



JOURNEY INTO SELFHOOD: A STUDY INTO THE LITERATURE OF CHAR AREAS OF THE RIVER BRAHMAPUTRA

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Journey into selfhood generates consciousness. Man being a part of Nature's ontological independence gains consciousness to form the sense of primary identity from the natural surroundings. The consciousness is not only individual, but it is culturally constructed. To understand a culturally phenomenological entity the prime factor to delve upon is the natural surroundings. Identification of people with the natural environment they live in is an ancient tendency. It is the natural surrounding that generates the inhabitant to think of oneself as a part of the environment without which a feeling of 'out of water' hovers around the concerned individual. 'The sense of self is the sense of being located at a point in space, of having a perspective in time and of having a variety of position in a local moral order'. (Harre, 1993: 4)

Being engaged in understanding oneself and searching for oneself is a journey. Being engaged in a journey triggers experience that gets transformed into artistic as well as literary expression. Man gets inspired as the psyche experiences an exalted way of expression.

The present study has been based on an experience encountered as a part of field study in the char areas of the river Brahmaputra during my research in the winter of 2013. My study covered the concept of association of the psyche people living on the bank of the Brahmaputra with the entity of the river. To my surprise, they opened up before me not only their trust on the river but they handed over enough printed material in connection with the river published in different souvenirs as well as their creative works. When Avi Sion (2003) observes that 'imagination and mental feelings, as well as bodily movements, and sentiments, are considered (within our current world view) is indirectly caused by self, through its more immediate exercise of cognitive, volitional and emotional powers' it generates the idea that the true feeling finds a honest outcome through artistic or literary creation.

The Brahmaputra houses river islands, islets and large sandbank areas. Moreover, another variety of land areas is found to have existed since long. Marked by human habitation, the defining feature of these areas is the ephemera, the physical vulnerability. The physical vulnerability of the char areas constructs the livelihood of the people living there with an alertness of destruction and shifting. The frequent physical changes results in seasonal fluctuation of the fluvial process. It is a characteristically linear landform completely within or extending into a body of water typically composed of sand, silt, and small pebbles. These areas have been named as char areas since long. Noted Geography A. K. Bhagawati (2014) observes that every river initiates the process of forming river islands, chars but only a few rivers have full formed char areas. The braided rivers like the Huang Ho and the Brahmaputra can produce such sandy river islands.

Referring to physical vulnerability, one particular char area does not remain in the same location for years. The huge areas go down to the bottom of the river water and are reformed in another spot gradually oozing out from the river bed. At present almost all the permanent char of the Brahmaputra are found to have human habitation. They have adapted to the environment of the riverine landscape. Their life is as unsteady as the unsteady boats in the rivers because during the flood the chars get submerged and some may even get completely wiped away by erosion. The chars are 6 to 10 years old. Chars are formed during the heavy floods.

Without human habitation the char areas would not have gained such attention, but the people living there have learnt to adapt with the ephemeral circumstances in such a way that they are not merely taking their breath rather, the course of their psychological development has been expressed in various creative works. The uncertain existence generates a readiness in them to leave the house, the crop, the yard, to leave everything they possess. But, the respect and love they bore towards the river Brahmaputra arises profound realisation of their trust on the river. The consideration of their identity as a part of the river course oozes from the fact that the essence and existence coincide: ‘the possibility of perceiving reflection which lays hold on absolute existence belongs to its essence as it does to every experience’ (Ideas 120). The state of having a distinct identity is narrowly termed as ‘selfhood’ Here lies the inborn tendency of man to search for oneself. While on the process man starts analysing the events that have been already experienced. Experience constitutes selfhood. To understand simply, the term ‘self’ is synonymously used with self-concept, self esteem, identity, subjectivity, personality, consciousness. The concept of the formation self is a never ending process. James Ward (1843-1925), an English Psychologist and philosopher recognised the unity and continuity of self behind the plurality of conscious phenomena. The phenomena connected with the dwellers of the char areas of the Brahmaputra finds true reflection in the limited range of literature they produced.

As observed by Henry Issac Venema (2000) “Selfhood remains a task modelled in signs, symbols and texts, but it can never be an accomplishment of the process of linguistic interpretation itself”. The linguistic expression of feelings and experiences emerges from social, historical and societal process that transcends any individual-society dichotomy or separation.

