Chapter 4

Locating the Change of Assamese Women's Dress: Gandhi and Post-Colonial India

Writings about the history of Assam, especially memoirs and books, have provided a wealth of information about the region's geography, flora and fauna, varied ethnic groups, and long-standing traditions, allowing for a comprehensive anthropological examination of the area. Although investigating the evolution of women's sartorial style across time proved challenging due to a scarcity of published studies on the subject, photography as a medium of communication and information revealed numerous dimensions of women's history and lifestyles during colonial times. When there were limited sources for research on sartorial styles, it was essential and valuable to use photographs as the primary data source. However, scrutinizing the photographs in a specific social and historical context provided a significant understanding of clothes' significance and meaning.

This chapter examines the relevance of critical socio-political events that contributed to the gradual and systematic modification of Assamese women's clothing. A series of events has led to a progressive alteration in the state's sartorial traditions, ranging from the advent of the British in the region to the integration of European components into Assamese dress and eventually embracing Pan-Indian clothes. The change in Assamese women's attire was the reflection of several ideologies that were embraced from time to time and the sartorial choices of people were aesthetically, politically, and culturally driven. The following are a series of events that significantly impacted the transformation of Assamese women's dress in the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century.

Photographic archives and personal collections (family albums) from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provided a comprehensive insight into women's status in Assamese society and their relationship to clothes and appearance. The visual data (photographs) thus acted as an essential source of evidence to

understand the role of clothing in women's lives, which is inextricably linked to the question of identity, gender, and their role in nationalistic discourse. In this scenario, the most prominent way to evaluate a photograph was provided by Barthes (1983), who proposed a two-level semiological analytical system for identifying denotations and connotations within photographs.

Figure 23: Jawahar Lal Nehru's visits to Assam in the 1950s, Source: Nehru Memorial, New Delhi

For instance, applying Barthes's theory of semiotics while understanding the photograph, in Fig: 10, Jawahar Lal Nehru's visits to Assam, the 1950s -

Denotations

The central focus of the image is the group of people (1) wearing caps who are present in the photograph, (2) who are folding their hands, (3) welcoming Prime Minister Nehru in the jeep (4) who are standing. This indicates a moment when Nehru visited Assam. The women are wearing their (5) traditional *mekhela chador*, indicating the clothing style of the period. However, more males in the picture are visible in contrast to women (6) attending the occasion. Contrasting clothing between men witnessed (7)

in terms of the length of *dhoti* (8) a few people wearing jackets (9) and wearing of shoes or remaining bare feet.

Connotations:

The photograph depicts Prime Minister Jawahar Nehru's visit to Assam following India's independence. The photograph of a group of individuals with their hands folded towards Nehru indicates that he is being recognized and appreciated due to his prominent position as the country's prime minister. They are all interested and enthusiastic, demonstrating that Nehru had enormous significance in the people's lives at that point in time. All the women are dressed in traditional *mekhela chadar*, which is a strong indication that women were strongly affiliated with traditional clothes until the middle of the twentieth century. This further illustrates the role of women in political engagement. Few men wear shoes, traditional *dhoti,* and kurta[27]'s covering most of their bodies. In contrast, others are barefoot, don't wear an upper garment, and wear a *dhoti* to the knees while partially adorning themselves with a cotton cloth. The relevance of the *Saraai*[28] and *Japi*[29] (worn by Nehru) as integral cultural artefacts in the photograph enhances their cultural significance and portrayal of the region. The interaction between Nehru and the children depicted in the photograph is significant. Another connotation, which is reconfigured with observations from one of our other data sources (an interview) when describing the photograph, is the role of caps, which primarily originated with their inception by Mahatma Gandhi during the Independence movement, and the significant role women played in making those caps (cotton/Khadi). Post-Independence, however, the significance of Gandhi's cap changed, and it took on a more emotional significance (due to the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948).

[27] a loose-fitting collarless shirt typically worn by people in South Asia
[28] Significant material culture of Assam. An object made of brass metal.
[29] *Japi* is typically a headwear worn by those who work in fields or reside in rural areas. However, it is currently used as a display and souvenir item and has become commodified.

4.1 Understanding Changes in Women's Clothing

In the early twentieth century, a handful of books were written about the women of Assam, providing insight into their lives. One such publication is Vickland's (1929) *Women of Assam*, in which photographs of women from the early twentieth century allow readers to examine the region's blending of different cultures, represent women's dress of the time, and provide valuable information about women's lives in Assamese society. In the same manner, photographs as a substantial data source strengthened the researcher's understanding of looking critically at women's dresses within a historical context. Changes in sartorial styles across time are evident in photographs, and the next chapter highlights clothing characteristics from a specific historical period (depicting a particular context). Therefore, the transformation of women's dress in response to socio-political events and the influence of Assamese modernity on clothing changes have been critically examined.

However, through the implementation of education during the colonial period, a new wave of aspiration and need was felt among a few affluent Assamese households who questioned the necessity of female education and urged women to pursue higher education. Women's status, too, changed significantly since the beginning of the twentieth century, bringing a new meaning to the subject of women's status. A new generation of women was imagined during this time, as women broke with tradition and pursued careers as doctors, teachers, and nurses to express their independence from the domestic realm and challenge the status quo. Women's emancipation did not develop consistently across Assam, and in several places (incredibly remote areas), women continue to be excluded from primary education and assigned gender-specific responsibilities. Women from disadvantaged and vulnerable backgrounds could not enrol themselves in formal education due to social stigmas and widespread suspicion of English-language education, leaving them doubly marginalized.

4.1.1 Early Assamese Clothing

According to historical records, the earliest and most common type of clothing in pre-colonial Assam was unstitched and wrapped garments around their bodies with tucks and folds. The *dhoti* was the most prevalent form of clothing for Assamese males, but it was worn differently by people from different social classes. A special scarf *(cheleng*[30]*)* was also worn by upper-class Assamese men made of both silk and cotton to cover their bodies in addition to the regular *dhoti*. In context, women in Assam wore both the upper and lower garments. The *mekhela*, *riha*[31] and *cheleng* in particular, did not mature into three-piece costumes until the eighteenth century (Barua, 1951).

Figure 24: 1940s Tezpur, Assam, Courtesy: D Hazarika

[30] *Cheleng chador* is an upper garment used by both man and woman in Assam. It is worn mainly during religious and special ceremonies. It is similar to shawl, usually made of cotton fabric.
[31] Another significant female upper garment is the *riha*, which is worn usually by married women. However, in contemporary times it is used It was made of *muga* or *endi* silk. Wearing *riha* with *mekhela* and *chador* by women was a mark of modesty and decency in Assamese culture.

However, a single piece of fabric or a *mekhela*, which covered the full body from chest to knee, was worn by women from the periphery who came into contact with the British much later in the nineteenth century. Although Assamese women's clothing is always referred to as *chador, riha*, or *mekhela* in existing literature, women also dressed in a '*methoni*' before the shift. As mentioned by the informant, Hemprava Gogoi (90 years), "When I think of the past, I remember my great-grandmother wearing *methoni* with no blouses and petticoat. Clothing (particularly *mekhela* or a *chador*) was woven entirely at home. There was no such thing as a blouse back then, and individuals would cover their bodies with a chador if necessary. They stayed in a *methoni* at home, however". However, later with *methoni* woman started covering their body with a *chador* as in Figure 25. This reveals the inconsistencies in the "development" and adaptation of women's attire, as well as the evolution of women's dress across time and Assam. Weaker communication and transportation, education, market, and other variables, may have slowed the pace of modernization in these distant and far-flung locations, where no traces of British influence could be found until the early twentieth century.

Figure 25: Women in her late 80s, wearing *methoni* with a *chador* covering her body, (Tezpur, 1960s)

The British envisioned and demonstrated how Assam might be a tremendous hub for earning profits from its rich underutilized resources, and they began constructing an infrastructure to support the unique capitalist setup in the region colluding with bankers, traders, clerks, lawyers, and cheap labourers from other Indian states. Due to the influx of different experts from various professions, the isolated society of Assam was exposed to a significant number of people from all over the world, who brought with them new perspectives, skills and ideas. It was at this period that professionals were observed to be monopolizing their expertise and seizing the entirely new set-up in Assamese society. Some of these individuals, such as traders who became agents of British trading houses in Calcutta and worked for their metropolitan counterparts in London, as well as clerks, doctors, and lawyers who benefited from the early introduction of English education and British-Indian administrative systems, monopolized government jobs and professions (Guha, 2016). Thus, Assamese intellectuals felt that they were being oppressed and that they were a minority in the newly constituted administrative province where their participation was minimal as compared to those occupying other Indian provinces. This reawakened a sense of identity crisis and discrimination among the Assamese; this sense of fear continued to haunt the Assamese later in the twentieth century with the advent of social movements claiming Assamese indigenous identity.

4.1.2 Changes in Traditional Weaving Culture

Another notable site to explore was Assam's handloom/weaving tradition, which has declined in popularity and innovation while having a huge impact on people's sartorial style since the late 1870s. The influences of modernity have put a strain on Assam's traditional weaving traditions. The craft of weaving, on the other hand, was traditionally practiced by women from all castes in all houses (Guha, 2015). Cotton cloth, as in other areas of India, has remained the primary material used by the people for their clothing as well as for their household items, which are available in a range of fabrics and styles in Assam as well. Assam's diversity of tribes and ethnic groups

contributed to the availability of a wide range of materials and ornamentation for clothing creation. While analyzing the weaving culture of Assam, women were enthralled by the craft of weaving. Weaving is an important part of Assamese culture that should not be disregarded. Several renowned people lauded Assam's weaving tradition during their tour. During his visit to Assam, Mahatma Gandhi said "Assamese women weave dreams on their looms" (Goswami, 2000, 53). It had a profound effect on the lives of women and was inextricably related to them. Weaving was both a part of Assamese girls' education and a part of women's daily domestic responsibilities (Samman, 1897). Weaving was so important in those days that during marriage proposals, women were questioned if they had learned to weave. A woman who can weave was regarded as "ideal" in Assamese culture during those days. The representation of an "ideal woman" and their contribution to an activity that occupies a significant position in a cultural context tend to be critical in a patriarchal society where women play a crucial role in the transmission of cultural values to future generations. While highlighting the importance of weaving in the lives of people of those days and these days in Assam, Satyaprava Gogoi (102 years, Freedom Fighter) says:

> "Handlooms have always been found in Assamese homes. Weaving was an important part of a woman's life since she made clothing for her loved ones at special events such as weddings, Bihu, and other celebrations. Except for *chemise*[32] and blouses, we used to weave our own clothes (recalling the 1930s). I began weaving at the early age of ten, but as I reached puberty (12 years), it was customary to wear the *chador*, *riha*, and *mekhela* during those days. However, I could recollect a case where the rearing of certain silk was tied to a specific Assamese community. *Pat muga*, for example, was reared entirely by the '*Jugi'* community."

