



## The Anthropology of Dress: A Study in the change of Assamese women dress in Assam

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### KEYWORDS

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### ABSTRACT

*As a cultural artefact, the dress holds an important position in everyday life. Other than covering one's body, it is representational and can be linked to questions of identity, nationalism, status, class and caste. This paper highlights the importance of clothing as a significant part of material culture and analysing the factors that have influenced the change in women's dress in different periods during the twentieth century Assam. It discusses the symbolic value and meaning attached to the dress and explains how it becomes a carrier of ethnic identity and class. The finding in the study is based on a structured interview using a visual ethnographic tool (photographs) as well as literature selected purposively.*

### Introduction

Anthropology contributes scholarship that relates to understanding the place of dress in culture, and I define the anthropology of dress simply as the study of the dress by anthropologists (Eicher, 2000). The evolution of dress in society within its socio-economic and political scenario represents much more than it is being assigned as a part of material culture. Simply, the dress can be defined as something that helps in covering one's body protecting one from the extreme weather condition. However, eventually, changes in the dress habits of society are quite frequently the result of political movements, state-interventions, and the rise of identity-consciousness adding new meaning to clothing. From being a product of utility, its representational value has increased phenomenally. Such as other than covering one's body it now has become more symbolic when linked with the question of identity, nationalism, status, class, and gender. Dress as an important part of material culture is recognized in a way how people construct their identity within a community through their clothing. The unique pattern, motif, and sartorial style in the clothing help in identifying a community or tribe representing their identity in a society. However, the impact of modernity in traditional societies has been deeply influenced by the series of events encountered, while affecting the social and cultural structure.

Assam is a state situated in the North-Eastern part of India. It is bounded by other north-eastern Indian states (popularly known as 'Seven Sisters of India') namely Arunachal Pradesh to the north, Manipur, and Nagaland in the east, and Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram to the south. The north-eastern states are connected with the rest of the country through a narrow 22 km corridor via a strip of land in West Bengal called the 'Siliguri corridor' or 'Chicken's Neck'. It also shares international borders with Bhutan to the north and Bangladesh to the south. North-East India consists of various tribes

and non-tribal groups that share their cultural traits such as food, dress, rituals, customs, language, and the like thus creating their own cultural identity. One of the commonalities among North-East India is its richness in age-long weaving culture and biodiversity. The vibrant textile tradition of the region enables one to understand the relationship between nature and culture, through the motifs and patterns used in the traditional attires. These motifs and patterns thus hold socially constructed meaning which is often contested.

However, after the annexation of the British in India and particularly in North-East India the series of events that occurred have a deep impact on society. Introduction to British administration, education system, trade, industrialization, and growth of urbanization has dismantled the traditional setup of the society thus recreating ruckus in the region. The late nineteenth century brought new experiences and challenges in the region where people got strangled between tradition and modernity. One of the major challenges faced by the people in the nineteenth century Assam is its shift from the agrarian to the semi-capitalist economy.

Assam has been a traditional economy until the British annexed Assam in the early nineteenth century. Agriculture was the primary occupation and an important source of livelihood in the region. However, among the womenfolk, the art of weaving was immensely popular. One cannot overlook the traditional art of weaving that has occupied a special place in Assamese culture. Many notable personalities during their visit have remarked and praised about the weaving culture in Assam. Such as Mahatma Gandhi during his visit to Assam remarked that the Assamese female weaver can weave dreams in their handmade clothes (Goswami, 2000, 53). It played a significant role in women's lives and was inseparable to them. Weaving among the Assamese forms girls' part of education and was a part of women's ordinary household duties (Samman, 1897). It is so intrinsic to Assamese women that during marriage proposal the bride is being questioned whether she acquires the knowledge of weaving or not. One who knows weaving was considered to be an ideal woman in Assamese culture. However, during the colonial period, there was a decline in the status of weaving culture deeply affected by the increasing imports from abroad.

If one looks at the history of dress in Assam, probably the oldest and most usual form of dress in pre-colonial Assam were draped clothing styles with tucks and fold. Existing sculptures (before the eighteenth century) and visual data such as photographs, give an idea of the clothing tradition in Assam. Albeit, very few writings on the Assamese dress and its significance as a part of material culture are found in the region.

