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Narrative Constructions of Identity and the Sylheti Experience

Narratives are expressions and representations of lived experiences even though they may not actually have been lived. Narratives essentially link real life forms to art. Likewise, narratives of lived experience and folk stories with its myriad cultural experiences are also an admix of real life and art. Irrespective of how a narrative is formed, be it by an individual or a group of individuals, all narratives have an in-built element or universality at least for the domain for which they are intended and therefore circulation of a story is a must for its artistic survival and appreciation. Such narratives, if domain specific and therefore coherent, are likely to constitute a community that identifies itself with the narrative in terms of a remembered tradition, event or shared reasons and values. Such narratives derive their sustenance not because they essentially speak of something that is true or false but because they make their listeners feel a sense of shared meaning. Rather than being a simple case of the story teller and the narrative in question, inventing and imposing metaphors

of agreement, what perhaps actually guide and determine character of the narrative to be told is the traces of lived experiences with all its knowable and unknowable elements. The key issue, in this context, therefore perhaps is to look in details as to how such narratives create the sense it conveys and who are its target audience.

Ingrained within the narratives, the issue, one presumes, calls for a dialogue between a thinking self and a fixed notion of authentic community. Such dialogues are expected to bring into fore all the implicit and explicit elements that accounts for the space between the narrative, its teller and the target audience. Such exercises basically centre on/in tracing the moments of presence and absence of the self, the world and others in an interlocution between the text and the context. It may eventually lead one to possibly end up finding a number of breaks and interruptions within what has so far looked like a coherent story. Consequently, the stable transmission of a fixed essence gives way to a live criss-crossing of signifiers over a dynamic and wide variety of narratives.

Narratives, by virtue of an excess over the comprehension of the tradition, often contain an element of ex-centricity, which implies that they are simultaneously culturally rooted and yet produces a counter cultural domain. While it allows one to speak and not just say what one means, it promotes listening to the unheard, interprets the truth of the world and self in a way that is often unique. In a constant shift between *being* and *becoming* without a realized essence, a realm of the counter factual therefore automatically goes into it signifying a series of contingent, invented and non-narratable ensemble of experiences. Narratives thus, provides for the necessary double bind of belonging to a unified story of life and yet not belonging to what the story merely says. It opens up a different space of living that looks for different cultures, communities other than ones own and engages one with stories/narratives of others.

Tales of ethnographic representations, inhabit the epistemic construction of the migrant or ethnic identity. Tales centred around the oriental as subjects of colonial canons of white anthropology has apparently given rise to a (inter) nationalist discovery of 'noble savages' in the theory and practice of politics of recognition and difference. As such, what seems to be present here is a residue of autonomy, carefully vested on such colonial and late modern national subjects, indignant in their own counter hegemonic aspirations and yet struggling to discover a place of speaking by/for themselves. Caught in the exchanges between the local and the global, the centre and the periphery, the citizenship

and the cultural membership, the private and the public, the subjects here are experiencing manifold challenges to locate their self-definition and the narratives of self-identity. Characterized by this existential dilemma, the narratives of mixed-blood, displaced and expatriate identity here is a siege from within, in a transition seeking to link late modern cultural and social capital with tradition. A look at the *self* and the *other*, therefore, constantly poses a crisis in terms of having a stable definition and hence a stable narrative.

In situating a dominant narrative of the Barak Valley of NE-India Sylhet emerges as a distant locale geographically and in the memory, which has been partitioned off from the being of Bengali identity and which has been a historical disruption in the continuity of a self identity for a Sylheti subject. As an interrupted and yet cobbled together idea of identity, the notion of Sylheti in the present Barak Valley acts as a link in the memory that establishes a contact with the partitioned other and at the sane time gives rise to a dynamic of interiority in terms of Hindu–Muslim identities that operated at the core of contemporary Barak valley's Sylheti identity.[1] One such immediate point of reference is the strange inclusion of Cachar district of erstwhile Surma valley into Assam by the British for administrative purposes in the year 1832. In effect a part of what was known to be integrated Sylhet became a part of Assam's administration and the whole process of bringing it under a uniform Special Assam Code in 1837. Looked from another angle, inclusion of a part of Sylhet known as Surma valley into Assam and keeping the rest of Sylhet within the revenue board of Bengal but included within Assam was not just a shrewd administrative manoeuvre on the part of the British, but it presented an enactment of a future policy of territorial division based on the policy of denial of distinctness of Surma valley and turn it into a linguistic and cultural periphery of both Bengal and Assam.

