

Chapter 3

Women, Photography, and Colonialism

3.1 Introducing Photography

“Photography is the child of optics and chemistry” (Harrison, 1887, 7). It was Della Porta, a pioneer in lenses, who devised the *camera obscura*. The term “*camera obscura*” comes from the Latin word for “darkroom/ dark chamber” and refers to a dark room with a small hole in the wall or window shutter through which an inverted picture of the view outside is projected on the opposite wall or a white screen (Gernsheim, 1986, 3). The photographic camera is inextricably related to the camera obscura's working mechanism, which serves as a prototype for its form and function. The emergence of the industrial revolution in the late eighteenth century with a new production technique sparked a new storm in technical advancement. Following the industrial revolution in Europe, introducing two remarkable technologies in the 1830s permitted human society to scrutinize and adapt its idea of reality in reaction to the permanent capture of ephemeral images reflected in the camera obscura. Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre, an inventor of the daguerreotype, developed a unique and unrepeatable monochromatic image on metal that could not be reproduced by any other method. In contrast, the alternate process was used to create monochrome, tonally and laterally reversed negative images printed on paper. When placed on another chemically treated surface and exposed to sunlight, the negative image was inverted, yielding a picture with typical spatial and chromatic values. As a result of this technique, the calotype (also known as the Talbotype) was named after its creator, William Henry Fox Talbot (Rosenblum, 1997). The calotype, an enhanced variant of William Henry Fox Talbot's Photogenic Drawing, was the sole procedure that eventually established itself as a rival to the daguerreotype to some extent. But it was Talbot's approach that laid the groundwork for all subsequent advances in photography.

As scientific inquiry gained momentum in the sixteenth century, with a positive response fostered by people throughout the Renaissance, followed by the rise of the industrial revolution in the late eighteenth century, a sense of reorientation was felt, with a realistic depiction of the world being induced and encouraged in the visual arts. Understanding photographs through aesthetic, anthropological, and historical contexts have created significant and complex scholarly literature on the functions of photographs in social relations. Photographs during the colonial period became a sophisticated reflection of a world linked through the capital, defining a constant and frequently contentious dialogue between the country and the world at large (Gaskell and Gujral, 2019). This chapter begins with a brief introduction to photography and its impact on India and Assam in the colonial era. When attempting to comprehend the social and cultural context of Assam, focusing on women's lives mainly through photographs, continues to be of the utmost importance because they were taken at the precise moment the events occurred, thereby conveying a sense of reality. In contrast, written documents typically record events after the fact.

3.1.1 Photography in India

The incitement surrounding the introduction of photography around the world not only piqued people's interest in the new technology, but it had also instilled a firm conviction in the possibilities that photography could open up in the future. As early as the mid-nineteenth century, the camera arrived in India, shortly after being invented in Europe. While human vision is limited to focusing on a single object at a time, the invention of cameras enabled humans to perceive objects that were not directly in front of us for the first time. Not only has the development of the camera altered what we see, but also how we see it. Unlike paintings, which were displayed on a wall and could be in one area at a time, cameras enabled the reproduction and recreation of many images that could be accessed from any location and utilized for any purpose.

Berger (1972) writes:

The camera isolated momentary appearances and, in so doing, destroyed the idea that images were timeless. Or, to put it another way, the camera showed that the notion of time passing was inseparable from the visual experience (except in paintings). What you saw depended upon where you were when. What you saw was relative to your position in time and space. It was no longer possible to imagine everything converging on the human eye as on the vanishing point of infinity (1972,18)

Photography served as a collection of records and was used for documentation, where images were a means of picturing the country's volatile political and cultural history. The commencement of early Photography in India was marked by foreign photographers documenting the living traditions of distinct groups and communities in a specific socio-cultural setting, owing to the country's isolation for centuries. In some ways, photography has remained vital since it has maintained and exacerbated a dialogue between the country and the rest of the world.

Photography was first used in India in the mid-nineteenth century, a few months after its development had been announced in Europe. In October 1839, during a meeting of the Asiatic Society, William O'Shaughnessy presented his trials with the new photogenic drawing that was generating so much interest in Europe. O'Shaughnessy might claim to be the first to introduce Photography to India (Pinney, 1997). As early as January 1840, Thacker, Spink & Co., the Calcutta firm, advertised imported daguerreotype cameras for sale in the daily *Friend of India* (Pal and Dehejia, 1986). Even though daguerreotypes generated better photos than calotypes, there were several drawbacks to working with them. The calotype method was preferred by early commercial photographers over the more expensive and delicate daguerreotype technology. The earliest known image is a daguerreotype of the Sans Souci Theatre in Calcutta, and in 1841 the Bengali paper *Sambad Bhaskar* was advertising the willingness of an English resident of Armani Bazaar to make daguerreotype likenesses (Ghosh, cited in Pinney,1997). However, "introduced in 1851, by Frederick Scott

Archer, the wet collodion process was a fairly simple" (George Eastman Museum, 2019) photographic technique, overtaking daguerreotypes as the primary photographic method.

Years later, in 1854, the first photography society was established in Bombay, followed by photographic societies in Calcutta and Madras in 1856, all of which steadily evolved and began organizing photographic exhibitions in various locations (Pal and Dehejia, 1986), with photographs ranging from portraiture, picturesque, architectural remains, etc. remained the primary focus. After nearly two decades of successful use in photography, wet collodion plates were phased out, favouring gelatin dry plates, which benefited photographers because they no longer required proximity to a dark room, and the plates were pre-sensitized and could be handled for an extended period of the following exposure. However, in 1888, George Eastman introduced the 'film,' formed of gelatin-coated paper, and designed the 'Kodak' camera (Pal and Dehejia, 1986, 186). The invention of 'film' simplified and commercialized the process of creating a photograph. Even in rural areas of India, the brand "Kodak" became immensely popular among Indian families until the 1990s.

The predominance of photographs from the colonial era represents colonial officials, wealthy merchants, and members of royalty who were unduly possessive and proud of their lawful role as rulers (in their way), as evidenced by their attire and body language. Consequently, pictorialism as an aesthetic movement dominated Photography in India from the late nineteenth century until the 1970s, attracting professional and amateur photographers (Gaskell and Gujral, 2019). During the same period, with the proliferation of photographic studios in the major Indian cities of Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta, the birth of portraiture photography was further developed in India.

Many colonial photographers, including Oscar Jean Baptiste Mallitte, Samuel Bourne, Sir Benjamin Simpson, Captain Hooper, Dr. John Murray, Colin Murray, and many anonymous photographers, were enhanced by the invention of the camera in capturing architectural ruins, landscapes, and historical monuments, as well as documenting the

art and cultures of various groups and communities that are currently threatened with extinction. However, Samuel Bourne remained the most significant and well-known British photographer among all colonial photographers. When Bourne arrived in Calcutta, he collaborated with Charles Shepherd, who had already established a small studio in the city and eventually founded the firm 'Bourne & Shepherd' (Pal and Dehejia, 1986). However, in 1991, a tragic fire destroyed a considerable amount of the studio's photography archive, resulting in a severe financial loss and vital historical data.

In addition to recording and photographing monuments and picturesque scenery, these nineteenth-century colonial photographers also documented and photographed members of a wide variety of groups and societies they encountered during their tours. To capture and gather information about India, cameras were a crucial component of the colonial regime. The camera was a massive asset in presenting a realistic portrait of life in colonial countries to British readers. At some point, photographs became a reliable source of information and attracted viewers with their dynamic visual effects that depict reality rather than books and diaries. Such as, "In 1861 local governments in India were issued an instruction to collect photographs of tribes and castes under their jurisdiction. This was reinforced at the end of the year by a further request for 'photographic likenesses of ... races and classes' to be sent to the Central Committee of the London Exhibition in Calcutta" (Thomas, 1980, cited in Pinney, 1997). This motivated a large number of dedicated amateurs to research and chronicle the traits of diverse peoples, as well as their differences and interrelationships. The *Indian Amateurs Photographic Album* (1856-1858) was a collection of photographs collected by amateur photographers and had a section on Western Indian Costumes and Characters (Pinney, 1997).

In terms of visual depiction, men predominated in the majority of photographs. "Photographs of well-placed, respectable Indian women are rare, as it was considered improper for women to sit before a camera wielded by a man" (Pal and Dehejia, 1986, 204). Thus, throughout history, a systematic approach to power and agencies provided

a clear image of women's subjugation, influenced mainly by socially determined gender roles and limitations. Later, the reluctance of male photographers to take images of women due to social restrictions led to the advent of female photographers who would step in to fill the void. Once the commercial photographic studios were established initially in major cities (Calcutta, Bombay, Madras) of India, the middle class began to attend the studios and investigate and perform their own intricate identities when camera technology became more affordable. The advent of photography sparked interest among amateurs and aspiring professionals. Within two decades of its introduction, the colonial state acknowledged photography as an intrinsic part of its authority and enthusiastically welcomed it (for documentation and record-keeping purposes). As a result of this new technology, visuals became an increasingly significant part of daily life.

3.1.2 The Coming of Photography to Assam

In Assam, photography arrived in the mid-nineteenth century. When it comes to photography, colonial masters are undoubtedly responsible for providing an overview of Assam and documenting the secluded region's plethora of cultural traditions, traditions, and indigenous peoples. In the beginning, British colonials were the ones who began writing about and documenting the people they saw in their travels, publishing anecdotes, diaries, and books, as well as photographs and sketches in it. Among the few books that documented the lives of the indigenous peoples of Assam and North-East India in the early years of publication are *People of India* (a series of photographic illustrations) by John Forbes Watson and Sir John William Kaye (1868), *A Glimpse of Assam*, by Mrs. S. R. Wards (1884), and *Stray Leaves from Assam* by P.H. Moore (1916). However, it was Elizabeth Vickland (1928) who in *Women of Assam*, emphasizes more on women's lives in the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. In colonial Assam, missionaries made considerable use of photographs to evangelize the region's predominantly illiterate people. Missionaries utilised cameras to document their lives for family and friends, as well as to inform congregations back home of their triumphs and challenges—and to raise funding to expand their mission

(Pachua and Schendel, 2016). At the time, ethnographic research was primarily concerned with data collecting, with questionnaires and photographs crucial in educating the administration and the general public about previously undiscovered cultures. Photography gained popularity in the early twentieth century (as cameras became more generally available), and individuals began documenting social and private life.

