

Framing Assam and its Diverse People through Colonial Photography: 1846 to 1947.

Debasis Gogoi

Research Scholar, Department of History, Dibrugarh University, Assam, India.

Abstract

The Indian Diversity and Colonial experiences in the context of Assam have many a fact yet to be explored to its potential. In 1840, the practice of Photography was started in India and in the same year Assam Tea Company also began the commercial production of Tea, a period from which the British actually started their strong interest in Assam. The authenticity of the use of Photography in Assam in the 1840's is not known in available records but the British and other Western Photographers have definitely photographed Assam in the 1850's and it stands very clear about the use of Photography in official records from the 1860's and 1870's. Captions and descriptions of images were on many occasions confused and mixed up while documenting the picture in various Print Media's. Even the colonial studies about dates and year of Photo Archives of Assam have been mistaken to an extent. The use of Photography in Print Media also found its position in the Colonial Period. It was only in the 1940's onwards that Photography began to be used commercial by the people of Assam. Photography not only made research about the geographical boundary but also its diverse people and culture.

Keywords: Photography, Colonial Assam, Diversity Identification, Photo Archives.

1. Introduction:

At the very first it has come to light during the research process that there are very few researches undertaken to understand the history of Photography in Assam or explore the narratives of the available Photographs of Assam in the colonial era. Photography, as the great theorist Stuart Hall (1979) expresses that the viewer interprets the meanings of the text based on her or his individual cultural background and life experiences. Hence, available photographs of the colonial era of Assam can more be related by people living with or if a member of the Assamese community. The British narratives of the early photographs of Assam then and now, though have thrown significant light on the history of Assam yet many of those are filled with misinformation and miscalculated. Another theoretician, Susan Sontag (1973) says that the individual who seeks to record cannot intervene, and that the person who intervenes cannot then faithfully record, for the two aims contradict each other. In this context, she discusses in some depth the relationship of photography to politics. Hence Photographic content has to be judged well to avoid any bias.

However, it is still to be recognized that the systematized and care oriented record keeping process and later digital upgradation by the Western Libraries and British Institutes of research has been most vital to trace the history of Photography in Assam and its diversity.

“Looking at the visual record –from its beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century to recent times – poses several challenges...It is a large and varied area that the British occupied between 1860’s and 1890’s, a cultural ‘shatter zone’ in which many linguistic and ethnic groups co-existed and which presented a variety of mutual engagements and understanding. After annexation, this cultural complexity proved to be both persistent and very dynamic – the region has seen astonishing ethnic and religious transformations, splits and fusions over the past 150 years. As a result, the identities of the late nineteenth century hardly resemble those of today. This pose a challenge for historians who are used to following a particular social group through time – we are dealing with moving targets here.” (Pachau and Schendel 2016:6)

2. Objectives:

The Primary objective of the study is to find how through the use of Photography, Britishers identified the demarcation of Assam, its tribes and their geographical habitat.

It shall try to trace various sources of Photographs and the Photographers of the period.

It shall analyse various photographs and their descriptions noted during the Colonial Period.

It shall try to explore new notion of diversity with the coming of the Tea labourers and also western influences among the diverse people of Assam.

3. Methodology:

The research has been conducted with various Primary Data Sources such as Interviews, examining old and Archival photos; Secondary Data such as Books, Research Papers, various websites and social media.

The research work would adopt Historical Analysis Method. Several techniques such as Analytical, Descriptive and Comparative method shall be used. Moreover, extensive field work with oral history also as a type of research has been undertaken in this study. The researcher has taken extensive support of various online means and private photo collections.

4. Broad arguments:

- i) Various published image of pre-independence period misrepresented the identity of Assam and in cases also the chronology of History of Assam.
- ii) Photography made certain assumptions on the diversity of Assam.

