity, Joymoti became a feminist icon whose celebration justified women’s participation as a community and that too with greater social sanction. As such the role of Joymoti Utsav in bringing women’s participation in conservative Assam at the turn of the last century cannot be justified enough.

What endures into the twenty first century is the legend of Joymoti and a rare celebration of a female hero in the public sphere hinging on the Assamese nationality and women’s consciousness as a paragon of feminine, wifely, Ahom, Assamese and nationalistic virtues. The recent launch of an all-women protection squad – ‘Joymoti Bahini’ – by Railway Police Force (RPF) is an evocative representation of this heroism of Joymoti in contemporary Assamese public

imagination. All of these can be perceived meandering their way into the past, into present collective memory and all collude in portraying her in myriad ways in history, myth, literature, arts to ultimately instill Joymoti with different identities which self-perpetuate at various times.

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Dr. Suranjana Barua is currently an Assistant Professor in Linguistics at Department of Humanities and Social Sciences in Indian Institute of Information Technology Guwahati, Assam, India. Previously she worked at the Centre for Assamese Studies, Tezpur University. She is a member of the Editorial Committee for the journal Language and Language Teaching. Dr Barua has published research articles and chapters in various research journals and books; has been a language consultant for various organizations and has translated important works of key literary figures of Assam such as Rajanikanta Bordoloi, Bishnu Prasad Rabha, Chandraprabha Saikiani, Bhupen Hazarika and Arun Sarma. Her areas of research interest are Sociolinguistics (Discourse Analysis), Language and Identity, Translation Studies and Gender Studies

Dr. L. David Lal is currently an Assistant Professor in Political Science at Department of Humanities and Social Sciences in Indian Institute of Information Technology, Guwahati, India. Previously, he taught at University of Delhi and worked as a Research Consultant at International Research Development Centre, Canada; Action Aid- UK-India; United Nations Development Programme India. Dr. Lal has also worked as Co-Project Director at Ministry of Panchayati Raj and Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Govt. of India. He has published articles in various research journals and co-authored research reports concerning the plight and rights of the marginalized communities in India, socio-economic policies, political representation of women. His research interests are socio-political history of the marginalized communities, identity politics, policy studies and conflict studies.

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