[32] A dress (specially made of cotton) that hangs straight from the shoulders and provides a uniform shape. A form of modern undergarment or attire for women that was introduced to Assam in the 20th century.

As the British strengthened their power in the late nineteenth century, Assamese elites and groups of educated persons wore attire that blended both traditional and western influences. In certain ways, the British were effective in influencing the populace through 'soft power' (Nye, 2005), where the locals began to embrace change that was more contemporary and sophisticated than the traditional way of life. During British rule, they were in charge of not only the country's political and economic development but also its social and cultural orientation. The modern advances in society (transportation, education, communication, etc.) impressed many Assamese intellectuals, who hoped for a new progressive Assam. However, Assam's economy suffered as a result of British trade and policy.

The European notion that traditional Assamese dresses were woefully "inadequate" and "outdated" piqued their interest in modernising them in a more structured manner following "modern" sartorial preferences. Those who worked for the British administration, as well as those who came into contact with them, gradually began to imitate their mannerisms and practices. The Europeans, on the other hand, tried to isolate themselves from their subordinates in every part of their lives to maintain their honour and superiority. They feared that the rapid embrace of western clothing by the public at large was threatening their cultural identity and that keeping a distinction between their attire and rituals would enable them to maintain their self-esteem as a cultural superiority in society. Briggs' description exemplifies the threat of losing their identity as well as their status because of the rate at which the Indians were experimenting with European costumes. The process of assimilation thus became extremely critical to European thinking to their future prospects. Briggs states:

> ……yet we should preserve the European; for to adopt their [Indian] manner is a departure from the very principle of which every impression of our superiority, that rests upon good foundations, is founded…… The European officer who assumes native manners and usage may lease a few individuals, who are flattered or profited by his departure from the habits of his country;

> but even with these, familiarity will not be found to increase respect, and the adoption of such a course will be sure to sink him in the estimation of the mass of the community, both European and native, among whom he resides (Briggs, 1828, cited in Tarlo, 1996, 36)

Initially, the British viewed the Assamese as highly primitive, uncivilised, and unsophisticated in their beliefs and behaviours. Traditional Assamese society, with its cultural traits, rituals, beliefs, and primitive mode of living, became a topic of reference for Europeans. Ward (1884), in her book *Glimpse of Assam*, describes the state of affairs and the changes that she experienced in Assam during the period of British occupation. Drawing attention to Assamese sartorial practises and their progressive evolution throughout the time (especially the nineteenth-century), S.R. Ward (1884) writes:

> The people are primitive in their habits and costumes; the introduction of English society affects but slightly the costume of the men. Those who hold Government appointments wear shoes and stockings, some wear trousers, with the native style of jacket, ……some young men wear the entire English costume……Women keep strictly to the style of past centuries, which is simple, economical, and well adapted to their mode of life and the climate (1884, 36). "The native costume of men is a strip of white cloth or silk so arranged around the waist, that the folds flow to the knees; a long-sleeved tight-fitting jacket and about five yards of thin white muslin around the head completes the costume" (1884,37). The women's costume is a skirt cut like a pillowcase, about the same width, open at each end; sometimes they are made of cotton cloth, but usually all wear the native silk. The top is drawn tightly around the waist, and the twist of the fold tucked in, keeps it on, without another fastening; a short-sleeved jacket is worn, just meeting the skirt at the waist; a silk scarf is passed over the left shoulder, then around the waist, the ends of which have a gay border hanging in front. When going out, a white

> sheet of cloth or muslin three yards long and one and a half wide, called a *'Chudda'*, is placed simply over the head, one end flowing, the other tossed over the left shoulder…….. Nearly every family has its loom placed under the eaves of the house, where the women busy themselves between the morning and evening meals, weaving silk and cotton cloth garments for the family, and often some pieces, in addition, to sell to pay their taxes (1884,37).

Ward's depiction of Assamese clothing captures the essence of supremacy by demonstrating how clothing was used as a means of expression to represent a hierarchy by thinking of western garb to be more current and physically appealing than native clothing. Apart, from cultural imprinting, they desired to be militarily and culturally more powerful than their colonial subjects. The Europeans devised a plan to evict the indigenous people and 'civilise' the newly colonised land. As a result, clothing symbolizes fabricated implications as well as the hierarchical power system that exists and thrives amongst cultures and countries.

When it comes to clothing, people of different social strata in Assamese culture always maintained a clear divide to establish an unquestionable hierarchy. The difference in clothing between upper- and lower-class people across time is reflected in the representation and description of their apparel in the existing literature. The contrast in clothing between the upper and middle classes contributed to the construction of an image in specific socioeconomic settings when a person's dress determined their social standing and rank in a community. As an example, farmers wore their loincloth *dhoti* to their ankles or above them, but upper-class men wore their loincloth *dhoti* to their ankles or above them. The distinction in sartorial style revealed the presence of a hierarchical structure that emphasizes individual lives, associating them with dignity, prestige, and honour. In some ways, this is how a person came to build a distinct identity between their self-description and the construction of otherness that they faced.

Even among Assamese women, variances in attire might distinguish women of different classes, ages, marital statuses, and so on. Earlier, women of the wealthier and

‘respectable’ families were supposed to wear nothing except silk. To wear cotton was nothing less than a disgrace to them (Vickland, 1928, 117). There is a representation of the symbolic worth of ‘silk’ against ‘cotton’ in clothes, with its significance changing over time. In contrast to the upper class, who wore rare and expensive silk loincloths, the lower class wore commonly accessible and inexpensive woven cotton loincloths, creating a clear divide between the two classes at first glance. Clothing had an important role in defining the qualities of 'superiority,' which referred to anything advanced and beautiful, and 'inferiority,' which referred to something traditional and inelegant. Although clothing's primary purpose is to cover and protect the body, it can also be associated with a specific identity in terms of class, age, caste, and so on. The disparity in clothing between the upper and middle classes contributed to the construction of an image in specific socioeconomic settings, where a person's clothing determined their social status as well as their economic level in society. Women from the upper class, for example, wore only silk or *muga*, whereas women from the lower class wrapped a *methoni* or cotton cloth until late nineteenth-century Assam. As a result, modernity was clearly connected with urbanity, and women's clothing preferences progressed in tandem with changes in social structure, with the addition of progressive enhancement and decorum to their already established traditional lifestyle. Those considered backward and traditional in the countryside, on the other hand, dressed according to context.

4.1.3 Stitched Clothes

As per popular belief, Muslims were first to introduce stitched clothing to India during the mediaeval period (Tarlo, 1996). Previously, individuals wore largely draped garments that suited the temperature and served their purpose. When stitched clothing was introduced, the distinction between Hindu and Muslim cultures became apparent as Hindu clothing was unstitched clothing that was draped and tucked, while Muslim clothing was tailored and stitched (Cohn, 1996). Furthermore, with the repeated invasion of one dynasty by another during the age of Sultans and Mughal Emperors,

“protecting women” became increasingly crucial in these sensitive times. Considering women's safety, Amir Khusao advised his daughter:

> “Hold yourself in the haven of safety; turn your face to the wall, your back to the door. The only way was to ensure the seclusion of women and to strengthen the fortification of their dress to avoid the gaze of those who were outside the social orbit” (Biswas, 1985, 18).

The Hindus, on the other hand, contemplated reconstructing everything that may protect their women from the exploitation gaze. As a result, the *choli*, a tight-fitting, half-sleeved dress, was born (Biswas, 1985). In terms of stitched clothes, it is also thought that the *choli* is the earliest of its kind in history of Indian women dress. Abbe Dubois was the first European to conduct a comprehensive examination of Hindu customs and manners, reporting the addition of a new item of clothing to Indian attire. Dubois (1817) states, “This (bodice), I am told, is a modern innovation, and borrowed from the Mohammedans” (Dubois, 1817, cited in Biswas, 1985, 30). Although the new elements initially became the taste of the upper class, they eventually began to wear them in their daily lives.

With regards to the female body, women's clothing has always dealt with a protective mechanism, where she is intended to conceal herself from the gaze in her daily lives. Women's relationships with clothes have always been a matter of 'consciousness,' with a perpetual conflict between their choice and their freedom to wear in their daily lives. In some manner, the issue of cultural appropriateness is intertwined with a woman's tendency to adhere to the norms of her culture. A patriarchal society has traditionally relegated women to subservient roles in their professional and educational lives. With today's shifting social norms and greater access to education and career opportunities, women are now breaking free of this constraint. However, women are also subjected to the ‘male gaze' (Mulvey, 1989) where they are often judged by the things they wear, which are seen as objects of desire.

Stitched clothing was introduced to Assam by the Muslim community, and it was not until European contact that it became popular and widespread. For the first time, the

Ahom Kings and high officials were drawn to the stitched clothing introduced by Muslims, who intended to replicate the robes of Mughal Kings and portray royalty by redefining their dress. The region's minority Muslim population, who were also skilled tailors, introduced a fresh twist to Assam's dress culture by introducing stitched clothes. Ahmed (1969) writes,

> "আহোম মহাৰজাই যেতিয়া চিলাই কৰা পোচাক পৰিধান কৰিবলৈ ললে, তেতিয়া দর্জিৰ আৱশ্যক হল। 'স্বর্গদেৱে' তেতিয়া মুছলিম দর্জি অনাই ৰাজধানীত স্থাপন কৰিলে। তেতিয়াৰ পৰাই চৌগা, চাপকণ, কুর্তা ডা-ডাঙৰীয়া সকলে ব্যৱহাৰ কৰিবলৈ ধৰিলে। (Ahmed,1969,165)

> "*Tailors began to arrive in Assam after the Ahom rulers began to wear stitch fabric. Swargadeu*[33] *introduced Muslim tailors to the state, and chauga chapkan*[34]*, and kurta became popular among the Assamese of a certain social level".*

Apart from sewing garments, the Assamese gained acquainted with new components of the Muslim population, which later became an important part of Assamese culture. Ahmed writes:

> এই দর্জি সকলেই অসমীয়া সর্বসাধাৰণ প্রযাক চৌগা-চাপকন,কুর্তা-পায়জামা দি দিয়াত অসমীয়া সাজ-পোছাকৰূপে কেতিয়াবাই এই পোছাকসমুহ অসম দেশত বিয়পি পৰিল।
>
> এই মুছলমান পৰিয়াল কেইটাৰ যোগেদিয়েই আমাৰ অসমীয়া সমাজত বিভিন্ন ধৰণৰ সামগ্রী, যেনে- জোতা, আতৰ, গোলাপ জল, নলিচা, ইজাৰ বান্দ,

[33] Kings of Ahom dynasty
[34] *Chauga* and *chapkan*, a Mughal style shirts worn by the king, ministers, and other high-ranking officials. Additionally, the *chauga*, a robe drapery, was a mark of aristocracy and was worn over the *chapkan.*

পিকদানী, আতৰদানী, গালিচা , চামিয়ানাৰ (চন্দ্রতাপ) ব্যবহাৰ হবলৈ ধৰে। (Sattar,1966 ,225)

"These tailors eventually brought chauga-chapkan, kurta-pyjamas to the Assamese general populace, and so stitch clothing became part of Assamese culture. In our Assamese community, a range of things were introduced through these Muslim families, including shoes, perfumes, rose water, tubes, carpets etc."

