

**Women in Photographs: A Study of Changes in Women's Dress in  
Assam in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries**

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## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

Clothing, as a cultural artefact, plays a vital role in everyday life and serves as a primary means of expressing and symbolising one's identity. It is fascinating to discover how clothes as a significant aspect of material culture not only enriches one's self (personal values) but also tends to explain the values attributed to clothing as a tangible artefact. As Woodward says, “As a material culture, clothing is not seen as simply reflecting given aspects of the self but is co-constitutive of facets such as identity, sexuality, and social role.” (Woodward, 2005, 21). Hence, giving more credibility to the clothed body the ‘self’ is being manifested and visualized through the clothing one wears, whereas factors like identity, class, caste, and hierarchy are closely linked to clothing.

Although the primary purpose of clothing is to cover one’s body and to protect oneself from adverse weather conditions, the evolution of clothing from a utilitarian object to a more culturally complex object has become more prevalent in contemporary times. Our discussion on clothing is based on Eicher and Roach-Higgins's (1992) emphasis on a definition that takes into account both the strategic impacts attributed to clothing's material features and its symbolic and communicative capacities. The significance of clothes is a strong factor of the wearer's lifestyle, encompassing their outlook and tastes, aesthetic disposition, artistry and technique of donning, and geographical environment (Biswas, 1985). As part of North-Eastern India, Assam is an incredibly exciting and fascinating region where diverse ethnicities and groups wear a variety of traditional and ethnic clothing (with specific motifs, textiles, and fabrics) that distinguishes one community from another based on their own cultural characteristics. Although weaving has been a vital part of women's lives from ancient times and has contributed to the material culture of the community, its popularity has declined in recent years. However, throughout the years, the significance of clothing and its meaning has evolved over time, resulting in substantial repercussions and tastes

among people, which have had a huge effect on the way people dress and adorn themselves.

The evolution of Assamese women's clothing over time reveals how clothing as a fundamental aspect of material culture plays an important role in daily life and how it is intricately connected to status, age, identity, class, profession, and gender. To understand the significance of dress in women's lives and to know why women dress the way they do, a more nuanced, contextual approach to clothes help us to better grasp the role of agency, power, coercion, and social institutions in people's clothing choices, which have a big impact and influence on people's sartorial choices. Understanding the meaning and practices of gendered clothing requires an examination of the historical context and shifting temporal orientations, on both a local and global level. Historical context and shifting temporal perspectives are crucial for a comprehensive understanding of how women's dress has evolved. With the evolution of women's clothing, its meaning and significance have also shifted within a social and historical context. Moreover, the variety of identities a woman possesses (as a mother, a daughter, and a professional) has a close association with clothing and the manner in which women display their womanhood.

Eventually, however, political movements, state interventions, and the growth of identity-consciousness provided clothing with a new significance, resulting in a shift in societal dress patterns. In addition to its utilitarian functions, clothing now carries connotative significance, serving as a means of intercultural communication. As Barthes (1983) points out, clothing serves as an artefact for concealing our true identities. Barthes offers a profound remark by Hegel that "the body cannot signify, clothing guarantees the passage from sentience to meaning" (1983: 258) thus, clothing manifests the 'self' through the attributes it embodies, while acting as a communicator in the social realm. In recent times the focus has shifted from the mere material use and importance of clothes to their symbolic function as a marker of cultural identity. In pre-British times, clothing was an integral aspect of the organic life of Indian communities. In terms of women's clothing, it was found that the most prevalent and

earliest kind of clothing among the Assamese was tuck and fold clothing, which was frequently woven by the women themselves. Weaving was widely practised by Assamese women and played a vital role in their lives, as it was once regarded as an essential characteristic of the "ideal woman." However, the British annexation of the region brought remarkable changes in the field of administration, politics, education, technology, transportation, communication, trade, and industries had brought an impact on people's thoughts, attitudes, etiquettes and also upon their sartorial styles. One of the major transformations during the British reign was the shift from feudal to semi-capitalist society bringing enormous changes in the traditional setup of Assamese society. As a result, the progressive influence of modernity in Assam brought about a significant reorientation of the socio-cultural and political structure of the society.