This future plan of territorial division was not just a ploy of the British, but it found its support in the emerging histories of Assam and Sylhet. An event such as imposition of Bengali as the official language of newly constituted Assam (1836–72) by the British had initiated an unbridgeable gulf between the local Bengali-speaking people and the Assamese as a community. This was later mitigated by an act of restitution of Assamese as the medium of instruction, but by then, a comparatively advantageous middle class Bengali-speaking community

[1] Achuyt Charan Tattvanidhi, *c.* 1317, *Srihatter Itibritta* (in Bengali), Sylhet.

had emerged as the dominant class of officials in Assam. This early act of division by the shrewd colonial rulers went a long way in producing a sense of enmity between the educated middle classes of Assamese- and Bengali-speaking communities. This ground level difference had been compounded by the emergence of a sense of dominance of Bengali literature, language and culture that followed directly and indirectly from Kolkata, the center of the so-called Bengal renaissance. One high point of such a sense of dominance of Bengali over Assamese in terms of literature, language and culture has been Tagore's idea of establishment of Bengali as the language of entire Bengal presidency that included Orissa and Assam; which, he, of course, later retracted from by admitting the distinctness of Assamese as a language that had enjoyed a longer ancestry than Bengali.[2] But that didn't have an impact either in propagation of Bengali in Assam by the conspiracy of Bengali administrators nor it had inspired the Sylhetis, the subject of this paper to dream of a Bengali hegemony over Assam.[3] In fact rather Sylhetis had likened the closeness of their dialect with Assamese, despite Sylheti being a dialect of Bengali.[4]

Folk narratives that were born from such a historical rupture presented a subjectivity that was caught in a in-between of real and imagined identity. This became more pronounced in the second and third generation Sylhetis who were born in independent India, who had never visited the land of their ancestors but who were constantly haunted by the presence of an imagined distant locale called Sylhet. This haunting was a result of the reference made to such subjects as refugees or outsiders in a politics of otherization on the one hand and due to the existence of a narrative of immediacy and intimacy with Sylhet on the other, that the older generation lived with and transmitted to the younger generation. Besides, the life-world of Sylhet which is so alien to someone who has not lived but which is always referred to by the older generations

[2] Rabindranath Tagore, 1974, 'Bhasabicched', in *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 6 (in Bengali), Kolkata: Visva-Bharati Prakashan, pp. 740–1; and Dimbeshwar Neog (ed.), 1954, *Dangoria Benudhar Rajkhowa*, Jorhat.

[3] Sivanath Barman and Prasenjit Choudhury, 1986, *Bastab ne Bhibram: Axomot Bangla Bhasa Probortonor Aitihasik Utsa Sandhan* (in Assamese), Dibrugarh. The response of Surma Valley to such an imposition was non-hegemonic, as leaders of the valley didn't articulate any nationalism by that time.

[4] Padmanath Bhattacharya, 1998, 'To the East of Samatata' (mimeo), in Narendra Nath (ed.), *The Indian Historical Quarterly*, reprint Delhi: Caxton, Vol. IV. Miscellany, 17.