As far as the question of the Brahmaputra is concerned Arup Kr Dutta in his book entitled ‘The Brahmaputra’ commented that the salubrious environment created by its river system has played a seminal part in unifying the desperate ethnic elements into a homogenized whole investing it with an Assamese identity. The river invokes in the people an entire gamut of emotion, awe, wonder, fear and love. The term ‘Luitor paar’ (bank of the ‘Luit’ i.e. the Brahmaputra) is synonymous with Assam. The association that the people bear with the river is found to have rooted in the consciousness of their existence, mainly in the Brahmaputra valley. The people living in the char are not exception to these. Rather, life amidst water provides them enough strength to consider two contrastive elements sand as well as the water as the ‘other’ for identifying themselves.

Coming to the contribution of the char dwellers into the world of literature, a good number of creative writings are found around their attachment and oneness with the river. Some of them are found in the form of book while others are collected from souvenirs published on the occasion of Literary Meet. There are a few individual publication of the poets and most of the publications are souvenirs released during different celebration among the char dwellers. The volumes used for the present study include *Pragati*, souvenir for 35th Establishment day celebration of Alopai Majarchar Bazar Committee (1979), *Char-Chapari*, Souvenir for Special Convention of Asom Sahitya Sabha in Alopai Majarchar, 2014, Golden Jubilee Souvenir of Alopai Majarchar Middle English School, Barpeta, 2011, *Paranga*, Souvenir, Char Festival and International Seminar, 7th, 8th, 9th and 10th Feb, 2005, *Sangram*, Souvenir for 13th Annual Function of South Barpeta District Minority Students’ Union, 7th and 8th February, 2009. They may not be read as high class literature but the value they bear unfold the steady trust of a few for whom the watercourse constitutes the underlying factor for selfhood construction.

Abul Kalam Azad’s poem entitled “*Bali Chaporit Mor Ghor*’ (My House is in the Sand Island) from the Anthology entitled *Bali Chaporit Mor Ghor* (2002) is a representative poem on life struggle of the char dwellers, their positivism with the glittering sand and their adaptability with the unpredictable natural disaster. The life for them is like the unstable boat in the river water. He writes ‘rhythm of life is captured in boat and oar/ in each flash of the oar, exists the wish’. The grief of instability runs into their vein. The search for self begins with a series of questions by either individually or collectively regarding the rootedness of a group. The development of the human self requires a historical process to be developed within a socio-cultural context. The course of change of the river unfolds before the

dweller two major selves of the river, one of disseminating love and other changing its course. Their journey of selfhood oscillates between the two ends of the river's selves. Abul Kalam Azad's poem entitled 'Noir Parot Mur Poja (meaning my hut is on the bank of the river) depicts the river as a sixteen year old girl who inspires them to live. While delineating the function of the river water in a poetic manner the girls who visited the river bank often for fetching water or for washing cloth on its bank are put in synchronisation of the greater identity of the river. The poet asks himself would he be attracted towards the nature blessed female bodies. Life is carried on. It cannot always be a saga of sadness. Here lies the universality of human nature.

Another representative poem composed by Miss Nazira Begum is '*Bor Luit*' meaning 'the Great Brahmaputra'. The poem expressed the mystery about the great congregation on the bank of the river, of how the river has been providing shelter to innumerable races in Assam. It bears the sense of guilt for leaving the Brahmaputra lonely thereby projecting an urge of responsibility towards the river. Assam being a tourist spot, being a land for integrity is the gift of the Brahmaputra. The poet talks about the greatness of the river to which every soul on its bank wishes to surrender. It is only through the water of the river the Assamese people will secure a place in the heaven. The poet sings: '*Newtonor tritiya sutre, borluitot joloshrote baspiyo tej pabo*' (According to the third law of Newton, the water course of the Brahmaputra would carry the people on its bank to heaven from where the river was born). Indian literature since the time of the *Puranas* houses enough evidence of the belief that the Brahmaputra is the son of Lord Brahma. The feeling of being one with river's overall contribution is reiterated through the whole poem.