Oscar Jean Baptiste Mallitte was also a pioneer photographer in 1860s Assam, and his photos are critical for understanding Assam during the colonial period. The photographs of Baptiste Mallitte are essential for comprehending nineteenth-century Assamese society. From capturing the transitional phase of modern Assamese society following the arrival of Europeans, Mallitte's photographs document socio-cultural changes (education and the growth of missionaries in the region), the introduction of new technology (steamers, etc.), and changes in people's appearance in terms of sartorial styles in response to the Europeans' desire to transform the traditional and primitive society.



Figure 1: Christ Church, Gauhati, Assam. Photographer: Oscar Jean Baptiste Mallitte,

Year: 1860s

Source: British Library

Others include Sir Benjamin Simpson, Bourne and Shepherd, Rev. Edward H. Higg, and a plethora of other unknown photographers who contributed to photographing those prior historical eras, which now exist as an essential visual information source for research. “The earlier known photograph was taken at Dibrugarh by Rev Edward H Higgs of St. Paul’s Church. Dating back to the late 1850s this was a portrait of a young woman” (Sharma, 2020). Photographs taken by such eminent photographers recorded fascinating images of the sartorial styles, decorations, and tattoo culture of numerous ethnic groups in Assam and North-East India.



Figure 2: Singphos¹⁶ (Singphos), Place: Assam, Photographer: Bourne and Shepherd,
Year: 1890s Source: British Library

Before introducing photography in Assam, many middle-class people who travelled to Calcutta for further education were already familiar with the technology. Sharma (2020) writes, "A close study of the memoirs of the Assamese gentry of those times reveal that the Assamese speaking middle class was first introduced to photography

¹⁶ The Singpho tribe is one of the important frontier tribes of North-East India. In India, the Singphos are found in the states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh.

in erstwhile Calcutta during the late nineteenth century as attested by the portraits of Assamese students who undertook a 'secular pilgrimage' to the imperial capital." As with their counterparts elsewhere in the country, Assamese elites increasingly began to use portraits and group family photographs to design themselves in ways that contradicted their status as British Empire subjects. As a result, the camera became a vital element of the aristocratic families, where individuals began to document their lives and their travels through images, thereby generating memories. Later on, photographic studios too began to emerge in urban areas like Guwahati, Dibrugarh, Tezpur, Silchar, and Nagaon. Such as, Ghosal Brothers established a photography studio in Shillong and Guwahati in 1899. The College Studio and Ghoshal Brothers were prominent two early photographic studios of Guwahati. Dhani Bora, Purna Bharali, Muktanath Bordoloi, Bhadra Sharma, Bimal Bhattacharya, and Prasanta Bhattacharyya are some of the best-known Assamese photographers from that period. Thus, during the early twentieth century, Assam was exposed to photography and its commercial potential.



Figure 3: Kodak 620 Film Camera (the 1950s), Courtesy: Raja Chakraborty, Guwahati

3.2 Understanding Photographs

We have all looked through a photo album (which contains images of family, friends, and events), but some photos evoke an emotional response from people and places associated with a particular period. Photographs are important because they contain a great deal of information and capture various events that can be utilized to examine and analyse knowledge in visual research. The use of photographs in social science research has played a vital role in expanding scientific recognition and facilitating research processes. There has been a remarkable increase in research on visual culture in recent years. Researchers used visual ethnographic methods, particularly the use of photographs, to locate historical situations where they used it as a tool to establish the relationship between people and images, the politics of cultural representation through a visual medium, interpreting iconographies, and scrutinizing various ways of meaning production produced by images circulated within and across cultures. The effectiveness of photographs is established when the images transmit strong messages that are related to significant, accurate, or relevant events and are worthy of further research.

As an essential part of historical data, photographs help form a new narrative discourse. Photographs were extremely significant primary sources for nineteenth-century historians because they provided first-hand testimony and direct proof about specific events or conditions. By exposing people, events, and objects to the camera, this new technology-enabled them to become visible entirely. Photographs had retained a particular interest in the way that they were created at the time when the events occurred, whereas other primary sources (such as letters, memoirs, and oral histories) are usually recorded later. Photography altered how people related to knowledge about the world around them and was linked to a host of concomitant cultural, social, and economic changes (Pachau and Schendel, 2016).

In his book *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes (1987) introduced the notions of *studium* and *punctum* to understand photographs. According to Barthes, *studium* is a shared sense of what an image is about, focusing more on the taste and aesthetic outlook that

draws people to the photographs rather than participating in specific details. *Studium* in a photograph does not imply anyone to study a photograph right away, but rather is an "application to a thing, taste for someone, a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment, of course, but without special acuity. It is by *studium* that I am interested in so many photographs, whether I receive them as political testimony or enjoy them as good historical scenes: for it is culturally that I participate in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions" (1987, 15). *Punctum*, in contrast to *studium*, is what adds to the significance of a photograph. Seeing an incidental and poignant feature in a photograph and the broader context could be interpreted as a manner of disrupting the qualities of *studium*. However, it is purely subjective to viewers. Barthes states, "This second element which will disturb the *studium* I shall therefore call *punctum*; for *punctum* is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice. A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (1987, 15-16). The *studium's* underlying intrinsic nature in all of its particularity is revealed by the quality of *punctum* in a photograph, which arises from the scene itself (designed to inquiry) rather than investing the *studium* in a photograph on its own.

With the discovery of photography, there was undoubtedly a significant crisis in the realm of painting. There were claims that as photography became more popular, it destroyed the standing of painting somehow. There was also debate about whether or not to include "photography" as a category of art. Painting and photography were popular forms of art in India until the early twentieth century. Unlike in the West, photography was not viewed as a threat to Indian culture. It was widely accepted, with many artists also employing photographic images as drawing aids, with the practice of sketching from photographs (particularly architectural ruins) being extremely popular. Although some impact could be felt with the decline in popularity of various traditional art forms and sketches (of places or events), people began to view photographs as an extreme form of reality. In some ways, the new technology (camera) that emerged during a period of technological growth in the modern world complemented the modern setting of Indian society.

A different form of visual media records different kinds of events. As Pinney (2008) writes:

“An image such as painting is a record of an event, but primarily the event of the painter's relation with the canvas. Paintings leave us physical traces, but they are the traces of the painter's body, the position of a holding a brush as it leaves a particular mark, an involuntary flick as an elbow flexed” (2008, 2-3). The subjects and their imagination cannot be controlled in the same way they can be done in painting or drawing; thus, the photograph is more like a footprint of the subject than an imitation. Like other visual pictures (paintings or drawings), photographs interpret the world precisely as a replica of its subject depicting the real world, which no paintings or drawings could interpret as accurately as photographs do. Photographs, in a sense, leave a mark on the world around us, highlighting the importance of seeing the world through the lens of the camera. As Roland Barthes writes, “in Photography, I can never deny that *the things have been there*. There is a superimposition here: of reality and the past. And since this constraint exists only for photography, we must consider it, by reduction, as the very essence, the *noeme* of Photography” (Barthes, 1987, 48).

A photograph results from the photographer's decision to consider it valuable. Similarly, photographs result from the photographers' deliberate intention to capture specific events that are worth recording and remembering. Photographs do not honour the ability to observe or commemorate experiences. “A photograph is already a message about the event it records. At its simplest, the message, decoded, means: *I have decided that seeing this is worth recording*” (Berger, 1972, 31). Photographs thus represent a person's decision-making process in a specific context, with the power resting with the person behind the camera capturing an event or a moment that appears to be worth recording.

In contrast to other art forms like painting and lithography, photography allows artists to intervene in their work, albeit in a different way. Even though photographers have the power of manipulation and the power to capture the significance of an event according to one's individualistic perception, they cannot alter or have imaginative

flexibility in their work as painting does and thus capture the reality that comes through the camera lens. A photograph's significance as an image and object is shaped by various historical, cultural, social, and technical factors. When we look at a photograph, we are influenced by the context in which we view it, affecting its meaning, effectiveness, and significance. We must think of the photograph as a "transparent envelope," as Roland Barthes (1987) put it, a powerful metaphor that emphasizes its underlying complexity as an artefact and a form of representation that cannot be intellectually altered and expressed conveying a historical transformational experience that the photographer has previously experienced. Sontag (2005) elaborated on this by stating that photographs and their power provide a new visual code, influencing our perceptions of what is worth investigating and our legal and ethical obligations to view particular images in light of photography's increasing significance and the complexity of its subject matter.

3.2.1 Use of Photography in Assam by Colonial Photographers

Upon tracing the visual history of Assam, it was discovered that lithographs and sketches were initially used to illustrate events and depict civilizations in action visually. For instance, in *A Glimpse of Assam*, Mrs. Wards (1884) portrayed the region with various sketches and paintings. Along with illustrating new developments brought about by technological advancements, Wards used her illustrative drawings to depict the rich biodiversity and traditional civilizations. With the advent of the camera, however, the depiction of the region in their literature grew more straightforward and more realistic. Since photography's inception, people have viewed it as a complete art form associated with a privileged social stratum. In Assam, Photography had a crucial role in allowing Europeans and historians to uncover and document a region and its peoples that had hitherto been hidden from the rest of the world's view. On the other hand, it documented and recorded photographs that have survived as a crucial data source for understanding societal change during the colonial period.