1. Early Photography in Assam:

5.1 The Story around the two existing Photographs of Maniram Dewan: Dewan was an Assamese nobleman and a freedom fighter in British India. He was one of the first people to establish tea gardens in Assam. He was a statesman of the Sepoy revolution of 1857. He is considered one of the

most outstanding personalities of the 19th century Assam. Due to opposition faced from the British in establishing private tea plantations he became hostile to the British.



Figure 1: This first portrait photograph of Maniram Dewan as archived in popular and renowned Stock agencies of the world such as amaly.com may be a true picture of Maniram Dewan. Maniram died at an age of 51 years in the year 1858, hence it is possible that this picture is taken before the mutiny years, most probably in the early 1850's. The portrait suggests it to be a Daguerreotype Photograph as Daguerreotype photos lasts long, a metallic background, the grayscale tone & contrast suggests it to be. Photography came to India in the year 1840 a year after the public launch of Daguerreotype process of Photography gifted to the world by France in the year 1839. In the initial years, only British officials and later on a few selected royal families in

India started the practice of Photography. Therefore, this picture of Maniram Dewan must be in the early or mid-1850's as in 1840's Maniram would have been too young. Moreover the turban on the head is similar to that of a Assamese turban called 'Paguri' in Assamese. The research expresses possibility about the reality of the photograph.



Figure 2: Many websites and blogs have termed this particular photo of the person sitting in the centre as that of Maniram Dewan.

But various points have to be scrutinized while determining this photograph. Though the man in the photograph may be a garden "Burra Babu" supervisor as found in various websites yet this particular photo is very similar to an Albumen Cabinet Sized Print. Firstly, this Albumen Cabinet Prints were used only from

the 1860's and Maniram Dewan died in the year 1858 at the age of 51. If it was Maniram Dewan than this photograph should have been taken in the late 1840's or early 1850's. And in this context in the 1840's and 1850's only Daguerreotype and Early Calotype process of Photography were used. None of these techniques resembles the photograph. Early Calotypes were not very sharp images and did not last very long in good condition and Daguerreotype process is a direct positive process, creating a highly detailed image on a sheet of copper plated with a thin coat of silver without the use of negative.

The plate is first buffed and polished until it looks like a mirror. Daguerreotype images are delicate and easily damaged.

From 1840 to mid-1850's no known British or French Photographers or other photographers of India had visited Assam. And in the local context there were no person of Assam practicing photography as early as the Royal Family of Tripura. Moreover, no known Photo Archives or Photo Agencies tag this photograph as of Maniram Dewan as contrary to the photograph in figure 1. Lastly the clarity of the photograph, if taken earlier than the photograph in Figure 1 ironically looks sharper than the picture taken later. Moreover, the facial features, costume including the shoe worn doesn't resemble an Assamese identity. Taking all these points in consideration the researcher has conclude that this photograph has less probability to be that of Maniram Dewan.

5.2 The Photographs of 'The People of India' series published by the Government of India as official evidence of People of Assam.

The book 'The People of India' edited by J. Forbes Watson and John William Kaye is a series of photographic illustrations with descriptive letterpress, The Races and Tribes of Hindustan, originally prepared under the authority of The Government of India and reproduced by order of the secretary of State for India in Council in the year 1868. In total eight number of volumes were published from 1868 to 1875. The interesting fact is that in the first volume itself photographs of people of Assam appeared in the official book.

In context to the People of Assam the photographs along-with brief descriptive features were included in the 1st Volume of the People of India Series. Among them the Tribes who were under the Assam section of the Volume were:

- i. KHANTIS, or KHAMTIS; Wild Frontier Tribe.
- ii. MISHMIS; Wild Tribe
- iii. SINGHPHOS ; Frontier Tribe
- iv. MEREES ; Hill Tribe
- v. KANYANGS ; Hill Tribe
- vi. MOAMURIAS, or MUTTUCKS; Hill Tribe
- vii. SONAIS
- viii. DOOANEHHS; Mixed Race
- ix. KACHARIS, or BODOS ; of Tibetan Origin

However in context to the present day 21st century Assam only five mentioned Tribes are of relevance in the study and the rest four tribes belong to Arunachal Pradesh. They are Singphos, Merees, Muttucks, Kacharis or Bodos and Kanyangs.