In order to trace the relevance of modernity in Assam and to analyse the evolution of clothes, the Industrial Revolution had a profound effect on Assamese society. In Assam, around the end of the nineteenth century, there was an adequate supply of manufactured foreign items that were available at comparatively lower prices, thereby hindering the indigenous industries that produced local goods. This in a way also impacted the weaving tradition, where the value and significance of meaning towards foreign goods changed, assigning it to something that is 'imported', 'progressive', and 'sturdy'. Thus, western clothing caused a split, where people gradually began to be influenced by it, which not only established new standards for modernity but also gave clothes new connotations, such as "modern," "progressive," and "outgoing."

The nineteenth century also saw a transition where the indigenous market was controlled by European goods, albeit on a small scale. Indians were first averse to western dress, but the British education system and the values that accompanied it led newly educated Indians to view it as a symbol of 'progress' and 'success' in the contemporary world, and they were profoundly influenced by it. In Assam, for instance, English education had a significant role in creating progressive minds, despite the fact that these brains were more inherently oriented toward the western

progressive paradigm. The way in which people think and convey their views is an additional fundamental development brought about by modernity. The introduction of modern education was not only focused on delivering formal education, but was also responsible for introducing progressive and modern characteristics into people's lives, particularly in their thoughts, ideas, and physical appearance. Clothing was one of the primary elements that underwent progressive alteration during the colonial era. During this time, there was also a marked increase in gender-distinct clothing that preserved the distinction between men and women.

The segregation of individuals into separate groups or strata based on class, wealth, status, power, and gender has never been egalitarian in Assamese culture. This social stratification was also strengthened under colonialism. As a result of social stratification, individuals began associating various parts of culture, such as clothing, to differentiate between groups and establish 'otherness', thereby expressing their rank and authority. Clothing played a significant role in determining a person's social status and place in society, allowing for the maintenance of hierarchy among various social classes. Dress thus served as a potent indicator of social prestige, differentiating across classes and subclasses. However, with the arrival of the British and the introduction of new sartorial styles, the distinction became firmer and more rigid, highlighting not only the process of differentiation but also the significance of identification; Clothes are a literal manner of classifying people, regions, nations, classes, castes, and other social groups. Therefore, understanding the evolution of dress tradition requires an understanding of both of these processes.

Even though it was predominantly men who adopted the shift from traditional apparel such as the *dhoti* to European sartorial style, women were largely insulated from British influence and western clothing making them adhere to traditional regional dress. Transition in women's wear was largely experienced in the late nineteenth century among a few elite women who incorporated selected features of European style, such as petticoat, blouse etc., with their traditional *mekhela chador*. In the late nineteenth century, few Assamese women (progressive and upper-class families)

embraced new dress aspects such as blouses, petticoats, shoes etc. to their sartorial style. But the twentieth century saw a much greater shift in the clothing of Assamese women even in remote parts of Assam. The role of education in enhancing and shaping the minds of women of progressive families remains significant and fostered. The role of missionaries who taught sewing, embroidering etc. in schools brought about a new change among people who started making stitched clothes imitating the Europeans. In the colonial era, the invention of the sewing machine, and power looms were major technologies that sped up garment production, allowing for rapid changes in clothing styles.

The methods in which the meaning of clothing is constructed and social relations are utilized give it significance. In addition, during this time period, covering one's body started to be viewed as a sign of "civilization," which was frequently emphasised by Europeans who wished to influence the locals to understand the value of clothes. The concept of modesty in relation to women's clothes has limited women's options, thereby offering ideas on what to wear and what not to wear. Thus, it ensured what would remain acceptable and unacceptable in culture. Thus, the values of modesty grew overly intertwined with women's clothes, to the point that the dressed body and look became a key site of control and supervision in patriarchal societies. In the instance of 'rape' or 'eve-teasing,' for example, the female is typically portrayed as the perpetrator, and questions are raised about her dress and character in Indian society. The Hindu women's dual nature of representation as *Shakti* (power) and *prakriti* (culture) enriches our understanding of Hindu women's conventions and role models. This dualistic framework allows for male influence over the sexuality and authority of women, that dominate women's position in a patriarchal society.