Stitched clothing's popularity in Assam surged only when the British took control of the province. A common concern for technology as a means of articulating desired modernity was a British pioneering remark on the role of technology in imagining and portraying imperial power. “Machines became ‘the measure of men,’ the standard by which Europe came to understand its uniqueness and superiority, and, by contrast, interpreted the backwardness and inferiority even of civilizations, like India and China, once held in high regard” (Arnold, 2013,15). Technology, as the epitome of modernity, gradually became increasingly infatuated with and attracted the middle class.

In the early twentieth century, a considerable technical revolution was already taking place in rural India, such as the use of rice mills, sewing machines, and other innovations. With the arrival of the sewing machine, India saw a wide spectrum of changes in its clothing styles as an impact on the utility of the sewing machine. This had a significant impact on people's inventiveness, as well as the production of western-styled clothing such as shirts, cholis (blouses), and *salwar kameez*[35], as well as products such as bed covers, curtains, stitch bags, and shoes. The primacy of technological innovation in the twentieth century, on the other hand, gradually shifted the position of the *darji* (tailor), who has remained a familiar figure in colonial India's

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iconography. *Darji* began their vocation with a few basic tools such as thread, needle, and scissors, which were eventually joined by a sophisticated sewing machine that found its way into people's daily lives in the late nineteenth century. In Assam, however, *darji* were primarily Muslims who relocated to various sections of the state after independence. As informant Durlov Buragohain (92) said, "In our village, there were one Muslim *darji* who started tailoring shirts and pants after independence. Since Independence, even in rural areas like ours, adopting western stitched clothing grew fashionable, since the clothing became a commercial commodity. Also, with Assamese men joining government employment as well as a uniform code of dressing in school and offices, the presence of stitched clothes in Assamese society became significant at that time (post-1960s)". Initially, Europeans encouraged native employees working under British authority, to dress in European attire (in the form of uniform). But it needs to be mentioned that many (Assamese) were already excited to wear the new sartorial style that gave the impression of wealth and sophistication although in a partial way, by wearing a combination of Assamese and European attire.

The gradual shift in clothing among some affluent and progressive Assamese households expressed their enthusiasm for the British project. Somehow, many Assamese intelligentsias were deeply impressed by the European perception of progress and their perception of being civilized. Initially, men of the progressive and wealthiest family who went for higher education mostly to Bengal, erstwhile Calcutta and abroad adopted new cultural attributes during their stay. For example, since his return from Calcutta in 1845, Anandaram Barooah used trousers, a hat and shoes whenever he visited Europeans or went out for a walk (Hopkinson,1867, cited in Barpujari et al., 1977,126). By and large, the indigenous communities of Assam (irrespective of whether they got converted) accepted the Western style of dresses gradually.

4.2 Linkage Between Assam and Bengal

The linkage between Assam and Bengal remained strong during the British rule in Assam. Though most of the changes may be explained in terms of industrialization and Western influence, the impact of Bengali society on ideas, lifestyles, beliefs and education cannot be overlooked. The impact of the Bengal Renaissance on Assam is to be understood in a given historical context to analyse the impact of Bengal society in Assam. In the 1880s, an increasing number of urban Indians mainly in Calcutta and Bombay began to wear European attires and many successful wealthy and well-educated Indian males took to wearing European dress in public (Cohn, 1996, 132). There were several notable accomplishments reported in the Samachar Darpan on July 30, 1931, by a few Assamese gentlemen. The paper further states:

> ….. The distinguished persons of the Province of Assam maintain contact with every affair in and about Bengal through the newspapers of this Province. In no district of Bengal are found so many subscribers to our newspaper as are found amongst the people of Assam……. Moreover, while from about half the districts of Bengal no letter is sent and appears in the newspaper, hardly a week passes without a letter being sent from Assam to us or other newspaper editors of this Province (Guha, 2015, 250)

This was the start of Assam's awakening as a result of its achievement in the pursuit of knowledge. A group of educated Assamese developed an admiration and interest for Bengali literature and language. They also expressed positive feelings about one particular cultural assimilation. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan (a pioneer in the modern age of enlightenment in Assam) for example, counselled his cousin Gunabhiram Barua to not only acquire English throughout his education in Calcutta but also to embrace and assimilate into a new cultural setting in the same way that Anandaram did. During his time in Calcutta, for example, Anandaram removed his traditional silk

dhoti and shirt and began wearing Bengali traditional *chapkan-pajama*[36] (Chowdhury, 1996, 40).

For administrative convenience, the British used Bengali as a medium of language in schools and courts for a long time. This led the Assamese to build a connection with their fellow Bengali at the first stage. The Bengali people's advantage of English knowledge and experience with the British administration made it simpler for the British to bring them to Assam as clerks/officials to assist them in administration. They eventually dominated government positions and services, causing a crisis among Assamese educated elites, who were reduced to a minority in the state. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, newly founded towns were either glorified villages or permanent colonies for government personnel and traders, with non-indigenous people making up the vast majority (Guha, 2016, 21). Since the socio-cultural and educational conditions in Assam were severely impoverished at the time of the British annexation, the Bengali who had been partially exposed to modernity served as an ideal example for the Assamese neo-educated during the British era (Abraham, 1973, cited in Chowdhury, 1994). With their entrance to Assam, the Bengal people brought with them contemporary concepts, etiquette, and a style of dress influenced by the British.

Women from progressive Assamese families had the chance to pursue higher education in Calcutta and abroad in the late nineteenth century. It was made easier by their shared family history, which had exposed them to western education and modern life. This in turn motivated many young ladies to change their appearances and dressing styles as a result of living in a new environment with modern features. Getting formal education outside Assam for lower-class impoverished women, on the other hand, was unimaginable at that particular period.

Blouses were viewed as a status symbol for working women, especially in Europe, and they also conveyed a woman's wealth and elegance. As a result, the sight of bare-

[36] *Chapkan* is similar to men kurta (upper garment), whereas *pajamas* is the lower garment (like trousers, made of cotton or silk fabric) of Bengal.

chested Indian women wandering the streets shocked the Europeans. The blouse under the *sari,* with its many sleeve structures and necklines, made colonial British and Indian fashions resemble one other at times. The *sari* and blouse (Victorian era) were most likely introduced to Assam by Bengalis. The Assamese eventually grew familiar with different cultures as a result of well-known educated personalities' links with Bengal's progressive families, as well as interaction with Bengali people who came to work under British rule. According to reports, Bengalis introduced the sari and blouse to them when they arrived in Assam. In the early twentieth century, the blouse became popular among rich and educated Assamese families. Later on, though, Assamese women learn to sew for themselves and made their blouses and other basic stitching items. The following is quoted from Vickland (1928), who describes an excellent Assamese woman weaving tradition and its merger with modern culture as follows:

> *"*Assamese women, as a class, are skilful weavers, and they favour the cream-coloured, hand-woven silks for the garments to be worn on dress-up occasions. These are elaborately designed in solid gold thread woven into fabric. The Assamese costume seems to be a compromise between Burman and Bengali (…….). The jacket and skirt seen to savour of Burma and *riha,* or shoulder-and-hip drape, an adaptation of Bengali saree." (Vickland, 1928, 19).

Vickland also mentioned the use of *sari* by Assamese women but the style of draping it was not alike the Bengali women. And in terms of the cost of the *sari,* it was much cheaper than the traditional one. She also mentions that the *sari* was brought into fashion by the coming of the Bengalis into the province.

The British brought with them modern ideas and knowledge, as well as a few roles in the enhancement that the people of the region valued, such as the abolition of slavery in 1843. (Guha, 2016, 9). However, their policies and legislation gradually weakened traditional Assamese society, to develop a regional economic basis only for their profit. Photographs collected delineate the transitional phase of the Assamese period, during which clothing underwent a transformation from a conventional to a western or semi-traditional touch in the late nineteenth century, respectively. Due to frequent

exposure to the public realm for educational, administrative, and general activities in Assam and other regions of India, men's clothing underwent a rapid transformation. Women's longstanding preoccupation with culture, as well as late exposure to contemporary schooling and the public realm, hampered the effect of European style and etiquette on women. In the mid-nineteenth century, the modern education system altered the oriental mind and enlightened the people's inner consciousness. Although the experience was limited and acquired by a certain class of people in which the majority of the deprived class remained marginalized. As a passionate promoter of female education, Anandaram Phukan, for example, arranged for a private tutor to instruct his wife and other ladies. He also hired a private tutor to give his daughter Padmavati Devi Phookanani a formal education (Chowdhury,1996). Assimilation of culture as a result of the creation of jobs under British authority, education, marriage relations, and other reasons strengthen ties with Bengal, encouraging individuals to adopt new progressive views and behaviours as a way of breaking free from the traditional society.

While analysing the change of women dress, Sahityarathi Lakshiminath Bezbaroa, who dominated the Assamese literary landscape for nearly half a century and dedicated himself to restoring the lost glory of the Assamese language and literature, as well as his wife Pragyasundari Devi, who was Rabindranath Tagore's niece has a significant role to play. She transformed a regular kitchen into a hub of innovation and creativity, discovering and documenting Bengal's and Assam's ancient culinary traditions in the early twentieth century. In 1902, she released her first cookbook, '*Amish O Niramish Ahar,*' which was the first of its sort in Bengali. Later, she also wrote an Assamese cookbook introducing Assamese cuisines. Her upbringing in a progressive, liberal household is likely to have had a big impact on her ideas.

The role of Pragyasundari Devi may be significant as belonging to an elite and progressive Tagore family, they were the first to suggest a redefinition of Indian dress in Bengal. The Tagore family was the cradle of the Bengal Renaissance and was heavily influenced by western culture. Almost all of modern Bengali culture's creative

principles and aesthetic norms may be traced back to the Tagore family. The appreciation of Europeans may be seen through the eyes of Bengali intellectuals and the middle class. When Dwarakanath Tagore[37] visited England for the first time in 1842, "he offered to the ever-remembered Queen, among other exquisite gifts, Chinese silk as rare objects" (Baruah,1965, cited in Chowdhury, 1994, 2). Later, the form of adoration became more serious in its religious features, with Indian idols fashioned to mimic the queen. The royal crown influenced the design of tiara in Assam (Chowdhury, 1994). For example, when Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan returned from Calcutta, he carried a gold *tiara* to worship his family's deity *gopola*. The crown was renamed the "crown of Her Royal Majesty the Queen." (Baruah, 1971, cited in Chowdhury, 1994, 2). In Figure 26, Pragyasundari Devi posing with Lakshminath Bezbaroa, is seen wearing a crown and a *sari* that resembles western gowns. The Tagore family, who were seen embracing new advances in their daily lives, were clearly greatly influenced by western progressive ideas. They were extremely excited about English education and their vision towards scientific study, thus encouraging others to do the same.