This study entails drawing on visual ethnographic data and archival material to understand the role of clothing as an important part of material culture in Assamese society as well as a new challenging way of understanding the symbolic entity that clothing holds in contemporary times. Though the term 'Assamese' has always remained contested the researcher here used the term to refer to the groups who use Assamese as their mother-tongue.

## **Methodology**

### ***Objectives***

The objective of this study is to explore the sartorial changes of women in Assamese society. Furthermore, it will analyze the role of clothing as a significant part of material culture and scrutinize various reasons that lead to the gradual change of clothing among the Assamese over the years.

### ***Area(s) of Study***

Fieldwork for the study was conducted in Tezpur under Sonitpur district in Assam. The selected area is culturally and historically significant as the region has witnessed various socio-political events over the years. These series of events have had a tremendous impact on people thus establishing a new perspective towards clothing that will be discussed below.

Data was collected through structured interviews by using the photo-elicitation method. The method was effective in a way that it enables the interviewee to recall their memories and provide a room for spontaneous conversation. However, secondary data such as books, archival materials were also used in the research. A total of 40 people was interviewed, both male and female. The age group of interviewees was in between 20-80 years.

### ***Result and Discussion***

Clothing as a significant part of the material culture not only enhances one's self (personal values) but it tends to understand the values assigned to clothing as a tangible artifact. As Woodward says, clothing is "not seen as simply reflecting given aspects of the self but is co-constitutive of facets such as identity, sexuality, and social role." (Woodward in Miller, 2005:21 as cited in Wright,2009). Hence, giving more creditability to the clothed body the 'self' is being manifested and visualized through the clothing one wears, whereas factors like identity, class, caste, hierarchy are closely linked to clothing. This research on women dresses discovers the role of clothing in Assamese culture while critically analyzing the change over the years. Apart from its utilitarian aspects, clothing now holds connotative meaning thus acting as a tool for communication between cultures. As an artifact, clothing conceals our physical appearance as Barthes points out, "the body cannot signify, clothing guarantees the passage from sentence to meaning" (Barthes, 1995: 258 as cited in Wright,2009) thus manifesting the 'self' while the clothing being a mediator in communicating in the social world through the qualities it encompasses.

Historical texts on Assamese women's dress reflect that the most common and earliest form of clothing among the Assamese was that of tuck and folds which was often weaved by the women themselves. The art of weaving was much popular among the Assamese women folks and played a significant role in their lives since owning the art of weaving once regarded as a significant characteristic of an 'ideal-woman'. Weaving was an important criterion that needs to be fulfilled during marriage proposals. Thus, the weaving culture in Assam has always been rich and intrinsic in the region and closely associated with women's lives.

However, the British annexation in Assam gradually dismantled the traditional Assamese society affecting its socio-economic and cultural factors. Further, the series of events that occurred from the nineteenth century also brought tremendous change under strong political grounds. The period British annexed Assam, the industrial revolution already reached its peak in Britain, thus affecting the traditional weaving culture and the small local industries in Assam. During the period, the Europeans also tried to strengthen trade ties between Assam with the rest of the world. With the imports of foreign goods, they tried to bring their control in the market system where the imported goods were way cheaper than the locally produced cloth. The traditionally produced industries thus could not compete with foreign goods. This being a prime reason for the diminishing production of local goods in a society where the foreign goods were available for cheaper rates as compared to traditional clothing.