is a distant imagery for the new generation. The stories of overnight evacuation and abandonment of land and properties by the victims of partition and riots is a reality that haunts the memory of a Sylheti of the present generation from family narratives of such experiences. These histories of trauma and conflicts in the memory attend forms of exploitation and oppression of contemporary life that operate in the form of ethnic cleansing and competing and contesting the identity of the other, constituting an otherized identity for oneself. This identity is rooted in a sense of dispossession and violence that haunts the memory. Such a history is activated in the repetition of violence that disables genuine dialogue between communities engaged in competition and contestation. So, memory and historicity are central categories linking identity. This opens up a discourse about the principles involved in the 'exchange of memories' and in 'translation' between the Sylheti community and other such communities steeped in memories of loss and no-thingness. In everyday life the sense of a Sylheti self and of a self identity is tied to mundane practices in which the subjects locate themselves by reference to a routine of action or performances enacted by the elder generations. For example, in festivities and marriages Sylheti *dhamail* and *geet* is an integral part, representing Sylheti identity. These forms of performances have come down through word of mouth or occasional demonstrations made by the ladies of the older generations. Present generations living outside Barak Valley or without contact with older generations that are slowly passing away, make attempts to make a dhamail performance making it look like bhangra or the like but attempting to assert her Sylheti identity in one form or the other.

It may be mentioned here that Butler and Derrida[5] point to what is significant about subjectivity in relation to acts, the re-iteration of a particular subjectivity in instances of action that position a self by reference to a previous pattern of behaviour recognized by significant others in this case the older generation of Sylhetis. Pre-established vocabularies of the subjects who have lived in the Sylheti life-world are used as narrative patterns that exist in a discursive form, interiorized in the form of imaginaries, that are enacted and embodied in face to face situations. For example a very popular Sylheti geet narrativizes

[5] Judith Butler, 1993, *Bodies that Matter*, London and New York: Routledge; Also see Jacques Derrida, 1998, *Monolingualism of the Other or The Prosthesis of Origin*, translated by Patrick Mensah, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

the first landing of an aeroplane at the Mascot club.[6] This imagery of landing of an aeroplane which is not a unfamiliar sight today for the younger generation is still a very favourite narrative imagery describing Sylhetti experience. The stability of cultural narratives and of social relations between the older generations of Sylhetis and the younger is premised on such patterns of repetition and mutual recognition so that a self exists as a knot in a network of intersubjective action and understanding; they enact the fact that every particular 'who' or self is coupled to a world, both material and social. Thus the trajectory between memory to identity is based on a idea that identity is constituted in relation to narratives of belonging and of the collective—nation, ethnic, religious community, tribe—that inscribe the deep structural aspects of the socio-material life world. Thus, identity or a sense of self is constructed by and through narrative—the stories we tell ourselves and each other about our lives. In the context of the present study Sylheti narratives exist at the interstice and the complex relationships between memory, nostalgia, writing and identity. Sylheti texts of memory shows that remembering the self depends not on restoring an original Sylheti identity but on re-membering, on putting past and present selves together, moment by moment in a process of creative reconstruction of trauma, history and memory.

It may be mentioned in this context that Sylheti women have been very creative narrators of the history of trauma and loss. Women were always kept out of the emerging public spaces in the transitory period between the nineteenth and twentieth century which witnessed riots, partition and the emergence of an Indian Nationalism. They invented alternative mediums of expression through *baromashi* geet, dhamail and *bounach* which described their subjectivities and also incorporated the realities of the times. It is interesting to note how creatively they intervened into spaces of public life by re-creating moments of public and national events like the hanging of Khudiram Bose, in their geet which they also sang along with other songs in marriages.[7] Interestingly, when literate women wrote letters, they wrote *Bande Mataram* on the top replacing Sri Hari or any such conventional words. They also embroidered Bande Mataram on handkerchiefs and presented it to others. In this manner women in their limited way participated in the nationalist reawakening.

[6] The song in Sylheti is *Aeroplane uria ailo mascotero club ete.*

[7] S. Deb Laskar, 2002, *Jyotindra Mohan Abong Gram Cacharer Samaj, Rajniti O Sanskriti* (1901–1991), Silchar, p. 89.