While analysing Pragyasundari's contribution in the shift of women dress in Assam, the role of Jnanadanandini (Pragyasundari's aunt) remain significant. When Jnanadanandini Devi Tagore arrived in Bengal, she brought a new beautiful style of sari adornment, influenced by the Parsi women of Bombay, this was later imitated by other members of Tagore family and the Brahmikas (Deb, 2010). Jnanadanandini even popularized the Bombay style of wearing the sari. According to BBC news (2014) Jnanadanandini Devi was reportedly denied admittance to a club during the British Raj because she was wearing a sari over her bare breasts.

This event had a significant impact on her personal life. "Jnanadanandini also began the practice of wearing petticoats, chemises, blouses, and jackets with sarees" (Deb, 2010, 41). A later variation of lace-adorned blouses and jackets became popular in Bengal. Rabindranath Tagore writes:

[37] Grandfather of Rabindranath Tagore.

"Cut pieces of silk from English tailoring shops along with bits of the net and cheap lace were to stitch blouses for women" (Deb,2010,42)

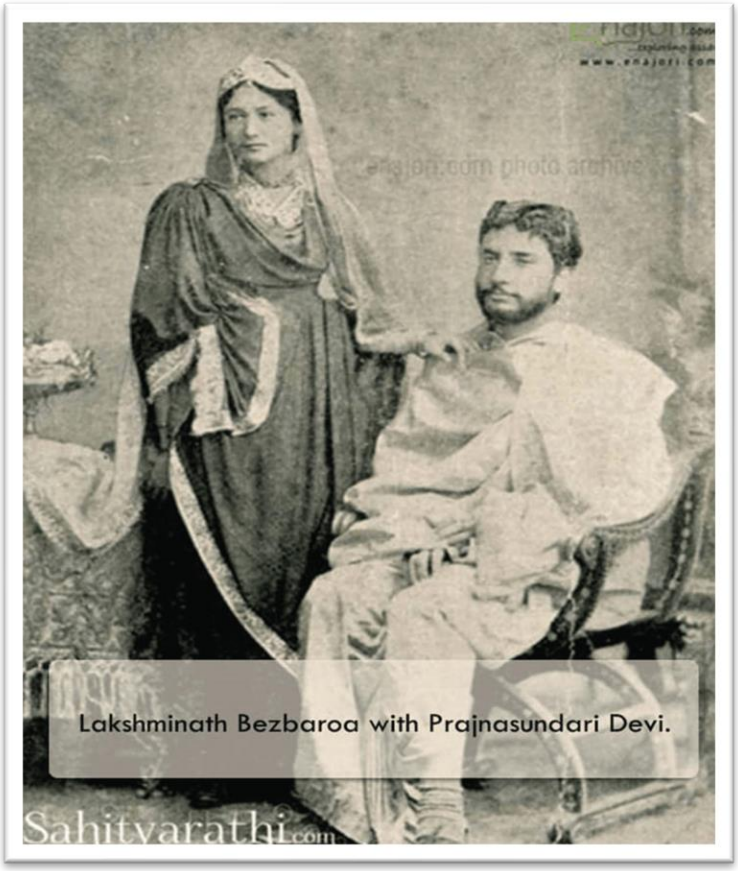


Figure 26: Lakshminath Bezbaroa with Pragyasundari Devi, Courtesy: Himjyoti Talukdar Year: late 19th century, Assam

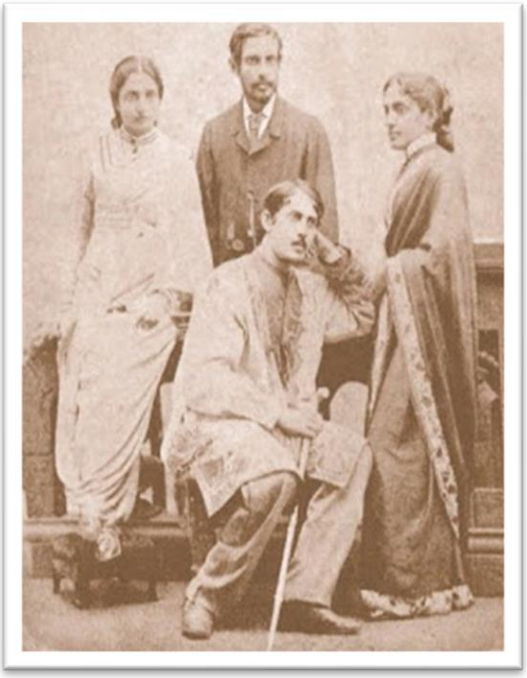


Figure 27: Standing L-R: Jnanadanandini Devi, Satyendranath Tagore, Kadambari Devi[38]. Seated: Jyotirindranath Tagore[39], Year: 1860s

Source: http://sesquicentinnial.blogspot.com/2010/08/jyotirindranath-tagore-contd-1.html

Hailing from the illustrious Thakur-Bari '*Jorasanko*', Pragyasundari's contribution to modernizing women's dress in Assam remains significant. The introduction of the *sari* remains a prominent product of Bengal. "Another fashion of wearing the sari was observable when the British government flooded the country with foreign cloth like the French chiffons, crepe-de-chines, English taffetas, and Japanese silks" (Biswas,1985,34) The *sari* has remained a popular Bengali material culture since its introduction to Assam. Early British connections with Bengal resulted in the introduction of blouses, jackets, shoes, and socks to Assam, as well as a cultural influence from Europe. *Sari's* became immensely popular among progressive Assamese women in the early twentieth century and were widely accepted in parts of Assam.

[38] Kadambari Devi was Jyotirindranath Tagore's wife.
[39] Jyotirindranath Tagore, Satyendranath Tagore , and Rabindranath Tagore were siblings.

Figure 28: Lakshminath Bezbaroa with wife Pragyasundari Devi and their daughter (late 19th -early 20th century), Courtesy: Avinibesh Sharma, Year: late 19th Century, Assam

4.3 Impact of Brahmo Samaj

Brahmo Samaj, founded by Raja Ram Mohan on August 20, 1828, was associated with the principal goal of social reform movements in India, with a focus on social freedom and cultural improvement among Hindu women (Heimsath, 1964). During the 1860s, the beliefs of the Brahmo Samaj spread throughout North-East India, particularly in Assam. Ram Mohan's ideals and Brahmo Samaj's activities greatly influenced the educated Assamese youngsters who, during their time in Calcutta, were to bring about intellectual and social improvements in Assam. Brahmo Samaj and its social reforms significantly impacted prominent Assamese intellectuals such as Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua, Lakshminath Bezbaroa, and Jagannath Baruah. Apart from this group, many others were affected by the Brahmo's views despite never visiting Calcutta. Hem Chandra Barua, Braja Sundari Devi, and Ananda Ram Goswami were Brahmo devotees who worked selflessly for a better

society (Banerjee, 2006,). In the late nineteenth century, the impact of the Bengal Renaissance was felt most strongly in Assam in which "seeds of socio-religious and cultural reforms on the Brahmo Samaj lines were sown by such pioneers like Padmahas Goswami and Gunabhiram Barua" (Guha, 1976, cited in Chattopadhyay, 1988).

In Assam, significant changes were seen as a result of the Brahmo Samaj's influence, with people imitating their attire as enthusiastic followers, in addition to societal improvements. However, a few famous progressive families in Assam were at the height of their inquiry at the time, and they were greatly drawn to Brahmo Samaj ideals and European culture in general. Few progressive Assamese houses embraced Brahmo women's sartorial styles, including blouses and shoes, with European influences, as a result of the Brahmo Samaj's impact in Assam, as seen by images acquired Figure 29. The image of the Chaliha family is highly significant in the context of Assam when analysing the effect of Brahmo Samaj on clothing in the late nineteenth century. All the women in the picture are wearing *mekhela chador*, however, women in extreme left are wearing a *sari*. Along with their blouses, Assamese women began to cover their bodies more modestly with *chador* and began to use veils more frequently, as depicted in the photos. The women seated on the left, on the other hand, appear to be wearing *sari's*, high neck blouses, and shoes, all of which were popular in Assam in the late nineteenth century. The picture depicts that during the early twentieth century, Assam was already accepting Pan-Indian attire and western elements such as blouses and shoes in everyday life (although initially by few progressive families).

Figure 29: The Chaliha family of Sivasagar (former Chief Minister, Bimala Prasad Chaliha is seen sitting to the extreme left) of the early twentieth century. Source: Vintage Assam, Avinibesh Sharma

According to Deb (2010), the Brahmo Samaj pioneered the usage of opaque *sari's* as opposed to the formerly widespread thin translucent fabrics. However, since writings suggest a deep connection between the Tagore families and the women of Brahmo Samaj, where the former (Tagore families) remained deeply influenced by European culture and its sartorial ideals, the gradual change in Assamese women's clothing can be credited to both to the Brahmo Samaj as well as European influence. The ladies (Brahmo Samaj) even imitated the style of wearing *sari's* popularized by Jnanadanandini Devi, known as the 'Bombay Style' (Deb, 2010, 41).

Although clothing became an increasingly important marker of identity in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Assam, the variation in Assamese women's clothing, became central signs and sources of visual classification based on class, status and gender. Along with that the idea of 'modesty' became widely associated with women's clothing and spread to the interior parts of Assam, where women

internalized certain dos and don'ts' about women's clothing. Such as, until the 1970s women in general covered their body with a *chador* or *sari*'s in a way that no parts of their body were seen. But in interior parts of Assam, women wearing *methoni* started to wear blouses or covered their upper body with a *gamosa*[40] *or chador*. While discussing the use of *methoni*, one informant Purnima Gogoi (85) said:

> "I recalled my mother's habit of wearing *methoni* at home until the 1980s. Later, anytime she went outside, we insisted on her wearing a *chador-mekhela* and blouse, which became popular in the 1980s and were widely available in weekly markets. During those days in public, wearing *methoni* did not feel appropriate."

The large influx of people and groups in the region undoubtedly altered the socio-cultural component of Assamese society, resulting in the wide range of clothing options accessible in the twentieth century. Whereas, cultural assimilation had another greater impact on women's lives, as evidenced by the way women dressed throughout Assam's history. Women have gone through numerous stages of cultural appropriation in terms of clothes, from admiring their traditional *mekhela-chador* or *methoni* to becoming extremely concerned with clothing. Assamese women from progressive households had access to formal education through missionary schools and private tutors by the end of the nineteenth century. Besides girls from progressive households, a small number of girls from middle-class families attended mission school and learned basic European etiquette and lifestyles during their education. Missionary teachers introduced blouses, underskirts, and cotton jackets to mission school girls to conform to European ideas of civilised dressing.