Secondly, throughout the study, it was found that cultural assimilation had a deep influence on the process of change in the Assamese women's dress. With the coming of the British, Assam experienced a new form of administration, educational system, land reform, language thus affecting its traditional roots. British conquest in Assam and the development in the field of infrastructure, transportation, education was solely for their interest. One of the prominent discoveries by the Europeans was the invention of tea in Assam. No doubt the Europeans were successful in building up the tea industry through their skills, experience, knowledge and were determined with a clear vision but the only problem was the unavailability of cheap labor in huge numbers. As a result, during the mid-nineteenth century, the Britishers brought immigrant laborers from the state of Bengal, Orissa (now Odisha), Chota-Nagpur, and from eastern parts of India to employ them in the tea gardens later cultivated in the region. Likewise, large numbers of Bengalis from Bengal for administrative purpose, Marwaris from Rajasthan for trade were also brought by the British during their rule in Assam. Hence, Assam established its connection with other states in India during British rule. In her book 'Women of Assam', Vickland (1927) talks about the range of clothing that she witnessed in the late nineteenth century in the streets of Assam donned by the immigrants settled in Assam. She talks about how few Assamese elites' women started wearing sarees as an adaptation of Bengali culture. Thus, nineteenth-century Assam witnessed a strong amalgamation between cultures in terms of cultural attributes such as dress, food, the language ~~where cultures got exchange~~ and gradually the transformation was visible in the sartorial styles among few Assamese progressive families. Cultural assimilation, as well as inter-state movement, brought the Assamese close to a Pan-Indian culture, clothing being one of the important material cultural traits that were visible in the region. The influence of western and Pan-Indian dresses among the Assamese was due to the hierarchy that exists in clothing. Such as the western dress seems more progressive, modern, and outgoing in comparison to traditional Assamese clothing; in the same way, the Pan-Indian clothes were regarded as superior to Assamese clothing. Clothing thus derive meanings based on power relations linking it directly to one's status in society.

While looking at the change of women's dress in Assamese culture the role of missionaries has a significant role to play. The prime objective of the missionaries was to evangelize the people of North-East India, however their endeavor in the development of modern Assamese language and literature cannot be ignored (Talukdar, 2012). The first impression of the British while coming to India was gathered from encountering Indians in their naked bodies. Newly arrived British women in India recorded with shock not only the semi nakedness of the Indians but also their "low" status, as they moved around barefoot, semi-naked, and so on (Cohn 1996,130). The status of the people was judged by the clothes they wore. With formal education, the missionaries also taught people to be 'civilized,' meaning to cover their bodies with proper clothing. This apparently made people to realize their state of inferiority and uncivilization because they were half-naked. Through clothing, the Europeans carried an aura of representing their form of clothing as superior and more outgoing than that of the regional clothing of Assam. The change was more pertinent among the progressive and wealthy Assamese who went to different states as well as abroad in pursuing higher education and adopted new cultural characteristics during their stay. Since his return from Calcutta in 1845, Anandaram Barooah used trousers, hat, and shoes whenever he visited Europeans or went out for a walk (Hopkinson 1867 as cited in Barpujari 1977,126). Thus, later many Assamese elites started imitating the western styles deeply influenced by the colonial masters and started emulating European lifestyles. On the other hand, the woman along with formal education was also taught activities such as sewing and embroidery. These resulted in the addition of new elements to clothing such as blouses and underskirts to their clothing. The historical perspective tends to look at the variable impact of the European culture and their idea of civilization while analyzing the change in the Assamese dress. The period of modernity that is believed to evolve with the advent of the British in Assam, added modern/western elements that influenced people to adopt new sartorial experiences.

Forty people interviewed during the study provided valuable inputs and their perception of how clothing plays an important role in their everyday lives. Most of the women find the traditional *mekhela chadar*<sup>1</sup> intrinsic to Assamese culture and as a marker of Assamese identity. However, they have also talked about the change in present times where one finds multiple variations of *mekhela chadar* which was very rare earlier.

When asked to one of the informants, aged 85 she said:

Interviewer: *Tell me about the dress you have seen around in your 20s?*

Interviewee: *Women wore handwoven Mekhela Chadar. The use of blouse was absent during our days. It is only in the post-1970s that people were introduced to blouses. Whereas, at home, women would tie mekhela over their chest and feel comfortable.*

Interviewer: *Did you wear a dress other than your traditional outfit?*

Interviewee: *Yes, it was back in the 1980s, when I was gifted a saree from my eldest son who worked in the Army. That was the first time I tried a saree but it was always mekhela chadar that I wore in public places. However, I remember during the Assam Agitation when women were forced to wear traditional mekhela chadar and resist the Pan-Indian clothing in public.*