In the rural areas women had the unique culture of katha stitching, which became the source of inscribing nationalist imagination through both stitches and discussions pertaining to the situation of the nation they had migrated into. Under the influence of new ideas and idioms of protest, women of rural Surma–Barak valley started embroidering dreams of emancipation and narratives of an emerging new society. They also embroidered the physical structure of important personalities of the Indian freedom movement colouring the entire tapestry with thread taken out of the border of old sarees. Among the women of the rural Muslim in Surma–Barak valley around the same time, *jynamas* and *mehndi* known as *mondi* was a popular medium of expressing individual ideas. Jynamas was another version of *katha*, while mehndi was inscription or design made with the colour extracted from leaves.

Contemporary popular cultural representations of Sylheti identity creatively draw upon the memory of past that is represented in folk belief and religious practices. Drawing from sources of cultural forms and narratives that pre-exist contemporary times, the popular acts as a meta-representation of a mindset that stands to speak for itself. It is in this pastiche of the past that the contemporary draws upon memory and public rites that attract participation of the community. One instance of cultural appropriation of the present generation and a reclaiming of Sylheti identity through popular culture, is the emergence of a group called *Dohar* which draws upon the rich folk tradition of Sylheti origin. This group in the contemporary times of rock and band music has taken upon itself to re-enact a Sylheti past through Sylheti folk songs and performances, which they have collected from various sources. They consciously refrain from using any modern musical instruments and use only the traditional dholok for the Sylheti beat. This re-enactment has re-created the disappearing sense of continuity with what is deemed to be the uncontaminated core of Sylheti identity. In their collection of songs, one finds a re-visiting of the idyllic locale of the rural Sylhet and human relationships that existed.[8] Their songs also represent the sense of Sylheti wit and humour as depicted in the characterization of the stereotypical Shiva as the intoxicated, happy go lucky husband of Durga. The song is an eyewitness view of lord Shiva by a Muslim lad who expresses his astonishment at the merry making journeys and processions that people undertake while worshipping Shiva.

[8] The song goes, *Bandhu darao re*... (in Bengali).

In continuation to such a search for latent cultural meanings, one could construct a paradigm of roots as disclosed in songs of mystic and rural poet of eastern Bengal called Hachon Raja. In one of his paradigm statements, the singer and composer Raja sang,

Khacahr moiydhye achin pakhi komne ase jay
Dhorte parle monobery ditem tari paye...[9]

(How the unknown birds come and go in their cages, had I caught them, I would have fettered them in their legs, with the yearnings of mind...)

The archetypal yearning to fly like an unknown bird over the infinite space of universe marks a sensibility that cannot possibly be captured by the mind alone. Mind functions here both as a limit as well as an organ of freewill that fails to fetter itself within the limits of the metaphorical 'cage', signifying body, life or being. This also signifies a sense of memory that reclaims itself in images like the bird, which is not merely literary or artistic, but it assumes a concrete narrative act that contextualizes itself historically in a post-partition milieu of re-linking with one's own past. This search for roots culminates into construction of a self-identity in the context of Barak valley of southern Assam.

This experience of being displaced and rooted at the same time has assumed a literary and linguistic dimension in conceptualizing a self-identity that is in exile from the mainland of Bengal. Going by the development and history of this exilic consciousness as it prevails in large part of Bengali-speaking world outside the main centre of Bengali language and culture, Sylheti self-identity is simultaneously affected by the larger world of Bengali language as well as distanced and decentred from any such world. Sylheti as a proper name exists in the world outside, while it presents itself from a position of exile. This exile consciousness is transformative,[10] as it overcomes the distance between Sylheti and Bengali in order to write and speak in Bengali. Authors from Barak valley are caught in a double moment of exile and becoming part of the centre

[9] Quoted by Rabindranath Tagore in 'The First Presidential Address' delivered by Tagore in Indian Philosophical Congress in 1925. The full English text is translated with the permission of the poet and published in the monthly magazine *Prabasi*, Magh, *c.* 1332 (Bengali), No. 25, Vol. 2, Issue 4, pp. 542–51 and cited in Amiya Shankar Choudhury, 1999, *Hachon Rajar Sangeetmala* (in Bengali), Kolkata, pp. 245–58.