With its setting in the mid-nineteenth century, when the challenges of tradition and modernity collide in Assamese culture, Tillottoma Misra's novel *Swarnalata* is a beautiful blend of history and fiction that will delight readers of all ages. Misra

[40] *Gamosa* an traditional scarf is the unique identity of Assamese society. The Assamese culture holds this small piece of fabric in high regard and makes extensive use of it. Gamosa is a one-of-a-kind cloth item with multiple applications.

(1991/2011) describes in her book the role of Missionary schools in the development of women's attire in Assam. She writes:

> There was a change in Tora's dress and manners after she joined the Normal School. She now began to wear a chador wrapped over the coloured mekhela and the cotton jacket, a sign of her growing up…….The chador would be carefully held in place on her shoulder with a brooch. This manner of wearing the chador was introduced by the girls in the mission school…. Unmarried girls usually wore the *riha* and the *mekhela*. Only the married women would wrap a chador over their *rihas* while going out…The girls from poor families didn't wear any blouses. They would tie the mekhela over their breasts and wrap a *gamosa* over that. However, Christian girls, even when they came from the Mission School used to wear cotton blouses which they called "jackets" and they covered themselves modestly with chadors. They even wore sandals, rare practice amongst ordinary Assamese women (1991/2011, 73)

Clothing was one of the many elements of British culture that a small but powerful Assamese upper class purposefully used and assimilated during the British occupation. Mishra's description of the clothing demonstrates how clothing may help categorize people based on their age, status, as well as marital status. However, Assamese society has always had a specific trait in which people display their social status through clothes.

E. Elizabeth Vickland (1928) work *Women of Assam,* provides a visual tour of the status of women in Assam in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Vickland provides an overview of women's social conditions, education, clothing reforms, as well as disparities between women of various classes during the period. In her book, she provides an influential and important speech by Hemprabha Das (feminist) at the Jubilee of the Nowgong Mission Girls' School. Das states, "In the past, there was a great deal of talking about the 'high-class' and the 'low-class' people….Gradually these two expressions are disappearing from our conversation.

Nowadays honour is given to virtue: glory in mere ancestry is on the decrease… If a person has no personal virtue or ability, his being born into a good family does not bring him much honour" (Vickland, 1928, 116).

Hemprabha Das attempted to draw a direct comparison of Assamese society in the past and present in her speech. Her remark reflected the emergence of a liberal Assamese society from its conservative past, where contemporary society traits predominate. Although debates on class hierarchy gradually became less significant in society, they still existed. Many people regarded certain social norms and values as a tradition and adherence to universalistic norms. Narrating a common girl's voice, Hemprabha writes:

> "I tried to persuade a girl I know to wear a silk blouse the other day, and she began to cry, saying she didn't think it nice in this day and age to wear silk for common[41]" (Vickland, 1928, 118).

This explains how clothes served as a social hierarchy barrier by giving them a set of constructed meanings. Wearing cotton clothes, for example, can be a manner of demonstrating respect and dignity to the upper class while still being confined by social control mechanisms and societal standards, in the early twentieth century. The majority of the texts that provide information on Assamese women's attire provided an insight into the attire that upper and middle-class women typically wore. Many times, the description of clothes for marginalised lower-class women was unknown.

4.4 Gandhi's Intervention in Indian Clothing

Mahatma Gandhi was the first leader to recognise the value of clothes, and he used it as a key tool in his political paradigm. Gandhi's transition from rejecting the European suit to donning a simple loincloth demonstrates his in-depth understanding of apparel as a symbolic phenomenon with various implications in a social structure. Millie Graham Polak, who spent time with Mahatma Gandhi, writes, "What different phases

[41] Referring to marginalized section of people in Assam.

in Mr Gandhi's mental career had been proclaimed by the clothes he wore! Each costume, I think, denoted an attitude of mind" (Polak, 1950, cited in Tarlo, 1996 ,62). Gandhi, unlike many other Indian males, adopted European attire much later. Gandhi was born in 1869 to a respected Bania family and nurtured in a distant region called Kathiawad, which experienced European influence much later (Gandhi, 1927/2018). However, Gandhi's time in London, where he studied law, exposed him to the English way of life and etiquette, as well as acquainting him with the language. He even ditched his Bombay-cut Indian suit in favour of a new type of suit and a hat that suited the London streets (Gandhi, 1927/2018). For Gandhi, London was a city of civilization, and he tried everything he could to blend in with the society while concealing his Indian roots. His time in London also resulted in a shift in his attitude toward European behaviour and customs. Deeply impressed and attracted to the modern civilized nation, he enthusiastically adopted European culture (food, dress etc.). He realized how important it was to have a western façade to hide his Indianness while living in a very alien modern society, which requires not just a knowledge of sartorial styles to become a perfect English gentleman, but also a knowledge of western ideals. Later, when he returned to India from London, he not only maintained his western manners and attitudes but also encouraged his family to dress in European garb.

As a lawyer, Gandhi's appointment to the bar in South Africa was a watershed moment in Gandhi's dressing philosophy. His embarrassment at not being able to integrate into British culture in London was the opposite when he arrived in South Africa. In South Africa, Gandhi saw Indians wearing long robes or *dhoti's*, whereas Gandhi arrived nicely dressed in European garb, with the Bengal turban serving as the only indication that he was an Indian (Tarlo, 1996, 67). It was a specific episode in Durban that caused Gandhi to undergo a significant transformation in his life when the magistrate of Durban ordered Gandhi to remove his headgear (Bayly, 1986). In India, removing headgear is an extreme form of insult and disrespect, as headgear is a symbol of cultural pride. This brought serious reoreitaion to Gandhi's clothing and he began to

wear clothes that were socially inappropriate and provocative, transforming his embarrassment into an opportunity to expose injustices and embarrass others by dressing provocatively, rather than according to the norm (Bean, 1989, cited in Tarlo, 1996).

Gandhi later wrote *Hind Swaraj*, which is best known for its blistering condemnation of contemporary civilisation. “He despised a society that emphasized bodily rather than spiritual fulfilment. He also expressed his disgust for the notion that European clothes might have a civilizing influence on the Indian people” (CWMG vol 10, cited in Tarlo, 1996, 68). Despite being profoundly impacted by Western lifestyle and beliefs, observing some humiliation and realities with clothing during his time in Africa assisted him in critically scrutinizing the powerful symbolic gesture of a dress in a socio-cultural context. However, shortly after the shooting of Indian coal miners by South African authorities in 1913, Gandhi made his first public appearance in Indian garb, rejecting European clothing. Gandhi appeared with his head shaved and wearing a *lungi* and kurta as a sign of sadness (CWMG vol 10, cited in Tarlo, 1996). Gandhi's radical sartorial transformation to Indian garb represents Gandhi's symbolic gesture of internal grief, which he showed through his mode of dress.

Gandhi experimented with his clothing frequently in the first several years after his return to India (Bean, 1989). He was aware of how much attention unusual apparel could draw, therefore to attract the fellow Indians (mainly the peasantry) he gave his public appearance in traditional Indian clothing discarding European clothes. Gandhi's clothing experimentation was not just about aesthetics; they were also about restoring India's weaving and handloom industries which declined during the British rule in India. Gandhi founded the Sabarmati Ashram in 1915, where he encouraged people to learn to weave and spin clothing (Gandhi, 1927/2018). Due to different experiences of humiliation as well as recognition during Gandhi's career, the importance of clothing in his life remained critical. Gandhi recognized the symbolic worth and strength of clothing, as well as its communicative influence, and therefore developed a unique approach to integrating people. He encouraged people to give up their foreign

garments and wear *Khadi,* which is made by indigenous weavers, to emotionally and culturally connect with them. Being in power among the colonized, the British were insulted and outraged by the Indians' discarding of foreign things.

In 1921, being invited by the prominent Congressmen of Assam, Gandhiji along with Shankar Ali and Mohammed Ali, arrived at Gauhati on 18th August on a ten days provincial tour and held meetings at Gauhati, Tezpur, Nowgong, Jorhat, Dibrugarh Silchar and Sylhet (Sharma, 1993). The political leaders delivered a powerful speech to the people protesting British control in India and the plight of underprivileged Indians as a result of European dominance. "Gandhi's speech in Hindi was translated by Tarun Ram Phukan into Assamese"(Sharma, 1993, 55). For the first time throughout India's freedom fight, Assam witnessed such resentment and wrath against European goods. In front of thousands of spectators, Gandhi stressed the importance of giving up foreign clothing and urged that all foreign clothing be burned as a symbolic gesture of protest against the British. Gandhi looked at the importance of clothing in people's lives and used it as a powerful instrument during the Swadeshi movement to bring about change. Susan Bean portrays how Gandhi as a 'semiotician' experimented with clothes and achieved an understanding of the role of clothes in Indian life (Bean, 1989, cited in Tarlo, 1996, 64). While wearing the loincloth, Gandhi tried to build a connection with the common people and tried to delivered messages through his attire. He also encouraged people to become more involved in weaving and spinning and to desist from importing foreign commodities. Understanding the power that indigenous clothes might perceive, Gandhi campaigned for the skill of hand-spinning thread and wearing basic khadi clothing as a statement of national identity and defiance to colonial oppression.

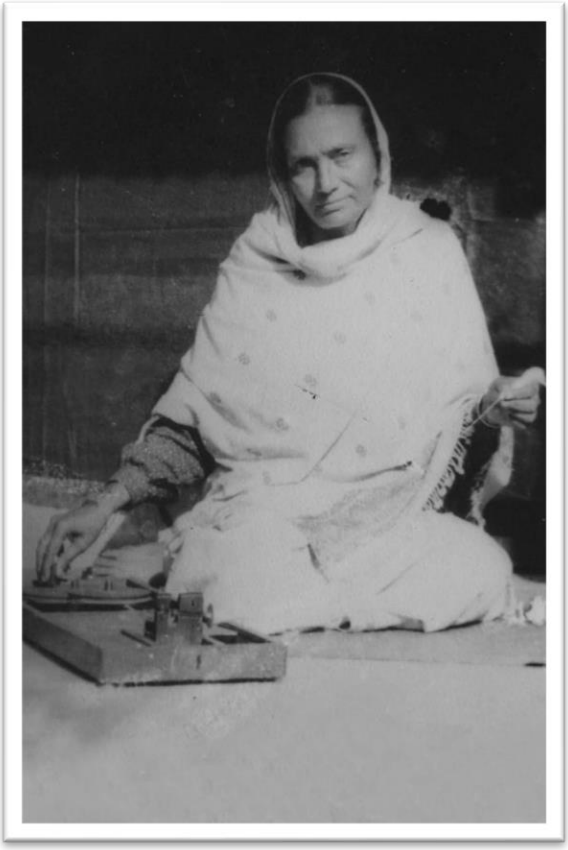


Figure 30: Snehalata Medhi while weaving in the 1930s, Courtesy: Bidyum Medhi

During the freedom struggle, the formation of the Assam Provincial Congress Committee (APCC) in 1921 (Sharma, 1993) signified a crucial shift in Assam's relationship with the national mainstream. As Gandhiji led the Indian Congress and called for a non-cooperation movement, many people from around the country became involved in the country's independence movement. Gandhi's visit to Assam captivated the people due to his simple and generous personality, as well as his exhortation to political integrity among the people to resist the British rule. Gandhi visited twice in Assam. His impressions of Assamese women tremendously boosted their self-esteem and cognitive endurance. Gandhi believed that, in addition to male leaders, women leaders were required in equal measure to strengthen the country's socio-cultural and economic structure as well as eradicate poverty in India during the twentieth century. Gandhi aspired for Indian women to awaken to be effective leaders who have long witnessed men's dominance and to be "pure, firm, and self-controlled" in the manner

of historic heroines such as Sita, Damayanti, and Draupadi, who suffered at the hands of men yet managed to live with dignity (Forbes, 2008). Gandhi's efforts to attract women into politics and to make them recognise that they are fundamentally equal to men have proven fruitful throughout India's freedom war for independence.