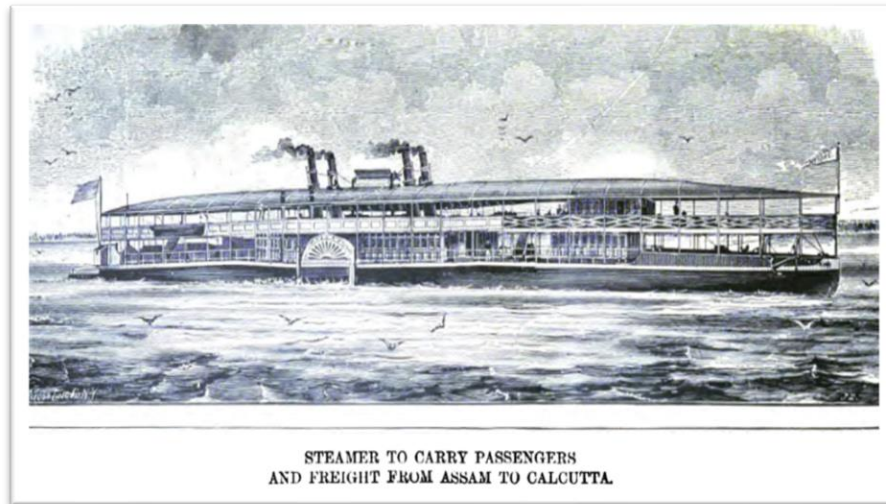


Figure 4: Mrs. S. R. Wards (1884), *A Glimpse of Assam*

During the colonisation process, photography played a vital role in depicting the colonised in Europe's mind. The Europeans regarded India as a photographic treasure trove due to the region's diverse cultures, customs, and traditions, all of which could be explored and studied to the fullest extent possible by European settlers. Thus, photography became a critical instrument and a mechanism that the British augmented to construct a visual depiction of the region oriented on colonial discourse. Colonial discourse has always sought to establish a distinct ideological superiority over adversaries to bolster their imperial rule over the conquered nation, thus labelling the colonized as “other”. As Homi K. Bhabha argued –

The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction.....Despite the play of power within the colonial discourse and the shifting positionalities of its subjects (for example effects of class, gender, ideology, different social formations, varied systems of colonization and so on), I am referring to a form of governmentality that in marking out a 'subject nation', appropriates, directs and dominates its various spheres of activity.....Therefore, despite the 'play' in the colonial system which is crucial to its exercise of power, colonial

discourse produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible (Bhaba, 1997, 295)

Regardless of the power dynamics inherent in colonial discourse, Bhaba's arguments tend to establish a narrative on how colonial subjects are viewed and represented as "otherness" through an imperial lens of visualizations adhering to a symbolic framework that sustains a strong sense of reality. When seen in this illustration, Edward Said's concept of "Orientalism"—the idea that the 'orient' is an integral component of European culture—can be better understood. As Said (1977,13) states- "Orientalism as a Western-style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient". Orientalism served as a rationale for European colonialism, justifying the West's dominating nature. Throughout the nineteenth century and beyond, European imperial powers focused on a specific ideology to dominate and govern the Orient, while portraying 'the East' as significantly inferior and desperate for Western assistance to survive and develop. The idea of orientalism further accentuates the "colonial gaze"¹⁷ in the European imagination of the colonized people. To validate colonial power, the colonial discourse thus ascertains colonial facts, culminating in categorizing and dominating the colonized mainly based on their racial distinctions. As a result, they continue to depict a clear divide between 'Us' (Colonial/Civilized) and 'Them' (Colonizers/Uncivilized/Others).

¹⁷ Establishing a colonial reality as a way of constructing and legitimising imperialism's authority

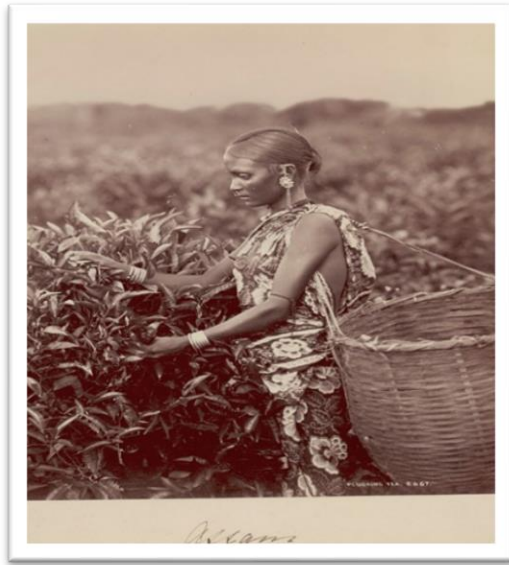


Figure 5: Assamese woman¹⁸ picking tea leaves, Creator: Bourne & Shepherd, Date: 1903 or before, Assam, Source: National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian



Figure 6: Title: Assamese tea receiving payment from the man at a table (photograph note: “Tea Coolies being Paid, Assam”), Place: Assam, Creator: Bourne & Shepherd, Collector: Koch, Emma Augusta, Date: 1903 or before Source: Smithsonian

¹⁸ The image classified here is that of an Assamese woman belonging to Adivasis community. However, over time they have merged into the greater Assamese society, incorporating numerous habits, traditions, language, and clothes. However, they have their own language as well.

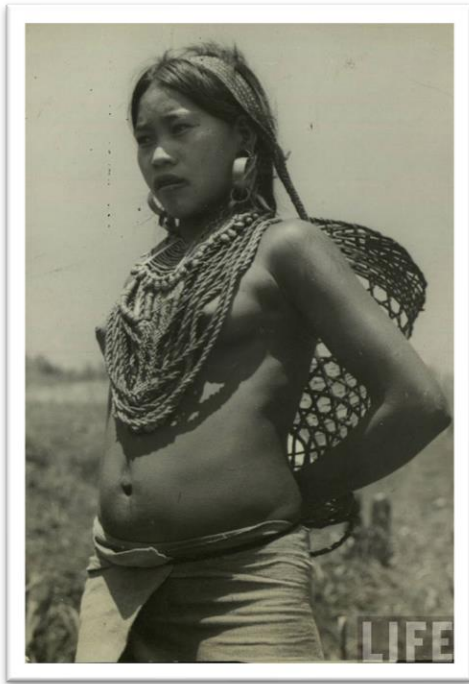


Figure 7, Women of Assam (Hills)



Figure 8, Women of Assam (Hills)

Figures 7 & 8: Tiled: Asia India, Assam, Source: Google Art & Culture, Publisher: TimeLife Credits: Mansells Date: Unknown , <https://www.oldindianphotos.in/2010/08/tribal-portraits-of-assam-from-life.html>

As in Figure 9, the photograph of European family with the Indian servants depicts a power relation that exists. With his comfortable posture, the colonial master demonstrated his superiority over his (colonized) male equivalents serving the household with a submissive demeanour and a respectful gesture toward their master. The snapshot shows Assam in a state of transition, as seen by the house type and modern furniture, among other things. Choosing to leave his innocence behind him, the youngster clutching the hand-made fan (formed from a leaf) is symbolically resigning to the role of servant to grownups. The Indian woman may be serving as a caretaker, seated lower than the European woman. The entire image is symbolic of a

particular form of power interaction between the colonized and the conquerors. European families project a "refined" image through their mannerisms, clothing, and posture as they relax in their chairs; in contrast, colonized people are depicted in a controlled position as they obey and seek the approval of their colonial masters to maintain their status as subjugated subjects. The photograph thus depicts the European envisioning of colonial land and its people, which is tied to reality through the imperial gaze.



Figure 9: British family with Indian Servants in northeastern India, 1880s, Source: Alamy

The colonizers strove to build portraits of their subjects that mirrored their interests through a camera lens. Photography had the power to alter and reshape the identities of colonial people. Photographs played a significant role in nineteenth-century European colonization as a tool for documenting, categorizing and colonizing the people they encountered. Following the British annexation of Assam, colonial authorities engaged photographers to create images. Along with their military force and missionary work in Assam (to evangelize and impart education), the Europeans were diligent researchers who researched the colonized people and their cultures. During the colonial regime, sociologists, anthropologists, and travel writers became enthralled by the prospect of chronicling the besieged region and juxtaposing it with

European culture and modernity. They strived to show the traditional Indian society, its traditional culture, and tradition to the West through various print media such as newspapers, magazines, and other descriptive publications. The power of photography to capture people and events through time aided their mission and enabled the spread of their likeness around the world.

Research and documentation of many ethnic groups were made possible via the advent of photographic documentation during the same period as anthropological studies emerged in colonial India. The *People of India*, a collection of photographic pictures with descriptive typography of the many races and ethnic groups released by J. Forbes Watson and John William Kaye (1868), is the first of its sort to be made under the authority of the Indian Government during colonial administration. The series depicts photographs of numerous ethnic groups and communities from various parts of India, which was the proper interest of the then-viceroy of the British administration Lord Canning, who was interested in bringing back photographic illustrations of various groups during his tenure in India that could be used as a valuable source of recollecting memories and the peculiarities of Indian life after their tenure in India. A few Assamese ethnic groups were also shown in the series, including the Misimis, Moamuria, Muttack, and Kacharis. The photograph of the Assamese woman (see Figure 10) in the series could be one of the earliest photographs of women published at the time. A traditional dressing pattern (similar to *methoni*¹⁹) is depicted in the shot, with no indication of the presence of a blouse. Even the accessories, such as the earring (*Keru*) and necklace, appear traditional. While the lady's look is hostile to the camera, she may be utterly oblivious of the technology or the reason she has been the subject of it.

Imperial powers were intrinsically interested in studying the primitive cultures and customs of indigenous peoples in the newly discovered countries, which remained an

¹⁹ A garment worn by ladies, typically covering the breast to the knees. It was especially prevalent in rural areas where ladies wore it wrapped around their bodies (without a blouse). It is frequent even among women of the older generation today.

essential site of ethnographic study (that is unexplored) in contrast to the progress of the West during the nineteenth century.