Few informants mentioned how earlier women in mainly rural areas women were busy in weaving clothes for their own, however, they now see a decline in home-made weaving clothes due to the import of Pan-Indian dress which is cheaper and less time-consuming. However, while selecting a dress women remain very conscious of what to wear since particular clothing possesses socially constructed qualities in terms of age, color, and different spaces. The dress can be both a mechanism for control and can be a strategy to challenge social norms. Thus, in religious events, Assamese women choose to wear *mekhela chador* rather than any other dress for the sake of tradition and as it seems to be appropriate in the particular situation. Another example might be that of a widow wearing white is culturally and socially accepted, whereas resisting the social norm becomes problematic in Assamese culture. However societal norms vary from place to place and individuals. Thus, in the present time, with the flow of modern thought and ideas, and people leading an urbanized lifestyle, societal norms and tradition have been more flexible to many. ~~However, there is always a constant skepticism between tradition and modernity that continues to strive among the people.~~ Another interviewee Minakshi Gogoi (38yrs), talks about the newer trends in clothing and the comfort she finds while wearing a Pan-Indian dress such as the *Salwar-kameez*. However, during religious occasions and celebrations, she tends to wear the traditional *mekhela chadar*.

This shows the multifaced identity that a person deals with the clothed body, where her clothing represents her status as well as her identity. For example, the traditional Assamese women dress is the *mekhela chador*, but it is also regarded as old-fashioned, inelegant when compared to other Pan-Indian dresses which are “classy” and “progressive”. Sometimes people wearing a particular dress can be bullied and mocked to some extent.

Many have linked the idea of modesty, shame, and class with clothing. The sense of modesty concerning women’s clothing was always present in Assamese society. The idea of modesty in terms of women’s clothing has restricted women’s choices thus providing a sense of what to wear and what not? thus ensuring what remains appropriate/inappropriate in culture. This has also helped in regulating women’s sexuality by controlling them in the dominant patriarchal structure, by continuously

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1 Traditional two-piece Assamese women dress. *Mekhela* is the lower garment and *chadar* is a long piece of cloth to cover the upper body.

monitoring their sexuality. Likewise, there was certainly a change in how people (especially women of privileged families) associated dress with modesty. Thus, in the early twentieth century with the change in the socio-cultural order, the reform in dress was equally visible in Assamese society. People became more conscious of their clothing, and the transformation in the Assamese dress was more apparent in this period due to certain socio-political events that people encountered. However, the difference in dress practices can be seen among the Assamese in terms of social order. Hence, high-class women wear only silk clothes as compared to the women of the lower class who wear cotton fabrics. Rare and expensive 'silk' gradually became dominant and used largely by the upper classes. On the contrary, the lower class draped the easily available woven cotton loincloth. ~~Asserting that the rare 'silk' is something that is meant for the rich can no better be understandable what Saikia had written on account of Assam's silk and its uses among people.~~ Saikia (2001) writes: "The silk was a mark of social differentiation to the discerning eye. The *Eri* cloth could be used by the poor without any difficulty. Of all the three varieties, *Eri* was the cheapest and the most common thing of daily use in winter" (2001,67).

However, in terms of women, clothing played an important role during the social movement in the twentieth century Assam. First and foremost, the Assamese women's role in India's Independence has been remarkable in the history of Assam. During the movement, the women boycotted foreign goods and accepted the traditional dresses mainly 'cotton' and 'Khadi' as a protest against the British rule. The shift from silk to cotton was the result of the Gandhian intervention in Indian politics. Gandhi looked into the importance of clothes in people's lives and took it up as an important tool during the Swadeshi movement. Gandhi was one of the first to realize the political potential of dresses. The very act of choosing to wear or not a particular dress was a powerful political statement and this was something that would forever alter the history of dress in India. 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 as cited in Tarlo 1996,64). While wearing the loincloth, Gandhi tried to build a connection with the common people and tried to deliver a message through his attire, and encouraged people to engage more in weaving, spinning, and refraining from the use of foreign goods. However, abandoning of foreign goods was also a strategy to discourage and demotivate the British power.

Another contribution of Assamese women was during the *Asom Andolon*<sup>2</sup> ( Assam Agitation 1979-85). During this period, clothing was used as a significant tool to represent the greater Assamese culture. During the *Asom Andolon*, women were told to abandoned Pan-Indian dresses and to wear the traditional *mekhela chadar* as a symbolic representation of the Assamese. The photographs clicked during the movement provide evidence to analyze how women were mobilized as cultural bearers in both sub-nationalist discourses. The role played by the Assamese women in the Assam Agitation was both symbolic (to represent her as the bearer of an "authentic" culture) and functional (the idea was, after all, to establish the uniqueness of the Assamese as a community).