[10] See A.R. JanMohamed, 'Worldliness-without-World, Homelessness-as-Home', in Michael Sprinker (ed.), 1992, *Edward Said: A Critical Reader*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 96–120.

of Bengali language and culture. Often they characterize their position as the third world of Bengali literature and culture. The connection between the third world and the first world is that of belonging, struggle and reverence, a mixed bag of sentiments and emotions that guide an internal graduation to the world of Bengali by often terming itself as *ishan* or north east of Bengal.

Such a location is imagined from both the directions. As an outside of Bengal, the valley is deemed to be located in the Northeast. Such an artifact of imagination is articulated in literature as a distant frontier or a periphery only for the purpose of a bottom-up movement towards becoming a part of the world of Bengal. This subjectivity of being the North East has found its paradigmatic expression in Tagore, when he lamented in one of his poems that the scenic land of Sylhet is exiled from the political boundary of Bengal and yet it is connected with the heart of Bengal and therefore, Bengal shall offer its blessings on Sylhet for all the time to come. The unflinching bond of being the blessed child of Bengal in Tagore's imagination connects Sylhet without a territorial fixity with the diasporic world of Bengali literature and culture.[11]

When the Sylhetis of Barak Valley imagine themselves as exiled and yet a part of the diasporic Bengali identity, it produces a self-effacement that is conflated with the current situation of not being-at-home with itself, by being located in the contested trajectory of Assam's history. But from this essential sense of loss and non-coincidences between Sylheti imagination and Assamese linguistic nationalism, what happens is a feeling of being orphaned within the rigid political and linguistic boundaries drawn around. Such external boundaries, of course, constrain the inner mental life, as it produces a picture of unfreedom and coercion.[12] This further results into ghettoization of the identity with its constitutive elements anchoring and rooting itself in a collectivity of pre-displacement of the Sylheti language. Added to that the politics of displacing the mother tongue constituted a politically displaced subjectivity of Sylheti operating at the intersection between culture, identity and belonging to the state of Assam. The conjunction between political and economic *inclusion* within Assam and cultural and

[11] An extract from Tagore's poem is reprinted in Ranendra Nath Deb, 1983, *Srihatta Parichay*, Nadiya: Published by author, see back of dedication page.

[12] Partha Pratim Moitra's poem entitled, 'Each Day For A New Ray of Hope', in Bhaskarjyoti Deb, 1999, *Born Again Memoirs: Collection of Verses Translated from Bengali to English*, Silchar: Graphics, p. 15.

linguistic *exclusion* from the dominant develops an identity of the self that is constituted by not just subjectivity, but a network of unstable relationship between the project of state building and cultural belonging. Such a network, on the one hand domesticates the pre-displacement linguistic identity and on the other produces a continuous subjectivity that constrains Sylhetis as an ethnic minority in Assam.

The exilic consciousness of being a Bengali mixed with an anxiety of seeking recognition of ones mother tongue and self-identity from the network of power relations or the abstract other, assumes the form of resistance and collaboration. With this internal sense of exile and resistance and external sense of being displaced and excluded, the articulation of Sylheti identity places itself between languages, boundaries, histories and other interstices of migrancy. Such interstitial spaces are fruitfully utilized in various forms of discursive and non-discursive reasons given for the state and the identity. Looking at Muslims as infiltrators,[13] or finding oneself not in an unequal encounter with the language of power, produces ambivalence in meaning. Sakitapada Brahmacahari, the icon of Bengali poetry from the valley pronounces this ambivalence in his paradigm statement, 'Bengali is my *Maa*'s tongue, while Assamese is my *Ai*'s'.[14] The word Ai in Assamese means mother, but he draws a distinction between Maa in Bengali and Ai in Assamese by pointing to their essential non-difference, now philosophically called *identity-in-difference*. The sense of belonging to one's mother tongue is universal, only the mother is different in her name and it is a *difference without alterity*.[15] Such intellectual writing protrudes in time and space, but its occasions are controlled by real power.[16] The sense of being exiled, therefore, is something like being subjected by an 'other' and determined by ethno-cultural oppositions.