The poem entitled 'Brahmaputra' by Mohammad Majnur Rahman reveals the futility of life of the Assamese without the existence of the river because the river is the creation as well as the creator, the eternal stream in the mind of the inhabitants on its bank. Akram Hussain Sikdar's poem '*Bhumiputra Moi Luitporia*' (meaning 'I am son of the soil, inhabitant on the bank of the Brahmaputra') echoes the long history on the bank of the river. Being an inhabitant on its bank the speaker feels that he revives with the essence of the river after every struggle on its bank. So he considers his identity as a '*luitporia*' meaning inhabitant on the bank of the Brahmaputra. The sense of collective identity projected through these poems validitates the statement of Melucci who said:

"Collective identity is an interactive, shared definition of the field of opportunities and constraints offered to collective action produced by several individuals that must be conceived as a process because it is constructed and negotiated by repeated activation of the relationships that link individuals to groups." (1989: 793)

The search for the past and present beneath the scrap of the stone on the sandbank of the Brahmaputra is reflected in Hafijur Rahman's poem '*Byatikromi Kolom*' meaning 'Exceptional Pen'. Rabikul Islam's poem '*Koisaabon, Chorbasi aru Borluit*' meaning 'reed' called Koisa, Chardwellers and the Brahmaputra' expresses sadness over the fact that though they worship the river considering the river as a deity the river seems to stand as an enemy without understanding their feelings. But their attachment with river is so intense that they want to live in the bosom of the Luit. M Hussain Ali in his poem '*Bhaal Paao Moi Char Chaapori*' meaning 'I love the River Sandbank' describes how the transparent river water and the sunny golden river bed make and remake the temperament of the char dwellers. Asserting the identity in the sandbank Neelkamal Bordoloi wishes that the foundation of his dream house should be in the sandbank. Out of the ravages directions of lives get changed, yet they struggle to fit themselves with the new accommodation'.

Hayet Ali Ahmed's poem entitled '*Brahmaputra*' recounts the concept of belief narrative attached with the river. One of the greatest festivals for the people of Assam is Ashokastami observed on the Ashtami (8th day) during the sukla paksha (the waxing phase of the Moon). The belief behind this ritual is that all the Hindu gods and goddesses assemble in the water course of the Brhmaputra leading to the holy bath also known as the 'gangasnan' people take on that very auspicious day. Ahmed refers to Ashokastami in his poem recounting the collective psychology. The psychological issues of memory and identity are integrated when they are studied from a point of view of language, discourse and narration. In the third decade of the present century the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1992) developed theories on cultural memory. When the journey to the selfhood is synchronised with cultural memory it emphasises the fact that the specific character of a person derives from belonging to a distinct society and culture. The poet urges the greater identity, the Luit to embrace the inhabitants of the char as its own existence. Through some of their creative works the char dwellers also show their endearing anger to the river. Rabikul Islam in his poem '*Kaisha Bon, charbasi aru Borluit*' becomes emotional and expresses his regret that the Luit does not understand their love and respect towards it (the river) but it behaves as enemies diffusing their dream referring to the havoc caused during the erosion and flood.

It becomes evident that the chardwellers' concept of selfhood depends upon how they adjust themselves with the ephemeral nature of the location they live in. The self is constantly constructed and reconstructed through the socio-cultural context. Cultural aspects of society function as a window which reflects how individuals or groups see and define themselves, and how other individuals or groups see and define them. The identity of individuals and groups involves both elements of personal choice and responses and attitudes of others. Sharing meaning by the members of a group results in a

mutually acceptable identification among the members. Sudhir Kakar comments on the connection of culture and the psyche of either individual or group:

Psychoanalytical knowledge of a culture does not coincide with its anthropological, historical, or philosophical counterparts although there may be some overlap between them. It is primarily the knowledge of the culture's imagination, of its fantasy as encoded in its symbolic products. (1997:15)

Human habitation in these areas explicitly determines the connectedness of the people with the riverine environment. Almost all the seasonal communal activities are determined by the annual change of the water course of the river. That the life of the river intermingles with all types of lives over it establishes group identity as an offshoot of a strong sense of belonging. The question of the relative importance of identities does not arise in this riverine atmosphere. The most important observation is that the ever changing water course of the Brahmaputra does not allow the char dweller to possess a concrete idea of the boundary of the household. They can point out to their previous owning land in the midst of the river. Sometimes the whole area of the char is swept away and thus the char and the village on it become a story overnight. As if as a balancer a new one emerges in the near vicinity as suddenly as the original vanishes. Life has to go on. They start building up their shelter afresh. They get adjust with exploring the possibility of living to adapt to the situation. M Hussain Ali in his poem 'Bhal pao moi char chapori' (I love char and sandbanks) expresses his heartfelt emotion to the every molecule scattered in the large sandbank areas of the Brahmaputra.

The spontaneity of the expression of the creative writing uplifts the soul of the creators to an elevated extent leading to a feeling of sublimity. Among the wide range of literature on the river Brahmaputra in different Indian as well as English language has been expanding the impact-dimension of the river on the people living on its bank. The literature created by the chardwellers provides an ornamental effect to it.

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