"Though thinly populated by straggling hordes of slowly procreating barbarians," and lying profitless in primeval jungle or in wild luxuriance of vegetation, this beautiful tract of country enjoys all the

qualities requisite to render it one of the finest in the world. "Its climate is cold, healthy, and congenial to Europeans; its numerous crystal streams abound in gold dust and masses of the solid metal; its mountains are pregnant with precious stones and silver; its atmosphere is perfumed with tea growing wild and luxuriantly, and its soil is so well adapted to all kinds of agricultural purposes, that it might be converted into one continued garden of silk, cotton, coffee, sugar, and tea, over an extent of many thousand miles." - Journal Asiatic Society, Bengal, vol. v., p. 193... There is perhaps no country of the world, of the same extent, where so many different races of men are collected together, as in the valley and hills of Assam. Who were the aborigines of the province is still a profound mystery; and as the histories in possession of the natives themselves do not contain any record of the ages previous to the first century of the Christian era, at which time the Assam valley appears to have been a populous country, we are not likely to obtain any satisfactory solution of the question. The earliest invaders, of whom any account is extant, would seem to have come from the West, and to have established in the lower parts of the valley a Hindoo form of government over a people whom they regarded as "melech," or unclean.

Though so many years have elapsed since most of the tribes invaded the province, it is still easy to perceive the great difference of physiognomy" (Watson and Kaye 1868)



THE Singphos according to the People of India series are by far the most powerful and formidable of all the hill tribes on the northern frontier of Assam; they are also the most numerous, and scattered over the widest extent of country. The Singphos cultivate with much success the tea plant, to the growth of which their climate is eminently favourable; indeed, it appears indigenous to some parts of their country. Truly the Singphos have been duly credited with the early use of Tea in various researches in present times.



"The Muttucks according to the People of India series were originally a rude tribe settled in a district called Mooran or Muttuck, which, prior to the Ahom invasion of 1224 a.d., had learned the doctrines of the Hindoo religion from two Gosains named respectively Madho Deo and Sunkur Deo. These Gosains were followers of Krisna, and their doctrine differed from that of the other Hindoos of Assam, particularly in their refusing to worship the images of Doorga" (Watson and Kaye 1868). This very introduction about the Muttack with reference to Saint Sankardeva & Madhavadeva is a mistake on the research part of the Photographer and the Author/Editor. However, the facial features, the earrings called as Keru identifies a Matak woman.

6. Other European Photographers:

6.1 Sir Benjamin Simpson: Sir Benjamin Simpson (31 March 1831 - 27 June 1923) was a British Surgeon-General and photographer who served in the Indian Medical Service Bengal from 1853 until 1890. He is one of the first known photographers to have ever photographed Assam.

Simpson Assam in 1867 and 1868 producing illustrations for Descriptive ethnology of Bengal published in 1872. His photographs were also used in the eight-volume series The People of India published 1868-1875.



Figure 3 Kachari Man & Women

Precisely where in Assam these wonderful photographs were taken is also uncertain—perhaps in Lakhimpur or Dibrugarh—but most were probably taken in Sadiya. He brought the aesthetic of European nineteenth-century portraiture to upper Assam. However, when later photographers were freed from official commissions to classify ‘race, caste and tribe,’ they did occasionally produce revealing images, close to tribal life and sometimes with ethnographic value. Still, most of the photographs during the late nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries were taken by British officials, usually during the many military campaigns that penetrated higher and higher into the hills north of Assam.