[13] Some of the Barak Valley leaders of BJP harp on this theme for electoral reasons

[14] Read a limerick stating this in Barak–Brahmaptura *setubandhan* organized by Axom Sahitya Sabha in August 1986 at Silchar District Library Auditorium.

[15] Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, 1999, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of Vanishing Present* Harvard University Press, Harvard, p. 290 explains this idea of alterity as radical when particularism of cultural difference is employed in connecting the different entities with a common conjunction. Saktipada Brahmachari does that in order to evolve a critical determination of difference between the self and the other.

[16] Edward Said, 1984, 'Reflections on Exile', *Granta* 13, p. 172.

Re-membering the Self

It is very interesting to note how the Sylheti literary imagination has re-membered a narrative self in the form of representative characters. The travesty of time has placed such characters at crossroads of lived history. Republication of the novel *Asrumalini* in 1986 has brought to the fore the memory of women of late nineteenth and early twentieth century women, represented by a typical character called Bhubaneswari Devi. She is the central character of the second novel *Asrumalini* (which was also called *Narishakti*) written by Surendra Kumar Chakrabarty in 1924.[17] It may be mentioned here that although women's lives and interventions in historical and political processes mentioned above have not been documented adequately, women did occupy a central position in the male literary imagination. The novel is divided into twenty-three chapters, each of which plays a temporally connected sequence of evolution of Bhubaneswari's authoritative character that grants her the commanding voice in family affairs. The main plot of the story is Bhubaneswari's nonchalant attitude to her husband Prandhon Gupta, who is full of philanthropic and altruistic values. She is very critical of her husband, who is depicted to be an epitome of goodness, but helpness before the wickedness of his wife. Prandhon's parents had died of epidemic in the village leaving him at the age of three in the hands of a midwife. Bhubaneswari decries Prandhon's soft corner for his midwife, whom he treated as equal to his own mother. Bhubaneswari appropriates by treating the midwife just like a maidservant. The novel builds up an implicit irony about the traditional notion of motherhood prevailing in Sylheti society of the period. An apparently intransigent character of Bhubaneswari challenges the culture of treating the midwife as mother, but the deeper sociological reality is that in the era of breakdown of joint Sylheti families, the place of mother or the midwife was not very secure, especially when one has a powerful wife like Bhubaneswari Devi. Mothers assuming the role of head of the family by displacing the male head is also ironized when Bhubaneswari takes total control over her son Paresh and turns him into a puppet in her hands. When Prandhon selects an intelligent and beautiful girl Jogarani to be his daughter-in-law his son Paresh marries her without taking any dowry in order to please

[17] For details see, Usha Ranjan Bhattacharjee, 1996, 'Baraker Upanyas o Ashrumalini' (in Bengali), in *Gabeshana Parishad Patrika*, Silchar, First Issue, February, pp. 103–17.

his father. But his mother Bhubaneswari who had always dreamt of a huge dowry from her son's marriage was utterly disappointed. Therefore, from the very first day she takes care to see that her son never gets too close to his wife. For example she is not allowed to meet her husband during daytime. The whole plot represents the presence of a powerful mother-in-law who undermines her nubile and good hearted daughter-in-law and subjugates both her husband and son, making them cower to submission to her power. The novel ends with several personal disasters in the lives of Jogarani, but demonstrates how Bhubaneswari's revengeful nature breaks the family in all the fronts. Of course the novel also re-presents how Jogarani, as the new generation woman appropriates both patriarchy and authority by first avoiding direct confrontation with her husband or mother-in-law despite having the knowledge of the source of her misery. Her patience, tolerance and dutifulness offers her the agency to have the last say in the novel at a time when her husband's family is at a loss both from moral and from economic standpoint. But unlike her revengeful mother-in-law she uses her agency not to destroy the family but to re-unite it forgiving all those who have contributed to her suffering and loss.