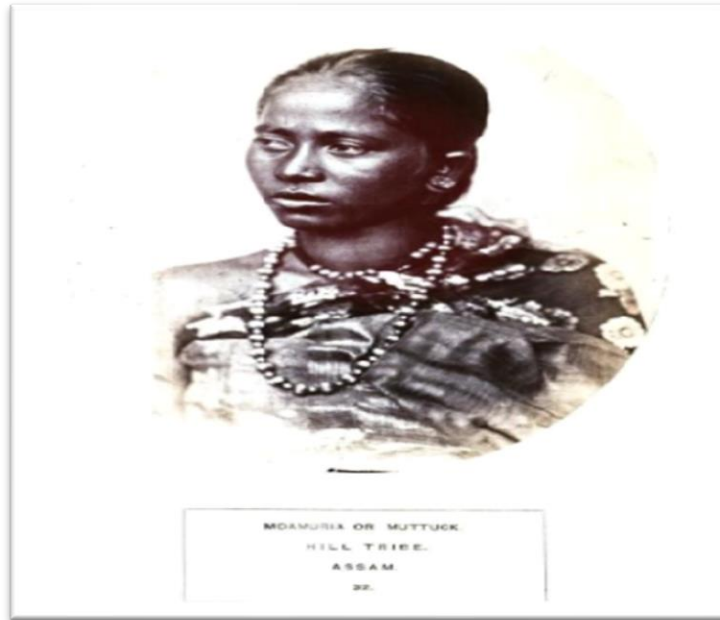


Figure 10 : Moamura or Muttack, Assam, Courtesy: *The People of India*, Year: 1860s

When the absence of a common language hampered communication and exploration, many colonial photographers turned to photography to record their subjects' communities' social and cultural features. Despite this, because appearances can be deceiving, this led to conflicting reactions and the possibility that the photographer's description of a shot was erroneous and deceptive on numerous occasions. When we look at a photograph, for example, we perceive it in the context of our own lives and our perceptions of it. They are accentuated by our knowledge and familiarity with the socio-cultural setting we live in. In many circumstances, the context in which the photograph was taken is critical to understanding the image.

Cameras have carved out an excellent niche for themselves in contemporary culture. Compared to the human eye's limited ability to focus on many objects simultaneously, cameras are technological marvels capable of recording images in various ways and distributing them broadly throughout the world. Dziga Vertov, the revolutionary Russian film director, wrote an article on this topic in 1923, and the following remark comes from it.

I'm an eye. A mechanical eye. I, the machine, show you a world the way only I can see it. I free myself for today and forever from human immobility. I'm in constant movement. I approach and pull away from objects. I creep under them. I move alongside a running horse's mouth.... I fall and rise with the falling and rising bodies. This is I, the machine, manoeuvring in the chaotic movements, recording one movement after another in the most complex combinations.....

Freed from the boundaries of time and space, I coordinate any points of the universe, wherever I want them to be. My way leads toward the creation of a fresh perception of the world. Thus I explain in a new way the world unknown to you. (Berger, 1972, 17)

Vertov's arguments acknowledged the camera's relevance in reshaping people's world perceptions. Images become increasingly potent due to their reproducibility and their ability to transmit meaning in a variety of contexts that are no longer constrained by space and time. Thus, photographs have developed into an essential kind of documentation and a form of nostalgic reminiscence, connecting people to both the past and present while also allowing them to ponder the future with concern.



Figure 11: Tea Garden, Cachar, Assam, Photographer: Oscar Jean Baptiste Mallitte, Year: 1860s, Source: British Library

When attempting to piece together a society's history or practice with no written records, photographs taken during that period can be precious. Albeit, photographers' choices on how they represent their subjects and the socio-cultural framework in which they operate have a significant impact on how the images are perceived. During the colonial era, colonial photographers were interested in documenting a wide range of activities that impacted the lives of the people and the society in Assam during their dominion. Such as capturing the tea gardens, new infrastructural development (buildings, churches, schools, etc.), the impact of missionaries, technological advancement, and the colonized population. Collecting and documenting photographs of groups and individuals represented as merely "uncivilised," "outdated," or deeply rooted in traditional Indian society provided a distinct visual portrayal of the colonised. Women were frequently viewed as 'objects' and their bare bodies were typically associated with immodest and lack of civility. Documenting their authority and displaying their superiority as an empire in how they brought about the change to the traditional Assamese society were two of their key strategies for utilizing their photographic records. Thus, making these records immensely valuable for examining certain socio-cultural and political aspects of Assam that lack detailed information about its origins, transitions, and evolution over time. Despite India being exposed to brutal forms of dominion and prejudice under British rule, the way colonial authority transformed India's traditional economic system and economy, particularly in the realms of education, research, and invention, cannot be underestimated. Assam too witnessed gradual but gradual change in the late nineteenth century. While enticed by the abundance of resources, Assam remained a prime territory for British annexation as a conquered region. To enhance its position, the British Government sought to reorganize the region following its colonial ideology and instituting a new institutional framework that resulted in substantial changes in the socio-cultural and political context. This caused significant upheaval in Assam at the outset, as people were introduced to a new form of governance and affluence that was opposed to their traditional culture and practices. As colonizers, they emphasized their legitimacy

through administrative and military power, intending to transform traditional Indian society through the lens of civilization, and thus an urgent thirst for transition was felt by bringing changes to education, administration, trade, transport, and communication in the existing traditionalism of Indian society.

3.2.2 Visualizing Women in Photographs

To enhance the understanding of women's lives and activities in colonial Assam, photographs could bridge the gaps in earlier works of literature, which included little or no record of women's lives and activities. Photographs enabled us to understand and trace the symbolic meaning that each image conveys in a given historical context, as well as to comprehend the structure of the status quo, class, transition, and cultural and social facets, as well as to provide us with a detailed visual representation of the past that remains a critical data for scrutinizing women's sexuality in terms of evaluating the diverse processes involved in the formation of their social identity through the lens of gender. The position and status of women in nineteenth-century Assam were examined, and it was discovered that women's status remained stable and dominant until the late nineteenth century. Unlike men, women's place in Indian society at the beginning of the colonial period was far from ideal. In a patriarchal society, women were constrained by customs and social expectations and were primarily subjugated.

Throughout history, women have endured oppression and prejudice. Their contributions to society have been mostly ignored or suppressed, leaving us uninformed about women's work and contribution to society and their physical well-being. As a result, records of women's lives and roles in society, whether in writing or through visual evidence (such as photographs), remained vague until the mid-nineteenth century (when they were often written about from a man's perspective). Thus, women's marginalization may be traced back to a variety of social and religious practices and taboos that restricted them and further entangled them in a system of oppression and masquerade. While talking about women's subordination, it is more

specifically based on the patriarchal structure's controls. Many feminists and researchers, particularly those who were women, significantly realized the importance of conducting comprehensive research into the lives and experiences of women. Adding to the new sort of revolution in human history was that women's voices were finally being acknowledged. Gerda Lerner (1986) states, "Like men, women are also always actors and agents of history, and women are and have been central, not marginal, to the making of society and the building of civilization" (1986, 4). Lerner's ideas were so widely supported by women that they attracted and reassured women as they sought to better understand and accept new viewpoints on gender. The subject of dominance and equality between men and women began to arise later in establishing women's roles in society, where women gradually began to raise their issues.

When photography began in Assam, it was initially the British photographers who captured the different landscapes, ethnic groups/communities, and new infrastructure development surrounding British administrative centres, missionaries, and the like. While the images were kept for their chronological documentation, it was noted that women were frequently absent and rarely seen in comparison to their male counterparts, indicating a lack of women's mobility during the early colonial era. The photographs, as an extreme source of evidence of reality, are susceptible to configuring and enhancing our understanding of culture in a particular historical context, so enhancing our knowledge and facilitating further interpretation.



Figure 12: Guwahati, 1903, Photographer: Oscar Jean Baptiste Mallitte, Year: 1860s, Source: British Library



Figure 13: Assam, 1903, Photographer: Oscar Jean Baptiste Mallitte, Year: 1860s, Source: British Library

While the nineteenth century saw several changes in Indian society as a result of many shifts from a feudal to a capitalist economy, traditional culture and practices gradually began to be replaced by modern investments, such as local weaving culture dominated by the arrival of machines, bullock carts were replaced by automobiles, and so on. Women's lives too underwent considerable changes after centuries of oppression by specific Hindu rules and customs that led to a highly withering life, placing them in a significantly deteriorated state. However, during the period when feminism began in the West to advocate for women's rights, significant social developments occurred in India, including reforms aimed at improving women's degraded status in society. In India, women have long been victims of social injustice and discrimination, ranging from unequal social status to harsh social practices. Several of the most heinous practices in India, such as *Sati*, child marriage, and widowhood, were abolished in the early nineteenth century by Indian reformers such as Raja Rammohun Roy, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Savitribai Phule, and Jyotirao Phule, with the support of the colonial regime, which condemned violence against women in the name of religion and culture. Unlike the western feminist movement, the Indian movement for social changes was initially founded by men and later expanded to include women joined by their spouses, sisters, children, and others. During the late nineteenth century, women's roles were reinterpreted, and their individuality was reinforced by the rise of "new women" (Forbes, 2008). For example, the introduction of formal education for women established new challenges, and they began to understand the causes of their centuries-long dominance and discrimination. In some ways, education increased women's self-esteem and gave them a fresh outlook on their ability to combat social injustices and understand the genesis of harmful social behaviours, which were key hurdles in a patriarchal system. Because women's issues in mainstream societies had mostly been overlooked since their commitment primarily to domestic chores, clothing had never been a major topic of discussion in women's lives. In a patriarchal society, sartorial styles operated as a method of alienation, with societal customs such

as *Purdah*²⁰ or veils acting as a barrier to women's liberty by keeping them out of the public eye. Social norms, on the other hand, became so ingrained in women's lives that they were seen as a tradition, controlling women's choices and liberties for decades.

Contrary to other regions of India, Assam had a better situation for women. Mula Gabharu, and Phuleswari, are a few references to the heroic deeds of Assamese women in which their strength and tenacity were seen to have been given significant social and prestige in Assam throughout the Ahom period. The standing of women-only suffered a setback with the Burmese invasion (Barooah, 1993). In the backdrop of Assam, until the British annexation, women's issues were severely marginalized. For the most part, women continued to play out their traditional gender roles, focusing on domestic duties like cooking and weaving. The socialization of gender roles within society firmly governed women, solidifying their status in a manner that blinds them to the patriarchal culture's dominance. Several feminist thinkers have explored the philosophical foundations and cultural ramifications of silence. For example, Simone de Beauvoir (1949) wrote about the early socialization of women into silence and invisibility. She believed that the "othering" of women renders them subservient objects to men. With the burden of sustaining the ideal woman image, women and their responsibilities were powerfully intertwined with gender norms and deeply organized within patriarchal connections. A reorientation in the perspective of females in India was brought about by a feminist movement that evolved in the late nineteenth century. However, it also needs to mention that women's oppression and exploitation were not as extreme as seen in other parts of India, unlike other parts of the country. Deka (2019) writes about women's conditions in nineteenth-century Assam:

²⁰ A religious and social practise widespread among some Muslim and Hindu groups concerning female confinement.