Europeans not only sought to "enlighten" Indian society through science and technology, but they also tried to comprehend and interpret it. The camera was an integral tool for documenting Indian culture in the colonial system. The camera was one way of explaining the mystery of the "inscrutable" Indian. With photography, the

British sought to convey imperial discourse through visual representation of the territory. The intention of colonial discourse has always been to establish an ideologically dominant position over opponents in order to increase imperial dominance over the conquered nation, thus labelling the colonised as "other." Indian Women have been one of the favourite objects of scrutiny for the colonial gaze. This was also true for Assamese women, where a clear distinction between 'Us' (colonials/civilised) and 'them' (colonized/uncivilised) was depicted in the photographs collected. Europe's conception of European racial superiority was heavily influenced by images of the colonised captured by photographers during the colonial process. Thus, women captured in photographs were portrayed merely as an object of the display where their complete or partial nudity was assigned as 'erotic' and 'uncultured', which was often looked at through the colonial gaze. The concept of orientalism intensifies the "colonial gaze" in the imaginations of Europeans regarding colonised populations.

The colonial project of photography in Assam created and rigidified new categories of ethnic self and 'other'(s). A case in point is the difference in the manner in which Assamese-speaking women were photographed as against women from the 'tribes' particularly the hill tribes. There are many instances of women from the hill tribes being photographed nude. Apparently, the simple reason behind this was the fact that Assamese women were more 'respectably' dressed than the 'other'(s). But in reality this could also have been due to the fact that depicting Assamese women as being comparatively more 'developed' than the 'other'(s), allowed the colonial masters to create a wedge between tribal and non-tribal others. This idea of being seen as "respectable" was also a trap for the Assamese to separate them from the uncivilized 'other'.

Women's emancipation experienced a new wave in the early twentieth century when their concerns were taken seriously. Women's place in society was strengthened by the importance of education, women's groups, women's engagement in politics, etc. Thus, the emergence of the new woman was witnessed as the standing of women improved

in society. Women living in urban areas, especially cities and towns, enthusiastically embraced western European models of feminine dress over traditional *mekhela chador* where not only their identities were redefined but, in a way, clothing was assigned with new meanings of modernity and progressiveness. When it was crucial to express their Assamese identity, they also adjusted their Pan-Indian or western attire (for example, in movements). As a result of Indian society's historical growth, clothing has come to symbolize 'modernity,' 'femininity,' and 'traditionality,' depending on the social environment and circumstances.

Although until the beginning of the twentieth century, western ideals and views of sartorial patterns were heavily affected by a small number of wealthy and progressive families, the shift in women's wear is evident in photographs. In addition to being impacted by European notions of 'civilization' and 'progress,' cultural assimilation within other Indian communities also brought about major changes in the attire of women in Assam. The introduction of *sari*, blouse etc. which were introduced by Bengal is a case in point. However, the independence fight, which started a few years later, prevented the shift (in a more rapid way) in the dress from becoming widely adopted as during the movement Gandhi's idea that clothes might be an effective political tool for overthrowing British rule remained predominant. M.K Gandhi's adaptation of swadeshi, for instance, gave it new connotations in subnational politics and clothing traditions. Gandhi sought to reclaim Indianness through clothing. The rise in popularity of Khadi was a conscious move in order to strengthen Indian dress over the growing popularity of western clothing. The significance of the symbolic value that clothing has is revealed by the focus on clothes (khadi) and the strength with which it was used during the Independence movement, successfully led by Gandhi. The movement had a significant impact on women as well, who restrained themselves from wearing traditional clothing and actively participated in it.