This narrative of late nineteenth and early twentieth century brings back the memory of joint family system among the Sylhetis in the pre-partition days on the one hand and consequently presents a re-membering of the female self which celebrates a subjectivity beyond the parameters laid down by patriarchy. Reprint of the novel in 1986 and its renewed reading by the new generation of Sylhetis strike a chord with the rise of women's power within the joint family, where one woman always occupied the central position by sidelining all other women and men as well. This marked a struggle in the family to occupy the central position and construct the place of an elder who would lead the family. But this structure of family fell apart due to partition in 1947, where joint families broke and gave rise to patriarchal power within the displaced families, which had to migrate from the undivided Sylhet to Surma–Barak valley.

However, it is interesting to note how women, as the most affected subjects of social and political histories reconstructed their self in the new geo-political locale of the Surma–Barak Valley As a recuperation of the sense of loss of collective self that grew from the breakdown of joint families owing to displacement consequent upon partition, women of Surma valley engaged themselves in life-world solidarity of inter-community activities. Encompassing the blurred borderlines between

Santhals, Kols, Mundas, Oriyas and Sylhetis, there has been a common celebration of spontaneity in local fairs followed by singing and dancing sessions. At one level, being a part of vagaries and bounties of season, women, through these blurred markers of identity inter-act and re-define new shades of local identity in rituals like Saoni Vrata, worshipping a family of 14 gods and goddesses (locally called Choudda Devata), Mera Meri and many other such micro performances. Such celebrations mark the exteriority of each of the rigidly defined patriarchical notions of identity. At another level, the supposed difference between Hindu and Muslim women are sidestepped in occasions such as Satynarayan and Chandipuja from the Hindu orientation and celebration of remarkable peers such as Panchpeer in commonly recognized altars of godheads. In sharp contrast to profanization of the ritual order, there is an increased mish mash between widely divided pantheons especially in case of some of the dis-gendered gods as mentioned above. Such an affirmation of feminine is a symbolic restitution of the feminine space lost in social domain. The heteronomy of celebrations in common sites bring together un-qualified particularities of godly presence in the fold of the feminine that overcomes male definition of idols and icons. There is also a very interesting subversion of boundaries of caste in female-centric rituals, for example, the Bauri goddess Lakkhinarayan becomes the saviour of upper caste goddess such as Laxmi or Saraswati in local lore. Folklore undercuts the socially defined boundaries to bring together the mutually excluded communities through their feminine myths and stories. Given this subliminal and representational interface, it is possible for women of Surma–Barak valley also to develop overlaps between distinct cultural and linguistic identities.[18] Meitei celebration of their histories of inclusion within India are participated by good number of Bengali women; while Dimasa celebration of their last king Govindrachandra's death is participated by sharing of grief among Bengali women. These real and imagined lives of native faith and histories constitute a vision of self that Hachon raja once sang,[19]

Who is this me and who is this you
Who vows for such one that never differs from the other
You are the master of the universe who made this word 'self'
an untruth

[18] For example, between the Dimasas and the Bengalis, the ritual of Manosa Puja and the reading of a folk text called *Padmapuran* are common cultural practices.

[19] *Hachon Udas*, 1st edition, p. 35.

You are the sole law without a counterpart
Vowing me and me only, they do not get the lord (...)

This is a public-reformative denial of male control of identity of women in the master narrative of local discourses that suggest another history and another symbolic constructions. Given this, the symbolic is intimately related to political and social struggles that women embody through resistance and affirmation of difference, thereby exhibiting 'a continuum from pain to healing'[20] through their newly constructed subjectivities.

[20] Jason Francisco, 1996, 'In the Heat of Fratricide: The Literature of India's Partition Burning Freshly (A Review Article)' in *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, No. 2, Madison: University of Wisconsin, Centre for South Asia; quoted in Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, 1999, *Borders & Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, p. 7.