Figure 31: During Mahatma Gandhi's visit in the 1940s ©Alamy

পাণ বজাৰৰ জুবিলি গার্ডেন কংগ্রেছৰ সম্পাদকৰ আগমণ উপলক্ষে
সুতাকতাৰ প্রদর্শন (২৭/১০/৪১) ছবি– নব বৰাৰ সৌজন্যত

Figure 32: Earlier Jubli Garden, now renamed as 'Panbazar Panitanky', on the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi. Source: Raja Chakraborty

During this time, Assamese women took part in the movement through the *Assam Chatra Sanmilan* (Assam Student Association) and *Assam Sahitya Sabha* (Assam

Literary Society) until the formation of the *Assam Assam Mahila Samiti* (Assam Women Association) in 1926, which was a provincial women's organization (Sharma, 1993, 34-36). The role of *Mahila Samiti* (Women's organization) played a significant role in implementing high values in understanding the women's condition throughout and played a prominent role in promoting "few weaving cooperatives (*sipinibhoral*) in late colonial Assam, which became a culture of establishing cooperative societies as an extension of the swadeshi (self-sufficient) movement flourished in early twentieth-century British India" (Medhi, 2015). Women's roles in Assamese society were thus reinterpreted throughout the colonial period, with women no longer limited to household jobs and activities but gradually becoming visible in public settings (such as their participation in schools, movements, or organizations). Assamese modernity was characterized by a substantial shift in women's lives during this period. Aside from that, the Europeans' involvement in establishing their ideology toward civilization had a significant impact on how women's perspectives changed, enabling them to be concerned about their own identity as women and their potential to change the world.

Figure 33: Women of Tezpur Mahila Samiti, Tezpur, 1960s,

A significant number of women attended meetings, organised parades, promoted the usage of *Khadi* and *Charkha*, and boycotted schools and offices to join the campaign. Women in different districts of Assam took part in a variety of activities, including educating people about non-cooperation and popularising Khadi, as well as weaving and spinning cotton. These events were noteworthy in modern Assamese history as Assamese women were exposed to the public space and became politically involved during this time. Women leaders such as Nalilibala Devi, Chandraprava Saikiani, Bijuli Phukan, Rajabala Das, Kiranmayee Agarwalla, among others, as well as male patriots including Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, Tarunram Phukan, Ambikagiri Rai Choudhury, Chandra Kumar Agarwalla, and several others, came together to inspire people in remote areas to join them in their fight to end the British Raj (Sharma, 1993). Leaders spoke on Swadeshi, Khilafat, and outlined the purpose and goals of the non-cooperation movement to the participants. In the case of Assamese women, organizational activities began before the start of non-cooperation campaigns. There was considerably more leniency for women from urban progressive households and Congress leaders and employees to participate, ignoring social restrictions.

The participation of people in spinning and weaving hand-made garments was one of Gandhi's key constructive goals during the non-cooperation movement. Gandhi was awestruck by the art of weaving practised by Assamese women, and the participation of Assamese women in appropriating *Khadi* was noteworthy. Assamese women have long been skilled weavers, making the goal of boycotting imported clothing much more achievable for the Assamese. During his tour in Assam, he received a beautifully woven fabric from an Assamese woman. Gandhi complimented: “Assam will rise to its full height in the matter of *swadeshi*. Its women can weave much more than enough for themselves” (Sharma, 1993, 241). The simplicity in his attire attracted many common people of Assam to be his followers.

The significance of clothes was an important part of India's movement for independence, and it served as both an economic product and a means of communication. “Gandhi’s campaign for *khadi* was a product of economic

nationalism" (Bean, 1989, 360). The decline of India's economy in the nineteenth century, mostly due to British intervention, wreaked havoc on Indian local industries. An important industry during the time was cotton textiles. With the decline of traditional industries Gandhi's project of '*khadi*' was an ideology behind favouring state interventions and reviving the indigenous textile industries by encouraging native Indians to weave hand-spun clothes. The shift from silk to cotton was also a Gandhian intervention. Gandhi look into the importance of clothes in people's lives and took them as an important tool during the Swadeshi movement. Assamese women were profoundly motivated by Gandhian ideals because weaving was extremely dear to their hearts, and the switch from silk to cotton/khadi was widely noticeable in Assam during this period. Gandhi's participation in Assam during the non-cooperation movement increased the popularity of *khadi* and cotton among the Assamese, resulting in a change in women's clothing in the state. While Gandhi was aware of the semiotic properties of cloth, he was also aware of the power that a simple outfit could have in drawing followers and shaping social events. However, it was the ladies of more affluent families who were more likely to replace their silk *mekhela chador*/*sari's* with cotton or *khadi* materials. Gandhi was successful in acting as a mediator and bringing people together via *khadi*, he was less successful in eliminating the variance in the quality of *khadi* that signified social division at the time.

The use of khadi is still preventative in modern times by groups of politicians and esteemed groups, but it no longer represents the same connotation that Gandhi hoped to convey with the *khadi* revolution. The usage of *Khadi* clothing by politicians has become a symbol of power and status. Even though the *Khadi* revolution was a Swaraj strategy that was only effective due to the nation's people's forces of sacrifice and truth, the particular outfit is today employed to acquire brownie points in the fields of identity, status, and vote banks.

4.4.1 Assam During the Freedom Movement, (1920-1950).

Until the 1920s, new elements in Assamese sartorial trends such as blouses, *petticoats*, *sari's*, and shoes became immensely popular in a few progressive Assamese families. Village women, on the contrary, began to wear petticoats and blouses much later, circa 1940s; previously, they had worn two mekhelas, with the light cotton mekhela serving as a petticoat. Except for a few, incremental changes in clothes were noticeable during the 1940s, as women's access to public areas increased. This can undoubtedly be attributed to the women's freedom fighters as well as feminists who paved the way for other women's emancipation and served as role models for many. Although *Khadi*, or cotton, was encouraged as a cultural icon of India's independence movement and supported among Assamese activists, it initially prompted worries about their indigeneity in terms of clothing. Satyaprava Gogoi, a 102-year-old Freedom Fighter, remarked,

> "During the Independence movement, very few women from our village participated in the movement. Due to specific concerns, women's access to public spaces was severely limited compared to what it is today. Women did not have access to formal education and spent their days completing household chores. We were compelled to wear *Khadi* or cotton throughout the independence war, and all foreign products were outlawed. Why use *Khadi* when we have our own Pat or *Muga* as traditional dresses? I asked our village's leader, as this made me curious. Is not this the swadesi we are talking about? She inquired further. While various types of silk garments were quite popular at the time and are now a part of our culture, she was advised that the importance of employing *khadi*/cotton, which is also an indegenous product, remained vital at that point."

Thus, Assamese nationalistic identity was already developing in the minds of indigenous Assamese in the early twentieth century, who not only asserted their traditional dress as part of their cultural identity (where they initially hesitated to use *khadi*/cotton) but were also equally proud of their rich cultural tradition of weaving.

Later with changing women's position and status in society, women's excess to education, employment and liberty from certain gender roles significant changes in women's lives was witnessed. As observed in Figures 1 and 2, women have undergone significant change in the styles of blouses (collared and other designs), the wearing of varying ways of mekhela chador, and the use of chiffon and cotton *sari*. The acceptance of various Pan-Indian and western clothing during the early twentieth century can also be connected to the progressive idea of modernity that gradually influenced the Assamese, with clothing serving as a significant indicator of change through which the concept of the "new woman" was redefined. In addition, this shows that the status of women in Assam was progressively rising, an indication of the region's progress.

Figure 34: Members of the Sharma family of Choladhara, Jorhat. The patriarch was Dr BinondiSarma who was a renowned physician and his wife Kunjalata Devi belonged to the Bezbaroa family of Sivasagar. She was known as 'Daktoroni Mami' for the selfless service she rendered during the kala-azar epidemic at Golaghat in the 1930s. Courtesy: Avinibesh Sharma

Figure 35: Before 1940s, Family photograph of Nabin Chandra Medhi Middle row (sitting from left): Nabin Ch. Medhi, Labanya Medhi (wife), Snehalata Medhi (brother's wife) Bipin Chandra Medhi (brother), Freedom Fighter and MLA of Mangaldai. Courtesy: Bidyum Medhi

4.5 Post-Independence India

India ultimately earned independence from colonial rule in 1947, marking the start of a prolonged process of removing the colonial legacy of economic underdevelopment, poverty, illiteracy, and brutal social inequality and injustice. For the people of India, independence marked the beginning of a new era free from colonial domination. Given its colonial history and the century-long struggle for independence, India has encountered significant challenges as well as accomplishments during the period. With a sense of optimism for the future, Indians and their political leaders embarked on their journey of nation-building, with a focus on socio-economic upliftment, which had deteriorated and stayed stagnant during colonial rule. India's experiences with colonial control and struggles to overcome it enriched their societal understanding of nationalist, democratic, and secular values, bolstered their objective of rapid economic growth and profound social transformation throughout the post-colonial period. India

enjoyed a distinct edge during the British era because of its awareness of such principles. However, in the post-independence era, it became evident that a deeper understanding of the principles was just as crucial in fulfilling the nation-building goal. There can be no doubt about how important Nehru's contribution and the ideas he developed and spread were crucial during this period.

Jawaharlal Nehru, known as the architect of modern India, made significant contributions to foreign policy at a time when India was in a tumultuous situation following independence. For Nehru, "modernising India" was a national ideology that needed to be preserved, strengthened, and consolidated to achieve the goals of unity, democracy, socialism, industrialization, and scientific and technological development while building a nation that truly reflected the country's immense regional, linguistic, and religious diversity while developing and progressing socially. Many Indians and foreign opponents, however, remained sceptical of India's broader development agenda, knowing that the country's vast religious, caste, linguistic, and ethnic diversity, as well as its extreme poverty, social misery, and wealth disparity, all of which contribute to the rigid social hierarchy, would jeopardise national unity, development missions, and democracy (Chandra et al. 2008). India would either remain together under a democratic or a totalitarian rule or disintegrate as a result of the conflict.