However, post-Independence, the growth of urbanization has resulted in the upliftment of new markets trade in Assamese society due to better connectivity to other provinces. This brought the traders an opportunity to import more goods in the markets. Other than markets, newspaper advertisement, as well as the Assamese cinema, has a major role to play in the transformation noticed in women dress. The post-1960s have witnessed women starting wearing Pan-Indian dresses (*Salwar* suit, western dress, Saree) moderately. This is considered an influence made by popular culture during the period inspiring women to accept the trend in clothing mainly by few elite Assamese families.

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2 an ethnonationalist movement against immigrants in Assam, mostly of Bangladeshi origin.

## Conclusion

Changes in lifestyle and identities, whether chosen, imposed, or a result of aging, are reflected in our memories of the dress (Slater, 2004). This article is an attempt to strengthen the understanding of cloth as an important part of material culture that seems mundane in everyday life is used instrumentally and linked to the questions of identity, nationalism, status, class, and gender. Clothes as a cultural artifact are embedded with multiple sets of meanings that are shaped by the socio-economic and political forces, reflecting the social and cultural aspects of the time that gives an essence of the embodied experience with clothes. This is discernible in the way Assamese women dress, which has embodied multiple-meaning over time.

The study reflects the layered meanings that clothing beholds and is defined concerning binaries, such as superior or inferior, progressive, and traditional. The binaries are made to distinguish the 'self' from the 'other', where the dominant 'self' tries to shape, create, and reinforce cultural meanings. The role of patriarchy in undermining women's position remains constant in the way women served as cultural bearers. Women's participation during the freedom movement and the *Axom Andolon* displayed women's enthusiasm (to attain public access) and as cultural representatives by accepting to wear the *mekhela chadar* as a cultural symbol of Assamese nationalism and their identity. "Clothes do more than simply cover and fit the body. They are an extension of the body, an extension that proclaims personhood, because people choose clothes that represent who they are" (Becker 1997, 138). Clothes do not have a meaning of its own, but it is the body that makes clothes live and connects them to the world.

However, the continuous renegotiation of identity through dress strives to continue between tradition and modernity. Lastly, if we consider the *mekhela chador* and the Pan-Indian dress as an artifact, then in contemporary times the several ways of clothing depict multiple identities that people use to position themselves to reinforce conventional stereotypes and to internalize the expectations of society.

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## Photographic References

- Figure 1- “[British family with Indian Servants in northeastern India]”. Photograph. United Kingdom: Alamy Limited n.d. Heritage Image Partnership Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo. *Private collection*. <<https://www.alamy.com/british-family-with-indian-servants-in-northeastern-india-image262730857.html>>. (accessed with license 7<sup>th</sup> January 2020)
- Figure 2- “[Lakshminath Bezbaroa with wife Pragya Sundari Devi and daughter (late 19<sup>th</sup> century)]” (Personal collection, ©Avinivesh Sarmah)
- Figure 3- “[The Chalaha family of Sivasagar (former Chief Minister of Assam, Bimala Prasad Chalaha is seen sitting to the extreme left) of 1900s ]” ( Personal collection, ©Avinivesh Sarmah )
- Figure 4- “[Members of the Sharma family of Cholahdhara, Jorhat, (1930s)]” (Personal collection, ©Avinivesh Sarmah)
- Figure 5- “[Family photograph of Nabin Chandra Medhi]” (Personal collection, © Bidyum Medhi)
- Figure 6- “[Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi visits Silk makers in Assam 1946]”. Photograph. Spain: Age Fotostock. *World History Archive*. <<https://www.agefotostock.com/age/en/Stock-Images/Rights-Managed/IAM-WHA-096-0250/1> (accessed with license on 26/-8/2019)>
- Figure 7- Bohra, P., “[Vintage Fashion: 1970s, Assam]”. Blog photograph. Slow Motion Thoughts. c2015. *Vintage India*. <<http://slowmotionthoughts.com/category/vintage-india/>> (accessed 9th January 2020)
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- Figure 9- “[Assamese women in Pan-Indian Salwar suit (1990s)]” (Personal collection, ©Siwani Mech).



## Pictures



Figure 1. British family with Indian Servants in north-eastern India.



Figure 2. Lakshminath Bezbaroa(Assam) with wife Pragya Sundari Devi (belonging to royal Tagore family, Bengal)and daughter (late 19th century).