In the book *Through the eye of time* by Tarr & Blackburn (2008) states that in December 1862, the annual exhibition of the Bengal Photographic Society in Calcutta displayed Simpson’s photographs of the ‘Frontier Tribes of Upper Assam’ (*Journal of the Bengal Photographic Society*, December 1862, p. 68). His second visit to Assam in 1867-1868 is mentioned in *Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* January 1868, p. 28. We know from his service record, written in his own hand, that he ‘proceeded to Assam on special duty to take pictures of the aborigines on the N.E. frontier for Bengal government on 21 Dec. 1867. Returned to Darjeeling on 15 April 1868’ (*British Library*, L/MIL/10/81, p. 104)

6.2 Oscar Jean Baptiste Mallitte. He is also one of the earliest photographers to have photographed Assam in 1870’s whose photographs play significant role in knowing various facts about Assam in the Colonial period. About a dozen photographs are available at British Library website www.bl.uk which establishes various places of Assam. Though huge number of publications, reputed websites and webpages including that of British Library suggest that Photographs of Assam photographed by Mallitte between 1857 and 1860’s yet the researcher strongly denies this notion because Mallitte arrived in 1857 and he was in Calcutta for the next few years hence the photographs cannot be in the 1850’s. The photographs also cannot be in the 1860’s as because while examining one of the photographs of Assam photographed by Mallitte of Guwahati River bank is mentioned as Sukreswar Ghat. While analyzing the picture we can see Northbrook gate on the right side. Interestingly Northbrook gate was constructed in the



year 1874 to welcome British viceroy Lord Northbrook. Therefore, the pictures of Mallitte are taken after 1874 and somewhere in the mid or late 1870's.

Mallitte was apparently a surgeon turned photographer, Mallitte arrived in Calcutta on 23rd July 1857, having set out from Bordeaux on the French ship Victor on 21st April.

He was evidently a practiced photographer on his arrival in India, since within a few months of landing his work was being shown at a meeting of the Photographic Society of Bengal on 21st October 1857. In 1862 he won the extra prize for 'very beautiful collection of ninety-seven photographs' at Bengal Photographic Society Exhibition.

Mallitte had frequently used the albumen process, which afforded great advantages in the form of rich sharp images which as glossy & smooth. It also enabled the photographer to prepare his plates at home, expose them outside, and develop them at a time after the exposure.

6.3 Photographer Rev. Edward H. Higgs of St. Paul's Church, Dibrugarh:

Though there are several photographs by Higgs of the 1850's of tribes of Arunachal Pradesh yet there are hardly any known photographs of Higgs of the people of Assam.

6.4 Bourne and Shepherd: Portrait of three Singpho people by taken by Bourne and Shepherd in the 1890s. The Singpho tribals of Assam are particularly associated with tea cultivation.

This print is one of a series of portrait studies of individuals and groups from Eastern Bengal (modern Bangladesh and Assam). It is possible that they were taken in response to the Government of India's call for photographs representing various ethnic types from across the sub-continent.



6.5 Photographer Fürer-Haimendorf: When Mills was in charge of tribal affairs for the entire northeast, he sent the young Austrian to the Subansiri area to do what virtually all his predecessors had done: investigate the extent of Tibetan influence and establish friendly relations with tribes.

7. Use of Photography by Colonial Photographers.

Photography was used in ethnographic research in India in the first half of the twentieth century. The camera was used extensively by anthropologists who produced large photographic collections.

Photography soon developed vigorously as a local 'vernacular' practice that concentrated on documenting social life as well as private lives. 'Vernacular is a term used to denote photographs that are not intended as art, for example, snapshots, news photos or commercial photos' (Pachau and Schendel 2016: 12)

For, historians of the nineteenth century and onwards, photographs are hugely valuable primary sources. The value of primary sources is that they provide first-hand testimony or direct evidence about

certain events or conditions because witnesses created them. Photographs are of particular interest because they were created exactly at the time when the events or conditions occurred, whereas other primary sources (such as letters, memoirs, autobiographies, or oral histories) are usually recorded later. Photographs thus provide instantaneous eyewitness (or rather camera-witness) accounts. The entire technology allowed people, events and objects to become visible in an entirely new manner by being exposed – and exposing themselves- to the camera. Photography also altered the way in which people related to knowledge about the world around them and was linked to a host of concomitant cultural, social and economic changes. It was not long before photography emerged as the crucial evidential paradigm of the modern world. (Pachau and Schendel 2016: 17-18)

The photographs of 1870's, reflects an early stage of a transformation of tribal life that began with colonial rule in Assam in the early nineteenth century and continues to this day.