Despite having similar economic and political roots, India's nation-building was a difficult process in which each state developed in its unique way. State politics are affected by a specific set of economic and social pressures, as well as a diverse array of social and cultural groups. Assam had been plagued by political unrest for years, even before independence, as residents feared losing their Assamese identity as a result of an inflow of immigrants who rendered them socially and economically irrelevant in their homeland. This anxiety was shaped by several factors, which influenced the demands and movements that were formulated and launched post-Independence Assam. The Language Movement of the 1960s in Assam marked the growing tension between the dominant Assamese and Bengali community, where

strong feelings of resentment reflected the growing friction between the two groups. Bengalis had conventionally seen as a rival group since the coming of the British. The British imposed Bengali as the official language of colonially administered Assam between 1836 and 1873 (Bhattacharjee, 2018), which enraged many educated Assamese intellectuals. With the advantage of English schooling over the Assamese, Bengalis were able to monopolise clerical positions in British offices and Railways in Assam. As a result, the Assamese found themselves being marginalized in their own state, where they were barred from administrative and other occupations, leaving them unsure of their future existence. This marked the beginning of a political movement to restore their identity and authority over their homeland. Clothing played an important role in the Language Movement, and it was employed as a marker of Assamese identity. Few jingoistic Assamese nationalists even compelled Bengali women to wear Assamese mekhela-chador to demonstrate their domination in their region. During this period, the region was stirred by the Assamese's growing feeling of an identity crisis, which inhibited people from wearing Pan-Indian clothing to some extent.

The political, legal, educational, and social position of women in Assamese society had all changed dramatically since independence. Women had come a long way from being relegated to solely private areas to their emergence in the public arena. The impact of modern education, as well as the elimination of social evils like Sati and women's right to property resulted in substantial changes in women's life by allowing them to claim their social standing. As individuals became more progressive and secular in their views and actions, the post-independence period was a moment of transformation for adaptable Western and Pan-Indian clothing. Assamese women also started wearing the chador in a different way, more aesthetically expressing herself as shown in Figure 36. Furthermore, the establishment of women's organizations enhanced women's engagement in political activities, which played an essential role in the major popular movements from the 1920s onward.

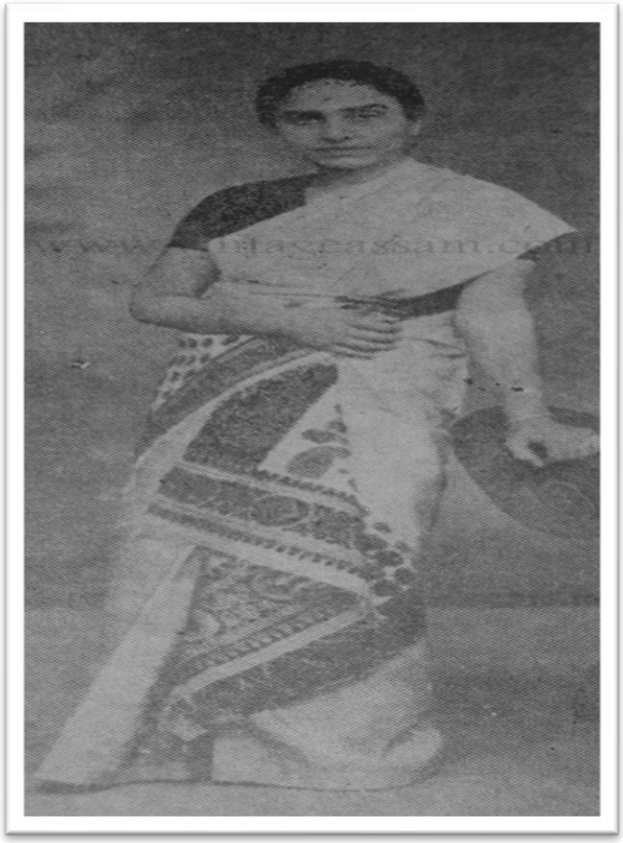


Figure 36: Noted freedom fighter and Parliamentarian, Pushpalata Das dressed in *mekhela chador* in the 1950s , Courtesy : Avinibesh Sharma , Place: Assam

This surely aided in the strengthening of their position in society, as women were able to discern their innate strength and subsequently, they came to understand their secondary position in a patriarchal society. Women's progressive and liberal beliefs were influenced to some extent by changes in women's status in society, ranging from an improvement in women's education level to women in the workplace and politics. As a result, the post-independence period can be seen as a period of transition for adaptable Western and Pan-Indian clothing, particularly in women's apparel, as a result of increased inter-state imports, media marketing (advertising) through newspaper (as in Figure 37) and the impact of Assamese cinema. For example, in TV or movies, a celebrity or actress may become famous for wearing a particular outfit or piece of jewellery, and this may lead to commercial opportunities. According to the context, this is the power of stardom that influences people's choices. The post-1960s

transformation in women's dress can also be attributed to the cinema, where new emergent sartorial traditions strongly affected women.

Figure 37: 1940s (Newspaper advertisement), mid- 20th century, Courtesy: Nehru memorial

4.5.1 Assam Movement (1979-1985).

The Assam movement, also known as the 'Assam Agitation' or *'Axom Andolon*,' took place in Assam from 1979 - 1985. People from Assam (North-East India) and other nearby states joined a movement against illegal immigration from neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh, resulting in significant public resentment and engagement. While universally neglected throughout history, women's contributions to society and the nation have always been devalued. The participation of Assamese women was critical during the Assam struggle. Women participated in the campaign in large numbers and were mobilised as cultural bearers and markers in both nationalist and identity politics.

Following India's independence movement, Assam Movement was arguably the most significant phase in Assam's history, with both men and women stepping forward in

large numbers to join the movement. The leaders of the Assam Movement adopted Gandhi's approach of using clothing as a political weapon. During the movement, traditional '*gamosa'* (traditional scarf) and *'mekhela-chador'* were made as compulsory regional costumes. The traditional '*gamosa'* was employed as a sign of *Axomiya* (Assamese) identity during the *Axom Andolon.* The essence and sentiments of *gamosa*, as well as its widespread use, helped people connect and served as a defining marker of identity within the state. In the sub-national political discourse, *gamosa* became a cultural emblem for Assamese nationalism. During the movement, males continued to wear western apparel and the only thing that identified Assamese identity was the wearing of traditional *gamosa*. Women, on the contrary, were compelled to wear the traditional *mekhela-chador* and firmly rejected the western or Pan-Indian garb (*sari* etc.) during the movement. The *mekhela chador* became a symbol and emblem of modesty during the Assam Movement because it was the only visible part of a woman's body that revealed Assamese identity. After all, clothing regulates the physical self. By abandoning Pan-Indian and western clothes in favour of their traditional *mekhela-chadar*, Assamese women's apparel during the Assam Movement emphasised the importance of women as cultural bearers of tradition. Throughout the Assam Movement, Assamese women's bodies were used to maintain the Assamese community's collective identity.

Women were neglected as a unique group in their efforts to preserve Assamese identity, and their rights were controlled by their male counterparts. Women from all walks of life, regardless of social status, caste, or religious affiliation, engaged in the movement giving the movement deep significance. Equally passionate and committed as their male counterparts, women participated in all of the activities of the movement, including picketing, procession and satyagraha. During the agitation, the ladies discarded their foreign and Pan-Indian garb in support of their regional attire, the *mekhela-chador*, which they used to signify their Assamese identity as well as an instrument to battle against the "others" or the foreigners. Women agitators, on the other hand, were active throughout the campaign, although they were frequently

marginalised at the decision-making stage, where they were restricted access to public and formal spaces. Women were dominated and neglected in the entire process of negotiation in a patriarchal framework during the revolution, where women were only exploited as a tool in the nationalistic discourse. Women's engagement in sub-nationalist discourses were visible in photographs captured during the movement.

During the Assam Movement, a sense of urgency was felt to establish a strong place for women, which resulted in the regulation of traditional dress (*mekhela chador)*, particularly for women. The significance of women during the movement is witnessed in Figure 38, where women in large numbers is seen participating in the campaigns and political rallies. To reinforce the movement, women were encouraged to adorn their traditional *mekhela chador*. Women served as cultural carriers, with their attire serving as a vital indicator of Assamese identity, and the Assamese *aideos*[42] were committed to protect the dignity of the "sons of the soil." The popular phrase of the Assamese movement, "*Jai Aai Axom"* (Glory to Mother Assam), as seen in Figure 39, highlights the significance of women's position during the movement, in which women of all age groups were encouraged to participate for a successful campaign on support of the movement.

[42] Formal way of calling a woman in Assamese

Powerful images of protest during Assam *Andolon* (1979-85) :

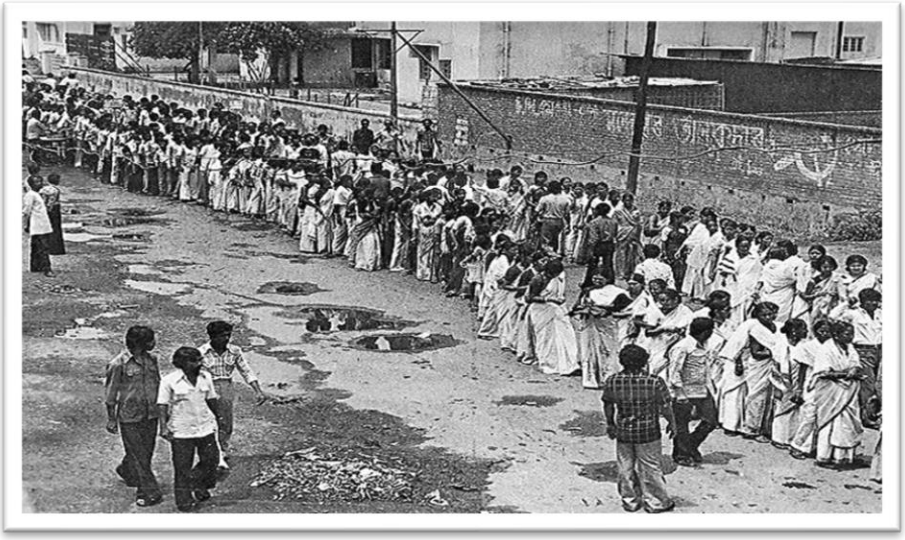


Figure: 38, Rally during Assam Movement, Source: Asom Gana Parishad: অসম গণ পৰিষদ (archive.is)

Figure 39: Assam Movement, Year: 1979-1985 , Place Assam Source: Asom Gana Parishad: অসম গণ পৰিষদ (archive.is)

4.5.2 Globalisation

India's economy and culture have seen significant changes as a result of globalisation. The rise of globalisation has had a direct impact on India's traditional social structure. In the 1990s, when the Indian market was liberalised, the large influx of commodities weakened the traditional market economy. With the expansion of the market and the enhancement of transport and communication, imports flourished in the growing towns of Assam. Clothing was an important item that was extensively available and had favourable responses from the public. Globalisation brought extensive changes in the shift in Assamese women dress, where women once again begun experimenting with their clothing. Women during the period, were seen enthusiastically welcoming Pan-Indian as well as western clothing. Changes was also witnessed in remote places. In many instances, unmarried women in their twenties pursuing higher education in distant areas favoured *salwar kameez* over the traditional *mekhela chador*. In addition, the size, shape, and manner in which the mekhela chador was tied varied in inventive ways during this time period.