In postcolonial India, each community has sought to reclaim its unique cultural identity through the clothing of its women. Assam presents a wonderful example of this. Assamese women's clothing practices can never be separated from issues of



nationalism and identity. The prestige of the “sons of the soil” had to be preserved by the Assamese *aideos*. An old cultural cliché involves equating women to the mother or as the homeland (Nayar,2020), in which the roles of women, particularly 'mother,' are lauded. As a result, women's representations as wives and mothers are glorified in the nationalist discourse and subnational identity politics as an integral element of the movement's philosophy and mission. Thus, the significance of women's clothing and behaviour has become an integral part of nationalistic discourse, where women bear the responsibility of cultural representation by adhering to prescribed looks and conduct. We have established that the creation of feminine dress in Assam is profoundly anchored in history and culture; nonetheless, social interaction and lived experiences continue to reveal a relational process of change. Moreover, we have argued that women in Assam intervene in agentic practices that are profoundly influenced by the past, present, and future within a historical continuity that positions progression and change in dress traditions. This allows us to explain why women during the *Axom Andolon* did not resist the methods of reform imparted to women in terms of wearing traditional *mekhela chador* and passionately rejecting Pan-Indian clothes such as the *sari* or western clothing, although males did not reject their western clothing.

Despite the fact that western clothing is more affordable, many women continue to make their own clothing (albeit on a smaller scale) in order to preserve local traditions and culture. As discussed, modernity in India was not alike the modernity that was witnessed in the west, as traces of tradition and culture remain deeply imbibed within it, where the traditional and old institutions of the society could never be dismantled. India's modernity is unique to the Indian social structure, which is dictated by its traditions and cultures. Similarly, traditional ideals linked with women's clothes have remained firmly entrenched in the culture, resulting in complex and contradictory responses to women's clothing. As a result, there is a conflicting reaction to women's clothing, as well as their choices and opinions about clothing in various contexts. As an example, ladies wearing Pan-Indian clothing such as *saris* and *salwar kameez* in

rural versus urban areas elicited contradictory responses. With the popularity of Bollywood and Assamese films after independence, Indian women's and men's fashion evolved to include a wider spectrum of Pan-Indian and Western styles.

In recent years, western and Pan-Indian clothes have become increasingly popular among Assamese women, yet the traditional *mekhela chador* has not been abandoned and continues to be a significant marker of Assamese womanhood. In fact, *mekhela chador* has entered the domain of high fashion and the importance of authenticity has not diminished. Many women today try to strike a balance between traditional and contemporary wear. Such as, in the context of Assam, while expressing one's traditional Assamese identity or expressing one's dedication and concern toward religious ethos, women's significance as a cultural bearer and being regulated through societal norms remain significant. Despite the fact that establishing modernity through clothes has become significant in the present context, women are still embedded inside the virtues of femininity that must be protected and developed in order to convey the spiritual essence of womanhood. Women in religious spaces in Assam, emphasized the spiritual signs of femininity being clearly marked through their dress, particularly the *mekhela chador*. As a result, there is a continuing rift between modernity and tradition, which has a significant impact on women's clothes in various circumstances. When analysing the effects of modernity on clothing, it becomes clear that, unlike early periods when distinct clothing distinctions were preferred to maintain a hierarchy in terms of class and caste in many Indian societies, the present context shows that modernity has partially bridged the gap and now sartorial styles are readily available. The clothing industry now has a larger market with more options and trends in an interim setting with the rapid growth of globalisation and the increase in the capitalist endeavour. This connects to what Dipankar Gupta's thoughts on modernity in India (Gupta, 2016). In contrast, the greater flow of commodities in a globalised society has had a significant impact on the authenticity of the traditional *mekhela chador* in terms of its style, fabric, and other characteristics. It has also affected women with different options for wearing the *mekhela chador*, such as donning the

garment in Pan-Indian styles such as *lehenga*, *salwar kameez*, skirts, blouses, and so on. A competing level for the 'progressive' and 'modern' status prevails when one chooses to dress. Thus, the history of changes in the clothing of Assamese women demonstrates that women's clothing is neither necessarily 'traditional' or 'modern,' but rather the result of a historical process in which new labels are being allocated today. In the course of this historical process, many social relationships, particularly gender roles, are reinvented.