8. The Practice of Photography in Assam by early Bengali & Assamese Photographers.

In the year 1897 K.C. Guha started the practice of Photography at Silchar in Assam. In 1899 Ghosal brothers opened Photography studio in Shillong and Guwahati. In that period a few prominent names of Photographers of Assam are Dhoni Bora, Purna Bharali, Bhadra Sharma respectively. In the early 20th century Assamese people too started popularizing Photography. Jyoti Prasad Agarwalla may be regarded as the first trained photographer of Assam. He learnt film-making at UFA Studios in Berlin between 1926-1930. His first film Joymoti (1935) was the fourth talkie which was Cinematographed by Bhopal Shankar Mehta with Technicians from Lahore. However, in Jyoti Prasad's next film Indramalati (1939) he himself was also the Cinematographer.

Muktanath Bordoloi may be regarded as Assam's first professional still photographer. In the year 1940 he started a Photography Studio named Pearl Art House in Amolapatty, Dibrugarh. The studio was in a British bungalow. During the second world war 'The MITRA BAHINI's CAMP' was situated in Barbari where Assam Medical College is situated. During that period the soldiers often used to come to Pearl Art House Studio for taking photographs and then sent those to their family through post. His photographs also reached America and also got published in national newspapers. In 1945, Bharati Studio was established in Dibrugarh. After Muktanath Bordoloi, Noni Gopal Choudhury established Art Gallery Studio at Thana Charali, Dibrugarh where presently a shop by the name Mukherjee Brothers is situated. During that period Art Gallery was a very popular place.

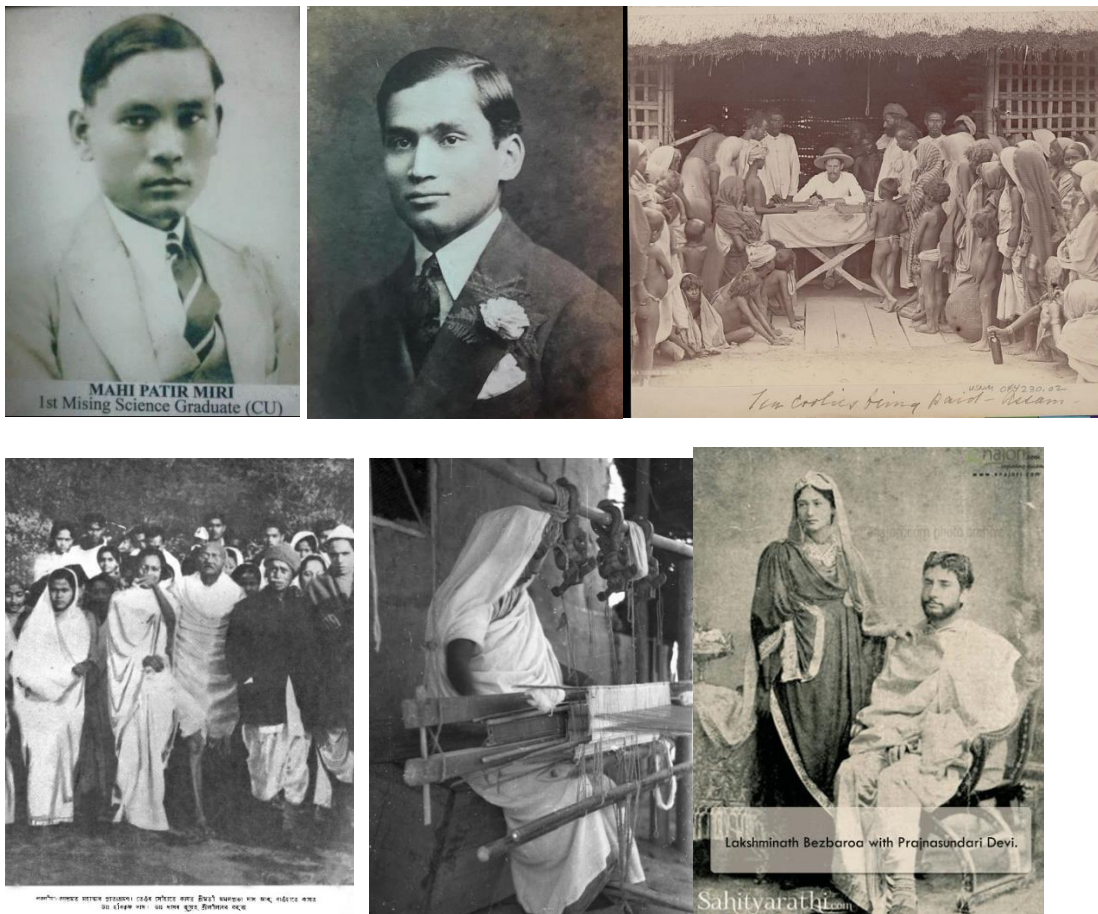
9. Photography in Print Media of Assam.