ঘৰুৱা কাজ-কৰ্মৰ বাহিৰে সমাজৰ কোনো দায়িত্বপূৰ্ণ কামৰ ভাৰ নাৰীৰ ওপৰত ন্যস্ত কৰা হোৱা নাছিল। গতিকে সামাজিক দায়িত্ব বুলি কলে সাধাৰণতে আমি বুজি পোৱা কোনো ধৰণৰ দায়িত্ব সেই সময়ত নাৰীক দিয়া হোৱা নাছিল। আনকি নাৰীয়ে নিজেও তেনেকুৱা দায়িত্ব গ্ৰহণ কৰাৰ কথা মনেৰে ভবা নাছিল। (2019, 169)

No responsible work of the society except domestic work was entrusted to women. So, no responsibility that we generally understand when it is called social responsibility was given to women. Even women themselves did not think of taking up such responsibilities.

As previously stated in Chapter 2, Indian modernity emerged during the British colonial period, when the country was still feudal and traditional. During the early years of colonialism, people experienced a period of transitional instability and upheaval and considerable changes in the socio-political and cultural components of Indian civilization. Because of their feudal past, the British perceive India as being capable of being transformed into a contemporary setting just for their economic gain. As a colonised state, the region's socio-economic and political status was impacted by new economic policies, the administrative and legal network, ideas of private property and modern education, improved sanitation, health facilities, improved modes of transportation and communication, and improved modes of transportation and communication. However, the new administration had major implications as a result of the rapid advancement of the social evolutionary ladder in Indian society out of the feudal era. The Indian economy has suffered as a result of dramatic changes in the administrative structure, which have resulted in the implementation of new revenue policies, land reforms, commerce, and other policies that have hampered and gradually transformed the lives of the native population.

Throughout the nineteenth century, European countries stretched their empires into Asia and Africa, leaving a variety of markings to show their presence. This kind of

cultural imperialism, in which they attempted to transform and portray their culture as better, was one of the most enduring aspects of European history. In the wake of their conquest and colonisation of nations around the globe, Europeans saw themselves as both militarily and culturally superior to their conquered counterparts. Building a sturdy socio-economic base for the state's seamless operation became extremely vital in order to rule the colonized country and strengthen its political power. European domination was reinforced by establishing a new political regime and economic policies to strengthen their grip on India, with the expectation that Indians would help them rule the country and expand their political authority. People's adherence to their traditional roots initially acted as a barrier for the British in modernising India's social and cultural structure. However, the European emphasis on clothing, for example, even created disquiet in parts of India where caste, class, and gender hierarchy were maintained through clothing. To improve the understanding of the social psychology of clothing and its reforms in women's lives, the analysis of photographic content supplemented by historical texts to provide a social context strengthened the study by providing the capacity for expression and evaluations.

3.3 Influences of Europe on Indian Dress

Europeans were taken aback by the nakedness of the Indians they saw on their first journey to India in the late seventeenth century, and the experience was novel to them as well. The first impression of the British while coming to India was gathered from encountering Indians in their semi-naked bodies. “British women newly arrived in India recorded their shock not only at the semi nakedness of lower status of Indian household servants, who seem constantly underfoot, dusting, sweeping, lounging about and playing with the *babalog* (white children), and also at their free access to the bedrooms of memsahibs as if they were non-males” (Cohn, 1996, 130). The term “nakedness” was used in this context to refer to the fact that the Indians have dressed in the most basic manner possible i.e., usually unstitched clothing by both genders as

compared to Europeans. In the view of the British, the disparity between Indian and European dress already created an attitude of “us” and “them” at first glimpse.

Women's dress has served to symbolically reflect the culture and convey it down the generations. Women's clothing in India has its cultural significance and distinctive qualities, each representing the diversity of the cultural variations in which they lived. However, until the Europeans arrived in India, the modification of regional costumes remained stagnant, culminating in a radical shift in Indian sartorial trends, causing people to understand the importance of clothing and the new ways of enhancing it. Depending on how close they were to Europeans, people's attitudes toward European styles varied. In areas with strong missionary influences, such as South India, or areas with a strong British presence, such as Calcutta, the Western dress was more commonly accessible and welcomed (Tarlo, 1996). However, initially, the adoption of western clothing was much more accessible to men, who unlike women were more likely to introduce first to the western reforms. While men were undergoing considerable changes to European (suits, pants, or any stitch garment) and semi-European (mixing Indian and western clothing) attire, women remained in their traditional dress.

In the past centuries, men and women wore merely a piece of cloth to cover their essential body parts, which was later modified at various points in time by adding accessories such as turbans (worn by both genders in various forms), *Kamarband*²¹ (by women), and the like to their clothing (Biswas, 1985). Women could be naked or partially covered with ease and it was largely accepted in society. Though most of the population embraced unstitched clothing before the British invasion, portions of India that fell under the Mughal dynasty were influenced by stitched clothing to some extent. While analysing the transformation of women's dress in India, the era of the Sultans and Mughal Emperors remains significant in Indian history. During the time of the Mughals, changes in women's clothing began. Head and breast coverings became an important part of women's sartorial styles. The Muslim women of the

²¹ Waist belt

Mughal period dressed like Persian princesses, with their garments providing the advantages of full coverage and dignity to the body, to isolate and strengthen women's protection (Biswas, 1985, 18). On the other hand, the Hindus saw the necessity to change the way women dressed as a matter of concern. Thus, the '*Choli*'²², a tight-fitting and half-sleeved women's clothing, was developed and made history in the evolution of Indian costumes as the first stitched garment to arrive on the scene. Later, there were progressive alterations in Indian women's attire, such as the inclusion of a *bodice*²³, *ghagra*²⁴, and *orhni*²⁵ until the annexation of the British in India. To proclaim its complete conquest, the *orhni* was then transformed into a *sari*. However, elements like the *petticoat* became an integral part of women's dress in the late 19th century, which were fine and expensive clothes for the aristocracy and manufactured in Bengal (Biswas, 1985, 30).

The European ladies, like the Indian men, were unsatisfied with what women were wearing at first glimpse. In his book *Indian Costumes*, Biswas (1985) describes an English woman who visited India between 1823-1828 and was shocked to encounter women dressed in gauzy *sari*'s. She later wrote in her journal (source and name not mentioned): "The dress was rather transparent, almost useless as a veil" (1985, 30). The attire of Indian women, which differed significantly from Europeans in terms of its styles and fabrics, was regarded as extremely primitive and outdated under European eyes. When looking at the evolution of women's clothing, it is evident that the issue of modesty and protection, as well as shielding women from the male gaze, has always been at the forefront.

The Europeans were baffled by the clothing styles of the native Indians, as they were immersed in and introduced to a new cultural context that was opposed to their own.

²² A short-sleeved blouse worn by Indian women, most popular in northern India which is worn with Ghagra (skirt)

²³ The part of a dress that covers the breasts and back above the waist and is form-fitting; nonetheless, the name "bodice" was only adopted after the British annexation. Previously, the word *choli* was more prevalent.

²⁴ A long full skirt, often decorated with embroidery, mirrors, or bells

²⁵ A long piece of cloth to cover the head and back

Here, both divergent cultures (Europeans and Indians) experienced “cultural shock” (Oberg, 1960) as they adjusted to fresh circumstances, resulting in chaos and anxiety between both groups. The Europeans also associated aspects of their appearance with their social standing as severely low-status individuals who seemed to be barefooted, clad or undressed, and unclean at all times. According to the British, Indian society was evolutionary backwards and inferior, as evidenced by the writings that support this idea. Because of the Indians' semi-naked appearance, Europeans equated them with a low social standing and dismissed them as being simply barbaric.

Tarlo (1996) writes-

“The disgraceful sight of the loin-clothed boatmen was not merely shocking to Europeans. It also confirmed their notion of the evolutionary inferiority of the Indian race of its backwardness and barbarism. Furthermore, it revealed the blackness of the skin which was in itself regarded as a biological sign of racial inferiority” (1996, 34).

Here is evidence of European enmity toward native Indians, who were constantly judged as 'inferior' and 'uncivilised' by Europeans based on their clothing and racial characteristics and held a despicable view because of the cultural differences that distinguished them from other races as a result of their distinct racial characteristics. Europeans had discriminating attitudes about Indians and made exceedingly unpleasant statements about them, portraying them as inhumane due to racial and cultural differences. In a letter to a young British man, Lieut. Col. John Briggs described the Indian culture, which he attempted to comprehend through the lenses of ‘cultural relativism’ and ‘ignorance’ (Tarlo, 1996, 34). Although, when juxtaposed to the European concept of modernity, Briggs' depiction of the Indian population was perceived as disparaging and insulting, with the locals being considered inferior and uncivilised beings. His statement projected how Europeans were superior in contrast to other nations (colonized ones), citing general advances in the domains of industrialization, urbanisation, transportation, and communication as reasons for their improved standard of living. Briggs describing the Madras boatmen wrote:

To the European the sight is hardly human, to see a black animal kneeling on three bits of wood, connected only with the fibres of a coconut, paddling away alone several miles from land..... What then must be the feelings of a person, landing fresh from London, without having witnessed any intermediate state of society between the height of European civilization in the finest city in the universe, and that to which he is so suddenly brought! (Briggs, 1828, cited in Tarlo 1996, 34)

As part of their efforts to “orientalise” Indian society, the British Supremacy was keen to recognise and respect the importance of cultural appropriateness among the people, as well as to include their views of “civilised” and “progressive” values into their daily life. In particular, they wished to change the traditional/native Indian clothes, which they regarded as inferior and outdated when compared to western apparel. With time, the introduction of new manners and sartorial styles, particularly in administrative offices and newly established Christian missionaries’ schools, played a critical role in transforming the traditional clothing and bringing them much closer to European styles and etiquette. In some ways, the Europeans were also aiming to enhance the value of foreign apparel over traditional Indian dress, which had long been a point of comparison. Initially, Indians had mixed feelings towards European attire, which they considered to be exceedingly exotic, sacrilegious, dirty, mingled, and even amusing to certain people. However, as a result of the proximity of their contact with the British, people's attitudes toward the British progressively changed (Tarlo, 1996). Though not only a matter of taste, the adoption of attire signifies a shift in the values and way of life of Indians as a nation.

