



Nurturing the 'Domestic' in the 'Nation': 'Joymati Utsav' and Sisterhood in Assam

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Abstract :

Women's reality, despite their presence and intervention in the public sphere, is confined largely to the private sphere or, at best, to its margins. An important field of study in this case is the colonial period in India. The reformist agenda was merely a platform for the colonizers and the colonized to justify their individual causes. It was not at all empowering for the women who were merely transferred from one kind of patriarchal structure to another until women became actively involved in the movement for their emancipation. In this context, the idea of women's community helps in thinking about women's empowerment through women working together, collaborating and making connections. In this paper I intend to establish that the community space from where women address other women integrates the 'domestic' and the 'national' in a way which contributes to a feminine perspective of the nation and its corollaries.

The paper examines a specific event in colonial Assam, Joymati Utsav or Joymati Festival celebrated by women of Assam celebrating the Ahom princess Joymati's sacrifice of her life in order to protect her husband, Gadapani, an Ahom prince who later ousts King Sulikphaa (Lora Roja). Though the Joymati festivals are celebrated till today in few parts of Upper Assam, this paper limits itself to an examination of records of speeches by women delivered on the occasion of Joymati Utsav in various towns of Assam found in *Ghar Jeuti* (1927-31), a magazine exclusively for women published from Sibsagar, Assam. Joymati Utsav, I argue creates an empowering 'community' space for women, thus, binding them into a sisterhood. This paper examines the origins of feminist consciousness, focusing on women's activities outside the home in colonial Assam, thereby also proving that such studies are necessary to formulate the origins of the women's movement in various localities.

Keywords: *Sisterhood, Joymati Utsav, Women's Community, Assamese Women, Colonial Assam.*



Introduction :

Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) recognizing the issue of the public and private as a crucial point in the history of women, men, and the state notes that women have always been excluded from 'civil existence.' She further writes: "The mighty business of female life is to please, and restrained from entering into more important concerns by political and civil oppression, *sentiments become events*" (Wollstonecraft 183-84).

Though Wollstonecraft associates this with the view that the female mind was unable to grasp anything great, this idea may be read as providing an occasion for female experiences to become events by themselves. This last idea of "sentiments becoming events" is important in reading the activities of women in early twentieth century India. Women begin to participate outside the domestic sphere in a manner that allows their experiences to be matters of public importance: their personal sentiments become events that further became occasions to celebrate. These women as I argue use the domestic space as a platform from where they stage their fight for emancipation, at the same time extending full support to the nationalist agenda. At the same time, I have it in mind that women's participation outside their 'homes' was a part of nationalist agenda to include women in the struggle for Indian independence with prescriptions on what women could do and could not do. Scholars like Partha Chatterjee (1989), Suruchi Thapar (1994), and Tanika Sarkar (1992) to name a few have written on the connection between women and nation in colonial contexts

with special reference to the Indian context. The attempt to reconcile the women's movement with nationalism demanded a reaffirmation of patriarchy in the name of nationalism. The Indian nationalists were not necessarily in favor of social reform for women, or even their participation in politics, and tended to make contradictory demands on women in the name of formation of statehood. Interestingly, women accepted that the demands of the community were far more important than their own and they diverted their attention to the male dominated nationalist agendas at the cost of their movement on women's rights. However, as women across the country extended full support to the nationalist agenda, they could fully access the civil space outside their homes to form communities of their own. Isolation and subordination thus gave way to organization and collaboration.

In this context the first celebration of Joymati Utsav in Upper Assam which was held on 6th April, 1914 on the banks of the Joysagar tank in Sibasagar, could be viewed as the beginning of a bonding and sisterhood in this part of the country. From 1923 onwards this festival became an all-Assam event. The Assam Mahila Samiti¹ established in 1926 also organized these festivals among women all over Assam. Gradually as these festivals came to be organized by the Sibsagar Mahila Samiti and other branches of the Assam Mahila Samiti, these celebrations became occasions not just to celebrate Joymati but rather to celebrate the spirit of Assamese womanhood that had the potential to change the course of history as is evident from Joymati's example. *Ghar*



Jeuti,² which may be regarded as a mouthpiece of Sibsagar Mahila Sanmilani kept records of the various Joymati Utsavs regularly thus giving wider exposure to the Joymati celebrations. The records of the celebrations in Sibsagar and other towns of Assam are to be found in various issues of *Ghar Jeuti* from 1928 onwards. All activities were documented, with names of people who came from various places to attend them, and summaries made of discussions, speeches, and resolutions taken, etc. The paper takes into account select speeches by women on Joymati Utsavs recorded in *Ghar Jeuti* held at various places in the state examining those women's texts of the early twentieth century which explore the idea of an alternate 'space' for women in Assam (though the privileged upper and middle class women in particular) from where they actively participated in matters of social progress and nation building.