Orunodoi is the first Assamese-language magazine published from Sibsagar, Assam, in 1846. According to Dimbeswar Neog, "the newsmagazine was illustrated with the blocks made by the Assamese sculptors from the pictures of Illustrated London News."

Prior to 1950s, letter press technology restricted the use of graphics and photographic documentations in the publications. Early display of this form of photographic journalism from Assam is visible in the English daily 'The Assam Tribune' during the latter part of 1930s. The venture started with publication of black and white photographs reproduces with the help of halftone blocks. (Medhi 2019)

The first issue of the Assam Tribune published from Dibrugarh on 4th August 1939 included halftone photographs. Gradually, not only political but also other forms of socio-cultural and sports news also received photographic expressions in the paper of Assam.

10. Some early photographs:



The first picture starting from the left is of Mahi Patir Miri photographed in the 1930's. He is the 1st Mising science graduate from Calcutta University and the first North-East Indian to be selected for the British-Indian Forest Service. The second picture is of Jyoti Prasad Agarwalla in early 1920's. These two pictures speak on how there were western influences in the dress and lifestyle of an Assamese male.

The third picture of Tea coolies in 1920s. The third shows contrast on how migrated woman tea labourers lived in pathetic conditions.

The fourth picture of Mahatma Gandhi's visit to Assam in 1946. In the picture is also seen Smt. Amalprabha Das, Dr. Harikrishna Das and Sri Liladhar Barua. The fifth picture is of a rural Assamese woman in 1930's. These two pictures speak on how Assamese native woman, maintained culture, free from western influences as compared to men. It also showed their participation in India's freedom movement and their multiple roles.

The last picture is of Lakshminath Bezbarua with his wife Prajnasundari Devi, which reflects the beginning of a new modern Assam.

11. Conclusion:

The above data presented proves that the various published image of pre-independence period misrepresented the identity of Assam and in cases also the chronology of History of Assam.

It may be possible that due to the huge number of tribes and communities, Photography made certain assumptions on the diversity of Assam. These assumptions led to consider narratives like most of the place of Assam was settled by rude tribes.

As per the research investigation carried out it was Photographers from France and United Kingdom who mainly had taken early photographs of Assam since the late 1850's and more officially from the 1860's who were either travelers or British officials. However, the practice of Photography in Assam started from about 1897. Photography was introduced in Tripura in the 1850's but in Assam the professional scenario began in 1930's and gained momentum in the 1940's. Though the real photographic scenario of Assam started about a century later, yet the few available records have proved to be a valuable one.