Globalization has resulted in a focus on standardised and westernised consumer culture, which has had a significant impact on society's traditional culture. Appadurai (1996) discusses globalization's cultural dimension. According to him, decontextualization of culture and global cultural flows of media and technology have aided in the development of unpredictable circulations of ideas, images, and people (migration) as well as the creation of an imagined social reality. In today's world, media plays an important function in disseminating information and reaching out to individuals promptly. The way the media associates and distributes meaning through commercials, cinema, and other forms of media, for example, has a significant impact on people. As a result, there is uncertainty. People tend to hold to tradition more tightly in the face of uncertainty (albeit in its symbolic avatar).

Historical context and shifting temporal perspectives are crucial for a comprehensive understanding of how women's attire has evolved. With several changes happening,

no one wants to wear the same garments as their forefathers and instead seek new ways to better it. Modernity in Assamese society is related to advancement and leading a modern lifestyle; clothing is categorized as "superior" or "inferior" in this context. As a result, the construction of the oriental concept that western apparel was superior to traditional clothing and antiquated influenced people's thoughts about clothing. Thus, modern Assamese culture has begun to deviate from its traditional clothing in favour of Western and Pan-Indian influences to some extent. The labels "traditional" and "modern" in the context of clothing have been derived through a historical process that assigns these distinctions.

Figure 40: 1990s, Tezpur

Courtesy: D Hazarika

Figure 41: 1990s, Courtesy: Aditi G. Fernandes,

Globalisation has induced contradictory impulses in Assamese society. On the one hand, it brought about sweeping changes and transformations in society, leading to the spread of homogenised and standardised items of use, including clothes. On the other hand, this has also led to a deep sense of fear amongst communities of cultural homogenization. It was expected that globalisation would lead to cultural homogenization and reduce cultural distinctions, but on the contrary, it has posed a danger to the locals, prompting people to mobilise in every manner imaginable to protect their identities through ethnic mobilisation. Aside from a sense of insecurity, globalisation has resurrected 'ideas of bounded cultures, ethnic resilience, and the resurgence of intense nationalist sentiments' (Kinnvall, 2006, cited in Nath, 2014). As, a result people have become more conscious about asserting their ethnic identities. This story has been repeated itself in Assam, as in many other places of the world. Thus, trying to strike a balance between competing claims of tradition, modernity, professional lives has led Assamese women to go for culturally sensitive and context-specific dressing. This is how the conflicting claims of diverse identities are negotiated by Assamese women today. Please consider the case of the following photographs of the same women in different social contexts.

4.6 Case Studies from the Field

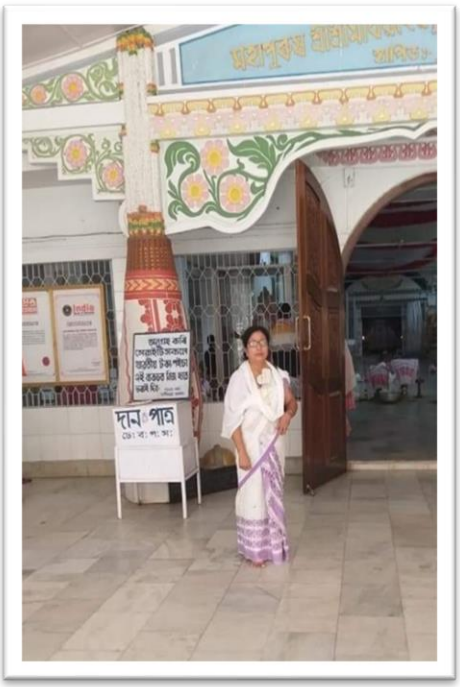
The following are instances of photographs that reflect how women of Assam today negotiate the competing claims of different identities. From sacred religious spaces to secular outdoor and professional spaces, women of Assam shift effortlessly from one role to the other**.**

Case Study 01: Respondent- Eva Mohan,

Age -53,

Occupation- Nurse

42(a)Respondent in her duty dress (Nurse)



42(b) During visit to *Namghar* (Assamese religious place)

42(c) During her visit to Ooty for vacation.

In Case 1, Eva Mohan is wearing three distinct dresses in photographs 42(a), 42(b), and 42(c). In photo 42(a), she (3rd from left) is wearing a *sari* and a coat as a mandatory uniform for her service. The coat is usually worn in winter, although on regular days she wears an apron over her *sari* or *salwar kameez*, like the woman on the extreme left does. In 42(b), she is visiting a *Namghar* (religious institution) wearing the traditional *mekhela chador* and *cheleng chador*. *Namghar* is revered as a holy place and like Eva, every Assamese woman who visits *Namghar* in Assam wears a *mekhela chador* and *cheleng* to cover their heads. Generally, only married Assamese women wear the *cheleng* chador with their traditional attire. She has also included and welcomed the Pan-Indian dresses like *sari*, salwar-kameez into her wardrobe. This could be seen in photograph 42(c) where during her vacation, she is seen in wearing a *salwar-kameez* with a *dupatta*.

Case Study 2: Respondent: Momi Rajkhowa, Age: 57,

Occupation- Owner a weaving institute

43(a) During her (left) visit to *Namghar*

43(b) Respondent while visiting her relatives

43(c) During her visit to Guwahati

43(d) Visit to Amritsar (2nd right)

In case 2, respondent Momi Rajkhowa, is seen in photographs 43 (a), 43 (b), and 43 (d) wearing a traditional *mekhela chador* in slightly different ways. In 43 (a), she is visiting Namghar while wearing a white *mekhela chador*. The wearing of the *mekhela chador* is comparable to Case Study 1, Eva [as shown in 1(b)]. Women typically prefer to wear white or light-coloured *mekhela chador* during religious occasions or events as a sign of having a relation with spiritual sense. In everyday life, colours also have significance while wearing for a particular event. While, in photograph 43 (b) she is dressed in a coloured *mekhela chador* and a sleeveless blouse. There are a wide variety of blouses on the market nowadays, including ones with varying textures, sleeve lengths, and designs. In 43 (c) she is seen wearing a Kurta. In 43(d) she is wearing a *mekhela chador* during her visit to Amritsar. However, the relevance of the *mekhela chador* and the *gamosa* in the final photograph indicates that they are displaying their identity as an Assamese outside of Assam. While she wears both traditional and Pan-Indian clothing, the significance of clothing as a fundamental aspect of Assamese material culture remains crucial for establishing her identity as an Assamese. The respondent also owns and runs a weaving institute where she employs Assamese

women to weave *mekhela chadors.* In her institute, she instructs the female weavers to weave both traditional (simple one coloured with less design) and fashionable mekhela chador designs in brilliant hues. However, while discussing about the weavers the respondent said-

Nowadays, it is very difficult to manage and employ women weavers. Many have left weaving or have started going for other jobs such as in shops, malls which require less physical strength. This is also since clothing is now readily available at affordable costs, whereas a small institute like ours could not compete with the market's products, which provide women a vast array of colour, style, and fabric options. I am considering closing down the institute as I am not making any money from it. In addition to my household chores, I prefer to keep myself occupied with my passion for embroidered mekhela chador, which I make myself.

Case study 3: Respondent: Buli Changmai, Age: 40,

Profession: Government Service

44(a) In a simple *mekhela chador*

44(b) Respondent wearing Assamese *mekhela chador* with western jacket.

44(c) In western clothing

44(d) In jeans and T-shirt

In Case 4, photo 44(a) depicts the respondent dressed in traditional Assamese clothing for a ceremony. In the following photograph, 44(b), she has added a western jacket to her *mekhela chador*, and her body language suggests that she is attempting to project a more confident and contemporary attitude while wearing a jacket with her *mekhela chador*. In 44 (c) and 44 (d), she is dressed in western jeans and a t-shirt/top. In response to a question regarding her current perspective on clothing and her selections, she stated: "While in office I usually wear *salwar kameez.* Whereas I have started wearing western dress such as jeans, tops/ T-shirt much recently. I feel more at ease in western clothes than in traditional *mekhela chadar;* not only do they take less time to put on, but they also make me feel trendier and more "in". However, on certain occasions such as weddings, religious gatherings, and when my in-laws visit, I choose the traditional *mekhela chadar."*

Case studies of women's clothing in the photographs reveal that they had a wide range of options beyond their traditional wear in contemporary times. The significance of clothing and its meaning are context specific, where women are seen changing their

role as well as their identity in relation to their clothing. All of the case studies show a clear shift in the way women of today approach and interact with clothing. It is evident that women have a complex connection with clothing, which is linked to a variety of characteristics such as age, identity, profession and social status. In contemporary time, people attempted to link modernity to new developments such as technological improvements, the transition from the traditional to urbanisation, the rise of malls, and living a luxurious lifestyle, among other things. As a result, the shackles of tradition and custom have been lifted from everyday life. Assamese culture is deeply rooted in tradition, the conflict between modernity and tradition has gone on throughout history. For example, Assamese women prefer to wear *mekhela chador* to religious events rather than any other apparel because of tradition and because it appears to be appropriate in the situation. However, in comparison to other Pan-Indian clothing that are "classy" and "contemporary" depending on specific contexts, *Mekhela chador*, for example, is deemed "old-fashioned" and "inelegant". Experimenting with the traditional *mekhela chador* was the most recent way women attempted to appear equally elegant, modern, and fashionable. This trend has gained strength in contemporary times as women now are no longer confined to domestic work and have attained great success in every field. Popular fashion designers from Assam, like Sanjukta Dutta and Kunal Kaushik, have made the traditional mekhela chador popular globally. However, the expansion of online shopping sites (such as Amazon, Myntra, etc.) has also made it easier for women to search out alternate clothing options, which are now readily accessible and delivered to their homes. Thus, the online business of *mekhela chador* has expanded rapidly in modern times, with sellers utilising social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp to promote and sell their products.

This, however, results in a loss of individuality and authenticity due to the advent of popular businesses that embrace contemporary patterns. Regions like Assam, where traditional wear has a long history, are facing the effects of the trendy sartorial designs which as a result is causing loss of family legacy and domestic weaving skills. The

clothing industry, on the other hand, is becoming more and more westernized. Mass-produced apparel with the growing trend mainly influenced by celebrities has erased the individuality of clothing. People linking progressive values to women's clothing in some ways have resulted in a more enthusiastic acceptance of change by women today. However, the dichotomy between traditional and contemporary clothes continues to exist, as women choose to dress in accordance with societal expectations in various contexts.