*Figure 3. The Chaliha family of Sivasagar (former Chief Minister of Assam, Bimala Prasad Chaliha is seen sitting to the extreme left) of 1900s. The use of saree is seen among the women in the picture*



*Figure 4. Members of the Sharma family of Cholahdara, Jorhat, (1930s) The patriarch was Dr. Binondi Sarma who was a renowned physician.*



*Figure 5. 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, Assam.*



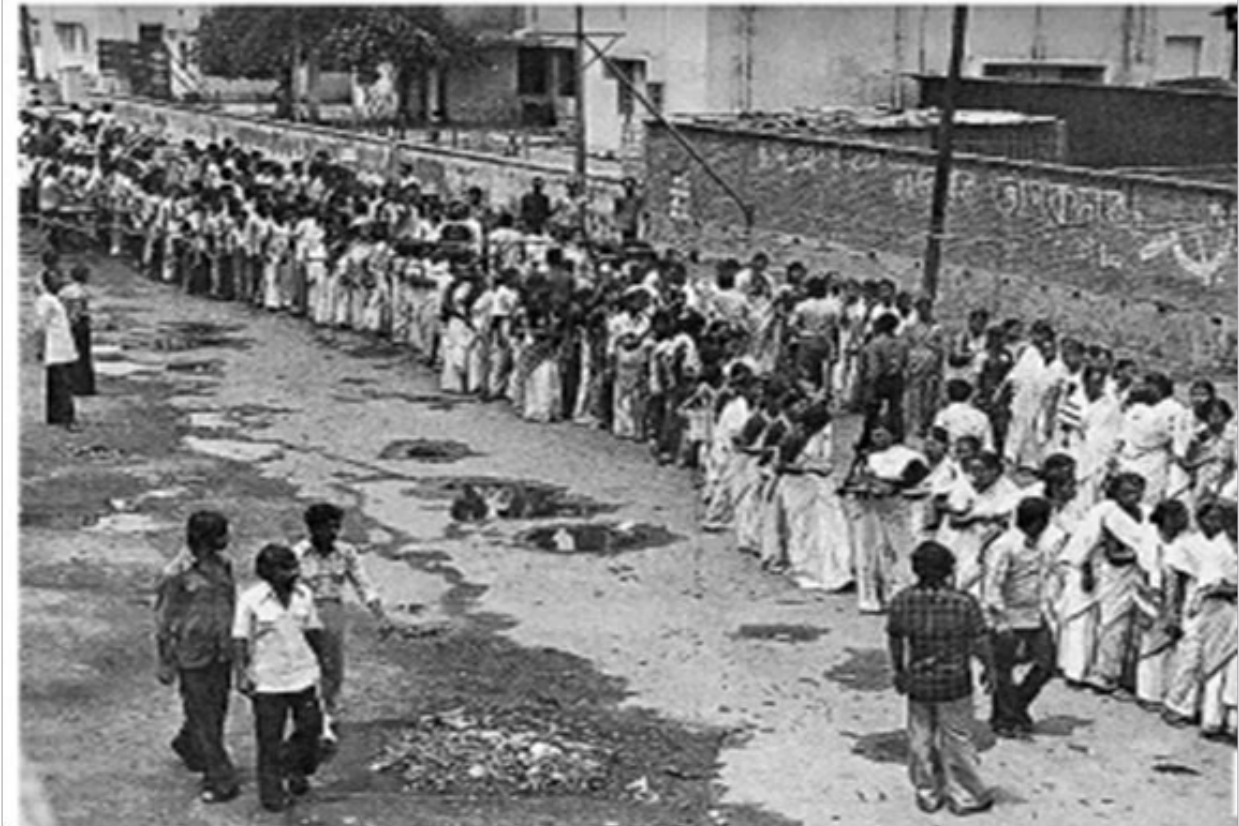
*Figure 6 Mahatma Gandhi's visit to Assam in 1946*



*Figure 7. Taken in the early 1970s in Assam, the women in these pictures are wearing traditional Assamese mekhela, barring one who is in knit collared top and boot cut trousers.*

*Figure 8. The Assam Movement, 1979-1985*

**The Assam movement, 1979-1985**





*Figure 9. Assamese women in Pan-Indian Salwar suit (1990s)*