The European quest to achieve a trade treaty until the eighteenth century was founded on their concept of trade, who designated certain cultural things as commodities. In light of their awareness of the region's valuable resources, the Europeans' desire to colonise India grew as they realised that doing so would be beneficial to their economic well-being. “Like the great Arab, Asian and Jewish trading companies, the Europeans- Portuguese, Dutch, French and English- were attracted to the Indian trade

by her fine manufacturers of cloth and silk and her agricultural raw materials notably indigo, pepper, cardamom and other spices” (Bayly, 1990, 45). Upon British arrival in India, they searched out a wide variety of fabrics and other precious artefacts that could be carried back to England from the continent. Other than social etiquette, Europeans viewed clothing as a crucial area in which they could draw others to themselves by portraying a sense of great worth through their attire after seeing the Indian way of dressing. However, the lack of interest expressed by Indians in manufactured products and apparel during that period could be explained by the fact that during the Mughal era, Indians were more interested in gold, silver, and copper, which had less of an impact on European clothing imagery. Secondly, India's rich textile culture allowed them to create enough clothing to meet their needs at the time, which did not inspire people to be concerned about their clothing. With a significant difference in clothing between Europeans and Indians, Europeans considered “clothes” as both an essential sector in maximising profit with their advanced technology and a vehicle of change in attempting to civilise the traditional Indians. Unlike the western attitude to clothes, however, the Indian relationship with clothing was not just functional and simply utilitarian, but also culturally and socially essential to one's cultural ethos.

The policies of the British administration not only influenced people's attitudes and behaviours but also attempted to construct a homogeneous framework of Indian society by reforming Indian values and cultural qualities. Among other things, the principles and traits that were deeply reflected in European sartorial patterns were being popularised by Indians to elevate their attire to the level of superiority and civilisation. As the British strengthened their influence over India, wearing Indian clothing became increasingly problematic to the Europeans. “As colonisers, it was considered as a ‘sign of eccentricity’ and even a ‘cause of discredit” (Bayly, 1990, cited in Tarlo, 1996, 36). The increased homogeneity in terms of appearance and attire, on the other hand, alarmed Europeans, who feared losing their prestige and dominance in colonial India. After arriving in India, British traders and businessmen initially

dressed in traditional Indian attire due to the influence of local customs and climate. However, once they gained political power and assumed control of India as the new rulers, it became increasingly unacceptable for them to do so because they believed it would diminish their status, power, and superiority in the eyes of the Indian people. In 1830, laws were introduced prohibiting workers of the East India Company from wearing Indian attire to official events (Cohn, 1989). To differentiate and detach themselves physically, culturally, and socially from the Indian masses, the British developed new standards. Since the British have always felt the need to maintain contrast in their clothing styles and practices to maintain dignity and pride, variances also served to highlight British superiority over fellow Indians. As a result, despite attempting to civilise the native Indians, Europeans were also concerned about failing to preserve their sartorial standards, which could result in embarrassment. Maintaining British clothing standards was thus necessary to preserve their pride and dominance and avoid such degeneration.

The study of dress history and its social and cultural ramifications in society was scrutinized by colonial writers in India throughout the nineteenth century, who were interested to look at the deeper significance that clothing holds in its materiality. Writers like Emma Tarlo (1996), Bernard S. Cohn (1996), and A. Biswas (1985) did considerable research on Indian dress and its changing prospects and have provided invaluable insights into the significance and role of clothing among the people in their respective cultures. Their research was notable for its contribution to the study of dress in India, in which clothing was studied in-depth and linked to issues such as caste, class, identity, hierarchy, and other such issues. Later Indian writers such as K.N. Pannikar, Vinay Bahl, and others drew attention to the relationship between body and clothes, offering insights into the role that clothing plays in society beyond being merely a cultural artefact. When considering the evolution of sartorial trends over time, it is indeed vital to note that, while clothing has always evolved, it was profoundly altered and revolutionized during the British era, which had a major impact on India's textile culture.

The traditional Indian economy was significantly impacted by the advent of new British regulations and trade, as the value of locally produced items could not compete with low-cost imports from the west. As a result, local industries and traditional weaving cultures suffered severe losses, while the market for low-cost, lightweight clothing flourished. People eventually gained accustomed to foreign objects as a result of the large flood of low-cost commodities into the country, which assisted them in incorporating new components into their sartorial trends. This also focuses on British cultural supremacy in India, as they sought to assert their rule and superiority over their subjects. Yet a few educated Indians were unable to resist embracing and enhancing European fashions, believing that they reflected all the British virtues of supremacy, progress and civilization and masculinity (Tarlo, 1996). This initially caused confusion and strife among Indians, as some Indians believed that European culture and its qualities were incompatible with Indian traditional values, and therefore remained divisive. Many elite families and highly educated men started wearing western coats with traditional Indian *dhoti* and scarf, and women started wearing blouses with Indian *sari*/traditional attire in many parts of India, becoming fashionable in modernising the traditional Indian costume and distinguishing themselves from their fellow native Indians.

3.3.1 European Influence on Assamese Clothing

When it comes to the history and evolution of clothing, it is apparent that, as a part of Indian culture as a whole, Assamese society has not experienced a dramatic transformation in sartorial style like other parts of India. With the Turko-Afghans and Mughals failing to conquer Assam, and the East India Company not considering occupying it until 1826, Assamese society remained largely cut off from the mainstream of Indian life throughout the medieval period (Guha, 2015). Assamese society was largely traditional until the early nineteenth century, with no signs of 'urbanisation'. However, the year 1853 is notable for the establishment of the 'Gauhati' city as a modern city (Chowdhury, 1996, 43), which coincided with the advent of the first railway services in India. The transformation in the socio-economic and cultural

framework of Assamese culture with the arrival of the British has undoubtedly impacted society all through time.

Guwahati, erstwhile *Gauhati*, being a modern city, became the British administration's principal administrative centre in Assam. This increased administrative roles, which were largely filled by Bengalis recruited by the British because they were already familiar with the British administration in Calcutta. This caused great worry among the indigenous Assamese, who felt alienated in their land. To address the problem, pioneers such as Anandaram Dhekial Phukan urged people to take responsibility to fit into the new emerging society. Such as, encouraging youth to go to Calcutta to enhance their English education and, as a result, get qualified for higher posts in their state.

The flow of modernity, with its various developments in education, administration, new job opportunities, transportation, modern health, and a developing market, gratified progressive Assamese to witness their state undergo a metamorphosis, assimilating new modern ways to Assamese traditional society. Assamese is still a traditional community, hence contemporary tactics were deemed to be essential for upliftment. This can be defended by elites such as Dhekial Phukan, who was on a mission during the colonial period to change traditional Assam into a contemporary developed state to some extent.

Anandaram writes:

মই এসময়ত সপোন দেখিছিলোঁ বুজিছা -----আসামৰ হাবি গুচি ফুলনি হোৱা,
ব্ৰহ্মপুত্ৰৰ সৰু সৰু গুটীয়া নাওবোৰ গুচি ভাপ জাহাজ হোৱা, দেশী মানুহবোৰ
ইংলেণ্ডৰ মানুহৰ দৰে গুণী-জ্ঞানী হোৱা॥ সেই স্বপ্নক দিঠকত পৰিণত কৰাৰ
চেষ্টাতে এইবোৰ কৰি আছোঁ। আইনৰ তৰ্জমা, অসমীয়াৰ পাঠ্য পুথি ৰচনা -
এইবোৰতে ব্যস্ত হৈ পৰিছোঁ। (Chowdhury, 1996, 54)

I once dreamed of ——Assam's jungles being transformed into beautiful gardens, the Brahmaputra's small boat being replaced by a steamship, and the indigenous people being as moral and wise as the people of England. We're doing it while attempting to make that dream a reality. We are occupied with the study of new laws and the writing of Assamese textbooks.

Until the eighteenth century, archaeological artefacts such as sculptures provided insight into the diverse forms of human ornamentation that existed throughout history in Assam, including clothing, headgears, jewellery, tattoos, and other tattoo-like adornment. Different forms of adornments indicated a wide range of symbolic connotations in one's culture. Among the sculptures (dated 10th-14th century) deities such as Visnu, Surya, Ganga, Yamuna, Lingas and others were most prominent in the sculptures, each with its significance in Hindu mythology. The sculptures of female deities were discovered to be normally bare, with little detail in their garments; yet, they were ornamented with jewels and garlands to hide their bodies. Later in the nineteenth century, Europeans depicted Assam in sketches and paintings, which can also be found in history books and diaries.

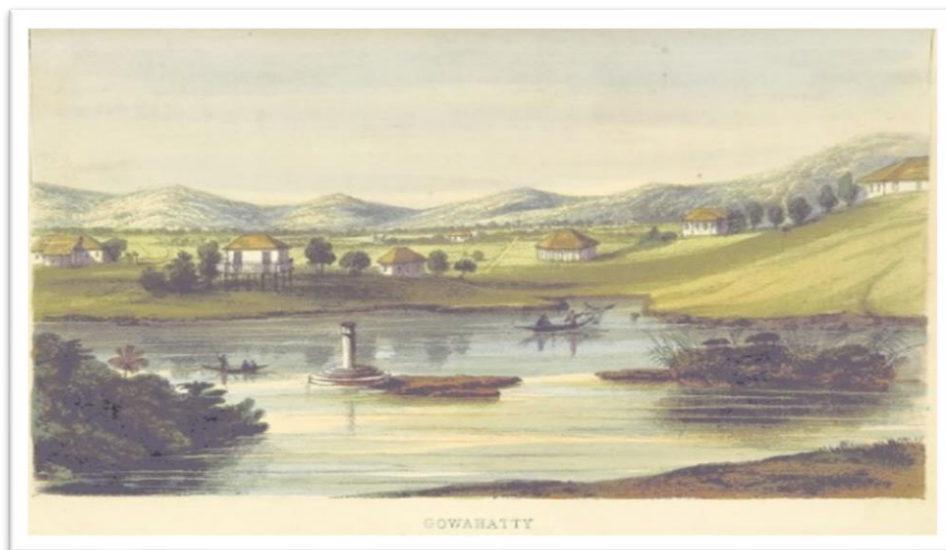


Figure 14: Guwahati in the mid-nineteenth century, John Butler (1847), *A Sketch of Assam*