Inventing a civil/community space for women's active participation :

Joymati Utsav allows an interesting reading of Assamese society when a nascent consciousness among women could be witnessed with regard to notions of 'race' and 'community'. The article by the editors on the 16th Conference of Joymati Utsav noted that gradually it was taking the shape of Assam's national festival (spearheaded by women) moving beyond the limitations of the local (Kakoti and Chaliha 475). By the time the Joymati myth came to be established in Assamese public memory, women had already internalized the nationalist rhetoric of woman as the mothers of the nation. Aparna Mahanta traces the history of the construction of this myth to an article by Ratneshwar

Mahanta on Joymati and Gadapani published in *Jonaki*. He intended to portray the image of a self-sacrificing ideal Hindu woman (along similar lines as the nationalists) and "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 69-70).

For Joymati's love and supreme sacrifice for her husband and the country, folk accounts refer to her as a *Sati*. Gadapani as Gadadhar Singha (1681-1696) brought peace and prosperity back to the country after becoming the king in August 1681. After becoming king, Gadapani dispatched an army against the mughals, thus, recapturing Guwahati from the Mughals in August 1682. Though Joymati Kunwari belonged to a royal family, her open declaration of non-violent revolt against the tyrannical ruler is seen as nothing short of a symbol of self-sacrifice, passive resistance, kindness, friendship etc. in addition to her devoted service to her husband and family. Other writers too reproduced Joymati's story during the course of the early twentieth century. Padmanath Gohain Barua wrote a play titled *Joymati* in 1900. Lakshminath Bezbarua's *Joymati Kunwari* was written in 1915 and staged thereafter on various occasions. According to Aparna Mahanta in her *Journey of Assamese Women (1836-1937)*, Joymati festival allowed the figure of Joymati to be used as a "potent cultural



and literary symbol in the social and political life of the Assamese people in the nationalist movement". (Mahanta 87) The importance of the Joymati cult to the people of Assam is evident from the fact that the first Assamese movie by Jyoti Prasad Agarwalla, *Joymati* was based on Bezbarua's play (Barua and Lal 7)

Public Speaking versus Private Emotions: Developing the Joymati cult :

The speeches recorded in *Ghar Jeuti* that the paper takes into account celebrate women's community and try to assimilate these communities into the growing nationalist project, which facilitated the growth of such communities and vice versa. Interestingly, these women speakers have internalized patriarchal structures in such a manner that without foregoing the traditional roles set for women, they tried to advocate for a space where women could carry out all her tasks and be a part of the 'world' outside the threshold of the 'home' as well.

Giribala Barua in her speech on the 15th Conference of Joymati Utsav in 1928 addresses all women who have gathered in Joydoul– to celebrate the spirit of resistance exhibited by 'Sati Rajrani Joymati Kunwari'. She sees this celebration as offering a platform, which will induce new ways of self-learning in the minds of young women who will be a part of it every year (Ghar Jeuti 464-465). Participation in the Joymati Utsavs enabled women to form a community of their own thereby contributing to the overall feminist consciousness among women in Assam. These festivals allowed the women of Assam to reconstruct the civil/community space between the

'home' and the 'world as one of strength, also enabling these women to participate in affairs outside their homes. She also interpreted Joymati and her life story as an example for women to follow and equip themselves with all tools necessary to lead a meaningful life. Barua of course does not challenge the traditional roles meant for men and women and urges that knowledge acquired on household chores, herbal medicines, agriculture, etc. will enable her to manage the domestic sphere properly thereby leaving the men free for work outside. She extends this to the larger context of the nation saying that: "This education is essential for our country now as it will enable women to allow their men folk to work outside the homes by taking care of the domestic sphere entirely. Otherwise it will be difficult to run families properly if only one person is burdened with all work" (Barua 464). Without challenging the traditional role of women, she talks about progressive women in other developed countries whom her women hearers should take as examples. Progress of the nation depends on such steps to be taken by women. Women should be educated not only in reading and in writing (which is just one part of education) but primarily should have the ability to cook, weave, etc (464-465). Weaving was (and still is) an essential part of the lives of Assamese women and this is a point which is taken up by many men and women in their writings and speeches including Giribala Barua, thereby asserting the need to preserve the integrity of the composite Assamese culture even as it comes into contact with ideas of modernity and change.