Several questions such as Such as, Which is probably the earliest photograph of Assam, What is the earliest official photographic record by the Britishers of India, Whether Captions & Details of the Photographs and the subjects of Colonial Assam has been biased, Who were the early photographers to have photographed Assam, What new Historical Narratives can be found in studying the Colonial Photographs of Assam, When was Photography practiced professionally by the native people of Assam, Whether Photographs of Colonial Assam has been able to capture the diversity of Assam, Is there any change of Culture or Trend while examining Photographs chronologically from 1846-1947 has been examined in this research.

References (APA):

1. Watson J. Forbes and Kaye William John (eds) 1968. The People of India: A Series of Photographic Illustrations with Descriptive Letterpress, The Races and Tribes of Hindustan. Vol. 1, London, India Museum, W^M Allen and Co, 13 Waterloo Place, S. W. Publishers to the India Office. Accessed 16 Sept. 2020, <https://archive.org/details/peopleofindiaser01greauoft/page/n11/mode/2up>.
2. Baruah, Nalini (2020), personal interview, Tezpur, 1st February, 2020.
3. Baruah, Ranjib (2005) Jyoti Prasad as a Film Maker, Guwahati: Adi Publications.
4. Barpujari, H.K. (2004) The Comprehensive History of Assam; Guwahati: Publication Board Assam.
5. Baruah, Nalini Kanta (2010), Images, Guwahati: Photo Service.
6. Boruah, Bidyasagar (2020), personal interview, Sixmile, Guwahati, 29 January, 2020.
7. British Library (2021) Accessed on 2nd February 2021 [Search - British Library Images \(bl.uk\)](#)
8. British Library (2021) Accessed on 2nd February 2021 [Explore the British Library Search - assam \(bl.uk\)](#)
9. Sontag, Susan (1973), On Photography, New York: Roseeta Books.
10. Falconer, John (2021) A Biographical Dictionary of 19th Century Photographers in South and South-East Asia, Luminous Lint, Accessed Dec 6, 2020 http://www.luminous-lint.com/app/photographer/Oscar_Jean-Baptiste_Mallitte/
11. Indian Tea Association (2008) Indian Tea Association, 125 Years, Kolkata: Indian Tea Association.
12. Karlekar, Malavika (2013) Visual Histories – Photography in the popular imagination; New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
13. Medhi, Rupam (2019), Place of Photography in Print Media of Assam, Ph.D Thesis, Place: Guwahati University.
14. Mazid, Altaf (2008) "Jyotiprasad and Joymoti : The Pioneer and the First Assamese Film" in Garima Kalita & Manoj Borpujari, (eds.) Perspective on Cinema of Assam, Guwahati: Guwahati Cine Club.
15. Pachau, J. L.K. and Schendel, W. V. (2015) The Camera as Witness- A Social History of Mizoram, Northeast India, Delhi: Cambridge University Press.
16. Procter, James (2006) "Reconstruction Work: Images of Postwar Black Settlement", in James Procter (ed.), Writing Black Britain, 1948–98: An Interdisciplinary Anthology Manchester: Manchester University Press p. 92.
17. Saikia, Chandra Prasad (1998), Asomor Batorikakator Derso Basoria Itihaas, Guwahati: Sri Prafulla Chandra Boruah.

Framing Assam and its Diverse People through Colonial Photography: 1846 to 1947.

18. Sarma Avinibesh (2018), Singpho Tribes Accessed on 3rd February 2020
<https://www.facebook.com/vintageassam/photos/a.409561135895682/735378936647232/?type=3&theater>
19. Tarr, Michael Aram and Blackburn, Stuart (2008) *Through the Eye of Time Photographs of Arunachal Pradesh 1859–2006. Tribal Cultures in the Eastern Himalayas*. Brill, Boston.

“I, Debasis Gogoi as the Corresponding Author, declare and undertake that in the study titled as **Framing Assam and its Diverse People through Colonial Photography: 1846 to 1947** scientific, ethical and citation rules were followed; Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry Journal Editorial Board has no responsibility for all ethical violations to be encountered, that all responsibility belongs to the author/s and that this study has not been sent to any other academic publication platform for evaluation. ”