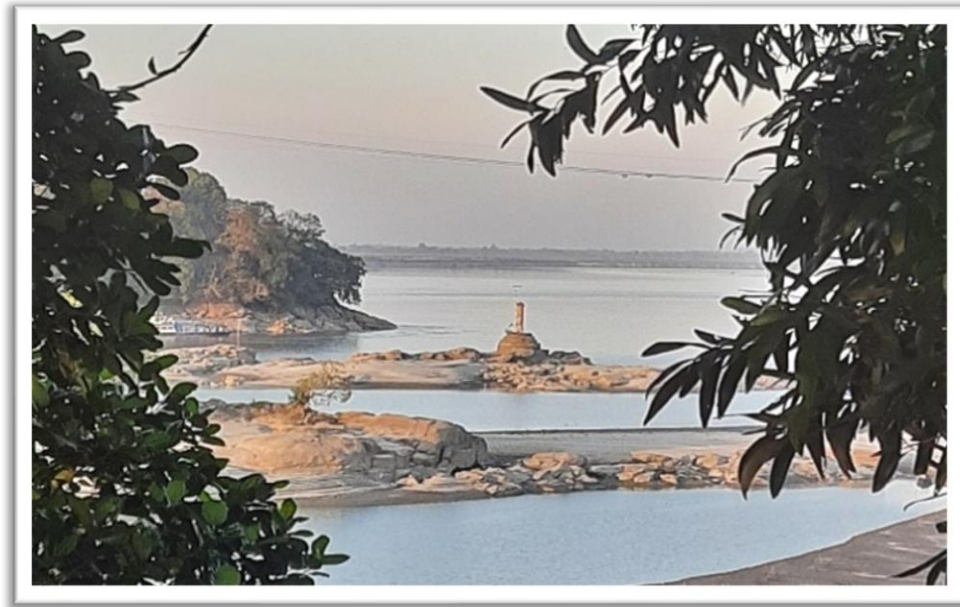


Figure 15: Guwahati 2021, @Siwani Mech

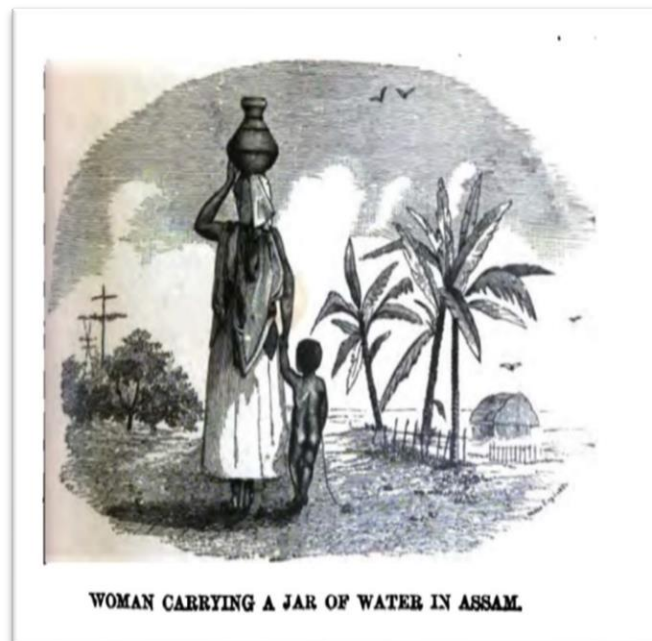


Figure 16: S.R Ward (1884), *A glimpse of Assam*

With the arrival of the British, a progressive shift in women's clothing (women of wealthy and educated families) became noticeable in areas of Assam where European operations and governance were still dominant. As a result of the colonial conquest, Assam was ruled by the British, which was a new experience for the people of Assam. The population underwent a significant reorientation in the late nineteenth century. They not only introduced the British form of government, political institutions, education, and social etiquette, but they also established a new set of civilisation requirements with the introduction of new sartorial experiences among the population. The late nineteenth century brought with it new experiences and hardships for the people of the region, who were caught between tradition and modernity at the time of its establishment. People experienced significant reforms in their social and cultural features as a result of the move from an agrarian to a semi-capitalist economy in colonial Assam. Before the British seized control of Assam, the state maintained a traditional economy in which the inhabitants mostly engaged in subsistence activities including farming, fishing and hunting. Agriculture was the primary source of revenue and source of livelihood in the region. It was only after the British arrived in the region, that changes in the way of life took on new dimensions, with improvements in transportation, communication and administration as well as improvements in educational institutions all taking a turn for the better to establish a connection with the rest of the world while, on the other hand, gradually distancing themselves from their traditional roots.

The Camera as Witness by Joy L.K Pachuau and Willem van Schendel (2016) states how the Europeans reacted to the dress of indigenous Mizo people. Those who came in contact with the missionaries were encouraged to dress in a 'proper' way (2016, 47). Pachuau and Schendel states the three basic aspects of dress that European looked at. Firstly, Europeans claimed that they could not distinguish between men and women at first glance since they appeared practically identical. Appropriate attire was one that indicated the wearer's gender. Secondly, Mizos were forced to cover their bodies because Europeans believed that being naked indicated a lack of civilization. They

were also exposed to European ideas of cleanliness. They contend that dressing neatly is essential for good health (Lorrain, 1936; Enkawitu, 1938, cited in Pachuau and Schendel, 2016, 47-48). The British, both directly or indirectly, connected shame with dressing and encouraged people to wear it in a “right way” which included entirely covering their bodies.

Assam's pre-capitalist economy transitioned in the colonial era in the late nineteenth century. Women were compelled to transform their connection with clothing from an essential part of the culture to a “commodity” that could be exchanged for money in the process of the British government's imposition of significant land taxes. As Ward (1884) states, “Nearly every family has its handloom placed under the eaves of the house, where the women busy themselves between the morning and evening meal, weaving silk and, cotton cloth garments for the family, and often some pieces, in addition, to sell to pay their taxes” (Ward, 1884, 37)

Clothes were once a source of revenue for the impoverished in colonial times when British laws and allied taxes could not be paid apart from agricultural products. With the end of the barter system, handloom clothing gradually became a valuable product in local marketplaces for making money. However, during the colonial period, the standing of weaving culture deteriorated, which was most impacted by the rapid growth of imported European apparel in the marketplaces. Imported manufactured goods (clothing) had a substantial impact on local/traditional enterprises since they could not compete with the cheap and affordable products of the west. It quickly spread throughout Assam, especially in areas under the British administration. However, there was less of an impact on those living in rural areas who had little or no exposure to western culture, especially in terms of behaviours and attire. As marketplaces opened and trade and business expanded in the state, however, awareness of European goods grew. Samman (1897), in his book *The Cotton Fabrics of Assam*, stated:

Cotton fabrics imported from Europe and India can be purchased ready-made for a moderate sum, and these though less lasting, are much finer in texture

than those usually made by the Assamese..... Accordingly, among rich classes, the women have given up weaving cloths for ordinary wear and confine themselves to the production of fine clothes deliberately and tastefully ornamented with borders and patterns of silk, or gold or silver thread..... The middle class, too, have now taken to wearing imported clothes, and it is among them, at the present day, that weaving is at the lowest ebb (1897, 3).

Samman's writings give insight into the dwindling traditional weaving culture, which has been compounded by the influx of low-cost imports that have steadily prospered in Indian marketplaces, culminating in the decline of local products. The availability of “foreign” goods at a cheaper price and finer texture than the local Assamese weave attracted the interest of the entire Assamese population. The effect of European imports became increasingly acceptable, firstly, because they were inexpensive, and secondly because people were enthusiastic about wearing foreign items as a new experience that linked it to something with higher values than traditional ones.

3.3.2 The Missionaries and Assamese Women’s Clothing

Christian Missionaries arrived in Assam shortly after the British arrived and attempted to promote Christianity throughout the state. The arrival of American Baptist Missionaries, who made Assam their field of evangelical activity had an important role to play in the socio-cultural life of the people. However, the Baptist missionary group had previously served in Assam during the pre-British era, where they had begun their voyage. For example, the Serampore Missionaries commissioned Atmaram Sarma of Kaliabar to translate the Bible into Assamese, which was published in 1813 and was the first book printed in Assamese language (Talukdar, 2012). The major goal of the Missionaries was to spread and convert the Assamese to Christianity, they were less successful in this endeavour in Assam; nonetheless, they were fortunate in other parts of North-East India, where they were able to attract the hill tribes. The period from the 1830s was the period of “social reform” when colonial enlightenment was trying to “modernize” the customs and institutions of the

traditional society. The adoption of a new lifestyle challenged the traditional cultures of the indigenous people. The evangelists made people believe in the newly emerging modern world guided by the light of science, western literature, medicine and even culture. The missionaries emphasized Christianity in lifestyle and tried to impose the religion on the people. To propagate Christianity, the Missionaries saw education as a necessary tool. As a result, they established schools among the illiterate and gradually produced a wide range of literature, including dictionaries, grammar books, and other important resources. The Missionaries, who exposed the Assamese to the outside world, are largely responsible for the advent of modern education in the region. Female education was also pioneered in Assam by the Missionaries, who recognised its value and its role in Indian society. Along with education, they also provided knowledge of enhanced sartorial styles and taught various methods and art to the women. Nanda Talukdar writes:

The American Baptist Missionaries were the pioneers of female education in Assam. Besides that in Sadiya, in 1844 Mrs Brown and Mrs Cutter established one girls' school at Sibsagar and it was followed by two other such schools at Nazira and Gauhati.....At Sibsagar, the Missionary ladies tried to teach Assamese ladies how to read and write.... So the Missionary ladies went from door to door at noon to teach the Assamese ladies.....Along with the prescribed books in the Missionary schools, the girl students devoted some hours to sewing, spinning and weaving (Talukdar, 2012, 96)

Imported clothing was seen as exceptional during the period, which gradually became available to the general public in a variety of styles and fabrics. Furthermore, these styles were linked to tailored outfits that were deemed 'modern' and sophisticated at the time. They also paid attention to the personal appearance of the indigenous and, at first, the new converts (Christianity) to influence the majority of the population, and exhorted them to cover their bodies to a larger extent than was customarily done. The arrival of missionaries in North East India ushered in significant changes in society's

social and cultural life. The primary objective was to convert people to Christianity and teach them ways to live as "civilised" people.