Similarly, Punyaprabha Das during the same Utsav regards that a nation's progress depends on her women, which is evident from actual events and written histories in the life of the nation. "Joymati sacrificed her life and when after her death her husband became the king a period of peace and progress was ushered in." She cites the example of Napoleon Bonaparte who once said that the strength of the French nation lies in her mothers. She recalls Joymati's bold step taken against the king in not divulging her husband's whereabouts and in not even thinking about her sons whom she left with her friend while walking out of her home with the king's soldiers (Das 469). The revival of the Joymati cult during the first half of the twentieth century in Assam was necessary to build the proper atmosphere for women's active participation in the freedom movement. It is both liberating and constricting. Tanika Sarkar writes about the sati being an adored nationalist symbol, her figure representing the moment of climax in expositions of Hindu nationalism (Sarkar 42). Joymati is seen as a sati who gives the highest proof of her devotion and chastity not by sitting on her dead husband's funeral pyre but by tolerating the tortures on her body inflicted by Lora Roja's men.

Satyagraha, Swaraj and Sisterhood

Joymati Utsav was a sentiment through which women glorified Joymati's resistance, sacrifice, and personal suffering, and it becomes a major event enabling women to come out and be a part of it. It subverts the elite-nationalist thought and at the same time provides for a historical opportunity for the political appropriation of women in a non-political space between the

'home' and the 'world'. In her presidential address in Sibsagar Joymati Utsav in the year 1931, Hemaprava Das equals Joymati's self-sacrifice with Gandhi's sacrifice and strong will power (Das 1139). In fact, the constant use of the term self-sacrifice reminds one of Gandhi's philosophies – passive resistance in the form of Satyagraha. Gandhi regarded the satyagrahi as one who has to lead an exemplary life, to set examples to others by their actions without imposing those actions on anybody, thereby doing away with criticism, contempt, hostility and eventual violence. If others do not follow their lead, they will be disappointed. In Gandhian terms, the satyagrahis need to regard this disappointment as partly being their own fault and mend their ways by inventing other means of setting an example (Bilgrami 4162).

Gandhi's non-violence (ahimsa) eulogises nurturing (primarily a womanly feature) as an important principle. He gives public visibility to all these qualities that have always been regarded as 'feminine'. His strong attachment to the charkha or the spinning wheel, the use of which would make India self-sufficient is also related to the idea of nurture, touch, and craft based ideal of work as against the machine-based one. This is also an aspect of the transformation – epistemological – between male and female ways of doing work, thinking about themselves, or even looking at the work. This image of the satyagrahi and the symbol of the spinning wheel are closely connected to the concept of sisterhood propounded by Gandhi in an important address to women of India in the form of a letter written to *Young India* on 11 August 1921:



The destiny of India is far safer in your hands than in the hands of a Government that has so exploited India's resources that she has lost faith in herself. At every one of women's meetings, I have asked for your blessings for the national effort, and I have done so in the belief that you are pure, simple, and godly enough to give them with effect. You can ensure the fruitfulness of your blessings by giving up your foreign cloth and during your spare hours ceaselessly spinning for the nation (Gandhi 78).

This was Gandhi's call to women to organize and form communities, which would in turn contribute to the strengthening of the national civil society that Gandhi was trying to form through his 'constructive programme' that he chiefly advocated in the Belgaum Conference in 1924. His constructive programme included his fasts for specific reasons (a powerful means by which he could pose as an exemplar within public visibility), suspension of all boycotts except the foreign cloth boycott etc. This necessarily allows a review of the emerging civil society as merely a result of a European encounter followed by a modernizing process. There was also an equally strong necessity to preserve indigenous Indian society from an out and out influence of modern civilization as it emerged in the West which Gandhi highlights in *Hind Swaraj* (1908). In this work Gandhi attacks the very notions of modernity and progress while talking about the ills of ever-increased mechanization and heavy industrialization which would disrupt the existing harmony of an agrarian society like India.

In this context Hemapra Das' presidential address (which I have already referred to in the previous section) may be mentioned, where she celebrates selflessness as an important quality that will take our country to new heights of excellence. Love for our country should not remain in words but our actions should demonstrate it. Recalling the great work that peasants were doing for the country, she said that others should help the peasants and work for their welfare especially in the lean season when they do not have their regular work to do. She says:

The number of peasants in our country is large. We owe our leisure time to the hard work that they do for us... If we neglect the peasants our country will suffer (Das 1138).

She said that they could help them by buying hand-woven materials from these women. She mentioned the efforts made by Dibrugarh Mahila Samiti that was engaged in selling hand woven dress materials and taking initiatives in selling the finished products by women of that region. By doing this, they could not only help the poor women but also contribute towards spreading love for swadeshi goods for which Gandhi was working. By 1928, khadi had acquired added importance as a powerful weapon in the programme of boycott of foreign cloth, which was to serve as the effective sanction behind the national demand and which Gandhi was determined to bring about with the assistance of mills. Weaving and swadeshi thereby become common strengths and resources based on which women bond with other women. Women's bonding is not only the



essence of sisterhood but is also necessary for women's empowerment.

In the presidential speech delivered in Baligaon Milan Mandir Joymati Utsav (the first of its kind in Baligaon) in the year 1931 Narayani Handique, the wife of philanthropist Radha Kanta Handique and a regular contributor to the journal, says:

Joymati was born in this mortal world with all qualities like kindness, devotion towards her husband, patience etc....Her action not only proves her devotion towards her husband but also displays love for her motherland and her own people whom she loved as much as her two sons. (Handique 1136)

She further spoke of the need to work for the welfare of the nation. Her appeal to young girls was:

Do not forget your duties and do not be afraid of hard work. All of you are bound to step into domestic lives in the near future. You are like Lakshmi. The welfare of the nation depends on you. Plead with your parents to give you the minimum education. Learn to read and write. At the same time, do not forget that the greatest skill that you can learn is the skill to run your household smoothly (1136).

These dictates, it may be argued, do not merely echo the prescriptions of the nationalist discourse that wanted the women to behave in a particular manner. We may arrive at a conclusion that an agrarian economy could progress by these means. Gandhi in *Hind Swaraj* wrote about his

own reservations regarding the impact of Western education on Indians. According to him, it ignores completely the ethical aspect of education and the need to integrate the individual within the collectively shared moral values of the community and instead cultivates "the pretension of learning many sciences" (Gandhi 75-80). At the same time, it needs to be noted that the writer participates in the "discourse of advice" that marked the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, the kind of education advocated by Narayani Handique for other women preserves the ethical aspect of education and will enable these women not to be confined in their homes but to be a participant in the social space outside their homes. In a way even while accepting these traditional roles, these women will be able to transform these roles in the manner Joymati did.

Conclusion :

Women's entry into the civil/public space through their activities led to a major intervention in the already established and ever expanding nationalist discourse which (is primarily) male dominated and patriarchal in its outlook. What is important in this regard is the formation of the collective spirit and a growing sisterhood which ensured empowerment and agency. Elizabeth Fox Genovese sees collectivity as an idea which "allowed these women to break out of their walls of silence and permitted them to forge a common language with which to express their hostility to the constraints of their lives" (Genovese 14). Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, sisterhood helped women to be less vulnerable economically, politically and socially. This



collective strength also disallowed segregation of space, and women became more and more visible in spite of various forms of patriarchal control, which sought to channelize and contain women's thoughts and actions. Women's thought and agency challenged the new patriarchies (which also control women's bodies and women) emerging out of Victorian sexual puritanism, Indian nationalist revivalism, and liberal reformism. It was therefore imperative for women to unite as a community in order to have 'agency'. In an article for an edited volume *Communities of Women*, I tried to locate female agency in the act of woman writing biography of another woman emphasizing that the formation of the collective spirit among women of Assam (or for that matter women of India) ensured better protection of their rights and privileges (Das 183). In a similar manner *Ghar Jeuti's* attempt to record the Joymati festivals and the speeches delivered by women and circulate those in print form is reflective of another small sisterhood creating through the acts of writing and publishing for the public sphere too.

Joymati Utsav enabled women to occupy a space between the 'home' and the 'world' and organize themselves as a community, which can be regarded as an initial step taken towards ensuring a space for women in the emerging civil society. Elizabeth Fox Genovese in her study on women's communities in Europe notes that the early activities done by women outside their homes were chiefly "exercises in community building" (Genovese 33-54). In this respect, community might better be understood as the opposite of individualism. These speeches,

where women address other women trying to build a civil/non-political solidarity based on common interests and goals, aim at not just emancipation for themselves but the attainment of swaraj and consequently, the formation of nation-state. The very fact that such a bonding developed around the celebration of the spirit of womanhood – Joymati symbolizing the inner strength, which every woman possesses in some form or the other – signifies that these women bonded with other women based on "shared strengths and resources". "It is this type of bonding that is the essence of Sisterhood" (hooks 46). Such a bonding definitely leads to a feminine perspective on the nation, one that does not dismiss the 'domestic' as trivial, instead, regards it as significant.

Notes :

The translations of original Assamese texts both primary and secondary are mine.

Notes :

1. Hemjyoti Medhi in her study on Assam Mahila Samiti (AMS) in late colonial Assam, associates the formation of the AMS in 1926 and its gradual extension "to the emergence of a nascent Asamiya public sphere" (Medhi 17). The role of AMS in beginning women's mobilization and agency in colonial Assam could not be denied.

2. Two women from Sibsagar Assam started their journey towards women's empowerment by editing a women's magazine, *Ghar Jeuti* (it was the first of its kind in Assam). Though this journal remained in circulation for five



years ie 1927-1931, it was able to reach out to its target readers and touch their daily lives. The women readers got an opportunity to learn about changes taking place in the public sphere all over India (as well as the rest of the world) and the

growing need to accommodate women in this sphere. They also read about the Western world and their progressive ideas and thus could relate to the fact that the Assamese society was still conservative in its outlook.

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