Figure 17: Missionaries in Nagaon, Assam, the 1900s, Source: New York State Archives.
New York (State).

<https://digitalcollections.archives.nysed.gov/index.php/Detail/objects/1235>

Photography was introduced by the colonial masters but it was noticed that they hardly photographed the Assamese-speaking women, leaving out the members of the hill communities. It might have been a conscious choice on the part of the British to stay away from photographing Assamese-speaking women to avoid antagonising the Assamese. The British could probably sense that the idea of Assamese-speaking women being photographed was not welcomed by the society. On the other hand, Assamese women were generally barred from making frequent public appearances. This is an experience that was narrated to me by some informant's namely, Satyaprava Gogoi, Nirmali Duarah and few others.

There are of course many instances of Assamese women being photographed by fellow Indians. This reflects a sense of suspicion among the Assamese not only about

the British, but also about photography. They felt that there was something intrinsically deceitful about being photographed by the ‘Mlech’, the word that was used to refer to the British. The British were seen as potential polluters of Hinduism. Therefore, words like ‘Mlech’ were used to reflect the fact that the British came from a lower caste and therefore interaction with them, particularly of the Assamese women, had to be carefully monitored. People were suspicious of the alluring motive of the camera that could possibly led Assamese Hindu women to even convert to Christianity. I was also told that the glaring absence of Assamese women in photographs taken by the British was also because of the fact that most of the photographers were male. Things changed to some extent after the arrival on the scene of female photographers and researchers who made women the subject of their study. One such female researcher was E. Vickland.

3.4 Analyses of a Few Photographs from the Colonial Times

Figure 18 is an early photograph of a woman of Assam, circa 1880s. The picture depicts a woman with her upper body covered with a chador. She is not wearing a blouse and is reluctant to be photographed. The image also suggests that, unlike the few progressive families who embraced modern dress elements, women in distant places did not undergo clothing improvements simultaneously. Consequently, Assamese from remote areas experienced modernity much lately in twentieth century.



Figure 18: Albumen photographs of an Assamese women, Date: 1880s Source: Old Indian Photos

<https://www.oldindianphotos.in/2014/08/albumen-photograph-of-assamese-girl.html>



Figure 19: Mustering the Coolies, Assam Photographer: Bourne and Shepherd, Courtesy: National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian, Year: Photo 1903 or Before.

Photographed by Bourne and Shephard in the late nineteenth century, Figure 1 remains a crucial image for analysing the transition in dress in colonial times. The photograph displays colonial rulers with the Assamese. The photograph depicts the colonial master in western clothes with his hand in his pocket, signifying a controlling body language towards his Assamese coworkers. In the case of the Assamese, there is a clear distinction in their attire. Few men are observed wearing both the traditional *dhoti* and *kamij*²⁶, even fewer are observed wearing only the *dhoti*. The second category of males suggests a lower social rank and consists primarily of labourers, as seen by their participation in chores such as hauling the cart. In contrast, women are observed covering their bodies in addition to wearing veils, even when dressed in traditional clothes. During the colonial period, European contact with the Assamese may have influenced the modesty of women's attire, as is depicted in the photograph. The shot also illustrates a situation in which both the photographers and the subjects are aware that they are being photographed, as seen by their stance and gaze toward the camera. Significantly, the photograph depicts a distinction between colonial supremacy where a distinction between the colonial and 'other' are observed in terms of clothing as well as 'division of labour'.

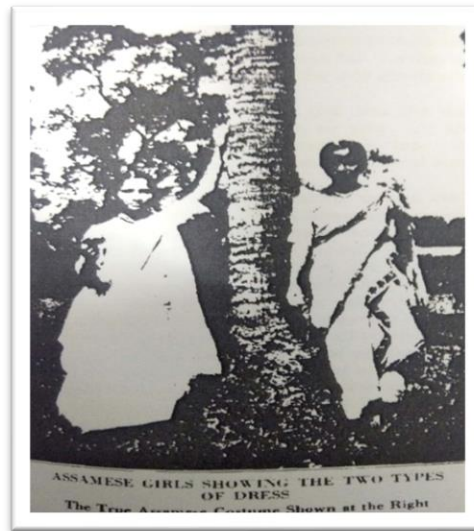


Figure 20: Assamese girls showing two types of dress , Photographer: E. Vickland, Source: *Women of Assam*

²⁶ Tailored upper garment of men, or called as kurta.

Figure 20, displays two Assamese women dressed in contrasting styles. The woman on the right wears a traditional *mekhela chador* and blouse, while the woman on the left wears a *sari* (replicating the Bengali style). The photograph was published in the early 20th-century book Vickland's *Women of Assam*, but it is significant for examining the transition that occurred in the Assamese society from the late 19th century onward. The image demonstrates how blouses entered the domain of Assamese clothing. With the coming of Bengalis into Assam and the expansion of markets, imported clothing from Bengal was available. Thus, the *sari* was a popular garment during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Consequently, a considerable shift occurred in the inclusion of both western and Pan-Indian clothes during the era.

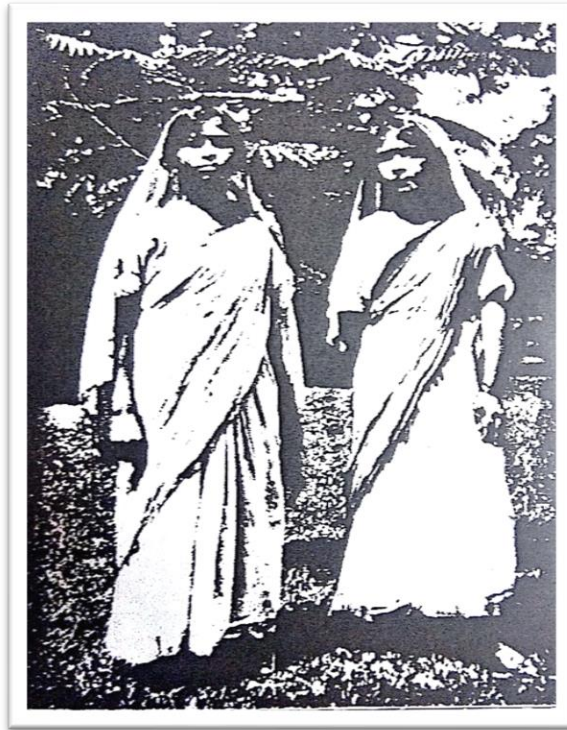


Figure 21: Assamese women, Source: E. Vickland's *Women of Assam* Year: Early 20th century or before

Figure 21, visualizes the emergence of the 'new women' who were gradually encouraged to attain education, and professional jobs, gradually asserting their visibility in the public sphere. In contrast to early colonial period, Assamese women

were primarily confined to the domestic sphere, women in the late 19th century (mainly from progressive families) were introduced to new ideas and thought primarily through education and were also concerned with their clothing. Women's dress was also influenced and inspired by their profession during the period. As depicted in Figure 21, the female doctors are seen wearing a new outfit consisting of a high-collared blouse and a *mekhela chador* worn in a manner resembling a sari for ease during their work and also to appear modest

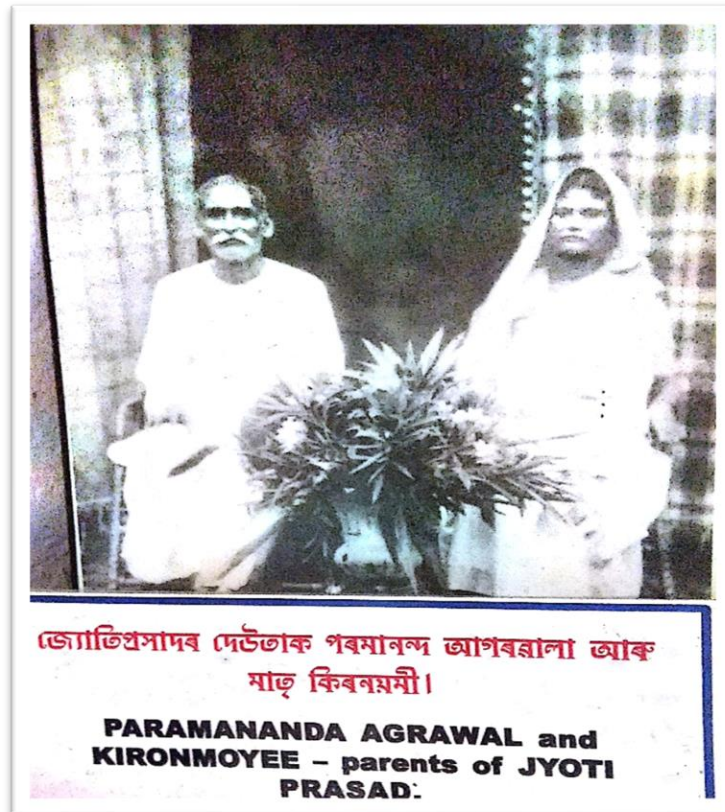


Figure 22: Paramananda Agrawal and Kironmoyee, Courtesy: Poki, Tezpur, Late 19th century.

Figure 22, depicts the photograph of noted Assamese filmmaker, writer, and poet Jyoti Prasad Agarwala's parents Paramananda Agrawal and Kironmoyee Agarwala. The Agarwala family although having their roots in Rajasthan, settled in the 1840s in Assam during the early British rule in Assam. The photograph remains significant

since in Assam it was initially the progressive families who were deeply enthusiastic in welcoming new thoughts and ideas in various ways, including their clothing styles (as it the initial display of modernity) to their fellow Assamese. Although Kironmoyee is seen wearing a *mekhela chador*, the inclusion of a blouse in the period remains a significant development. The use of a blouse in order to cover one's body was a mark of decency and modesty which was internalized by the British idea of being 'civilized'. Thus, until the end of the nineteenth century Assam, especially in terms of Assamese women's dress, the inclusion of blouse and sari were prominent changes that were witnessed.