

## Capturing the ‘Savage’ and the ‘Civilized’: Seeing Through the Lens of the American Baptist Mission

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### Abstract

*Oriental discourses’ simplified construction of natives as ‘primitives’ and ‘savage’ was further reified and nuanced with the advent of missionary accounts. These images were further strengthened as missionaries started taking pictures from the foreign fields. The success stories of the foreign field were regularly sent home and those were used to evoke social and financial support for the foreign mission cause. The missionary discourses in the late 19th and early 20th century marked out differences between the new converts and the indigenous population. The impact of mission and the missionaries were measured in terms of ‘civilization progresses made by both groups. This contrast was represented in the missionaries’ accounts of their work among the heathen population and studies in photographs. These photographs published in mission magazines and from private collections are used as a tool of differentiation, and as sources. These photographs were highlighted as a visual evidence of ‘civilized’ and ‘uncivilized’ and ‘Christian’ and ‘heathen’ dichotomy. Whereas the indigenous population was largely constructed from earlier and current ethnographic accounts, projected as ‘savage’, ‘headhunting’, ‘primitive’, ‘naked’ and the new converts were presented as ‘civilized’, ‘educated’, ‘clean’, ‘clothed’. It served to make the missionaries’ work seem like an adventure, a brave struggle not just on the topographical jungle but also metaphorically the jungle of wild ‘unbelievers’. It served to shock and also to move the pity and the piety of the post-industrial west and re-affirm their belief in the superiority and necessity of such works.*

The earliest missionary interest in the northeastern part of India was shown by the Serampore Baptist Mission, which after 1837 was amalgamated again into the parent body of the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS). During the brief period of its independence from its parent body (1816-1837) the Serampore Mission started its work in Assam and Meghalaya. The work of the Mission was encouraged by David Scott, and they started with translation work of the Bible, one school in Guwahati

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though no before they could have a strong base the difficulties of the mission coupled with the amalgamation led to handing over the field to the American Baptists. The American Baptist also had official sanction to start its work. Commissioner Francis Jenkins invited the mission to work among the Khamtis and Singphos of the eastern most part of the Brahmaputra valley. It has of course become a part of the lore of the history of Christianity as how the American Baptist Mission was not merely interested in evangelizing the 'tribes of the frontier' but thoughts of it as a springboard to reach the Shan tribes of upper Myanmar and Southern China. Soon enough the futility of attempting to cross the eastern section of the Himalayas became apparent and the American Baptist Mission started focusing on the Brahmaputra Valley and its 'natives'. By 1845 the Baptist Church of Assam was established with three branches located at Guwahati, Nagaon and Sibsagar respectively, though the body was disbanded after few years, the individual mission centres functioned in lines of the mission structure.

Soon schools were started in the Brahmaputra valley among the caste Hindu Assamese people. But despite relative success of the schools the number of converts among these people were disappointing for the missionaries. This led to attempts to work with the non-caste Hindu population of the region, the 'tribes' of the hills and the plains. Though as a part of the earlier Shan Mission the American Baptist Mission had attempted some mission work among the Nagas. In the 1850s they started working among the Karbis, a 'tribe' living in the hills near Nagaon. By 1860s started working with the Garos the American Baptist Mission encountered a field where the possibility of evangelization was vast. Initially the Mission Centre was the Goalpara but with growing members in the church they relocated to Tura by 1877 and soon the Tura Station became one of the largest for the American Baptist Mission. After the failure to launch the Namsang mission in 1841 the real mission among the Nagas was renewed when in 1871 Godhula, an Assamese evangelist started from Sibsagar to work among the Ao Nagas. In 1876 E.W. Clark moved to the Naga Hills and started living in Molung and by 1880 another mission centre was established in Kohima among the Angami Nagas and in 1885 among the Lotha Nagas in Wokha the third centre was established. From Nagaland the mission's expansion to the neighbouring princely state of Manipur was by accident rather by design. William Pettigrew of the Arthington mission was allowed to work among the Manipuris after the Political Agent of Manipur gave him permission to open a school in Imphal in 1894. British reluctance to jeopardize the political situation in Manipur and keeping in line with their policy of 'non-interference' the political agent asked Pettigrew to shift from Imphal to the adjoining hills which were under the direct control of the former. Pettigrew sets up the mission at Ukhrul among the Tangkhul Nagas and following this he resigned from the Arthington Mission and joined the American Baptist. By the end of the nineteenth century the American Baptist Mission's stations dotted the map of northeast India ranging from Garo hills, cutting across the Brahmaputra valley and climbing the Naga and Manipur Hills. The mission official records document this successful journey of the Mission in celebratory terms referring usually to converting the 'fierce head-hunters' to good people of Christ.

## Visual Sources of History

Historians have often relied more on archival sources for reconstruction of pasts. But as photography emerged as a modern tool the sheer number of cameras and captures created another repository which was often relegated to a secondary status as compared to a written text. As mentioned by Schendel it was much later that the “social life of photographs and social practices in which photography is embedded or gets entangled” are explored.<sup>2</sup>

In the written texts certain aspects are often absent, like ‘material culture and everyday life’ which can be located in visual sources; and others – “the history of memory, of the body, of landscape – are inextricably bound up with the image.”<sup>3</sup>

Though there are several ethnographers who used illustrations or photographs in their accounts of northeast India, visual sources abound too though not in similar large number. Whereas ethnographers and officials recorded the native cultures and practices accompanied by visual sources. Another mode of knowledge construction existed parallel with and in relation with the official ethnography. Missionary accounts of peoples and places are rich with imagery, often not constrained by official diktats. They also photographed the places and people and often very with very different social lenses than the official ethnographers. As mentioned by Joy Pachuau, missionaries were “visually adept and used images to help proselytize the initially illiterate inhabitants” but also to “inform congregations back home about their achievements and hardships – and raise funds to expand their work.”<sup>4</sup>

Van Schendel’s pivotal essay on the Chittagong Hill tracts the photographs of northeast India are interesting because they open up to us the world of photos, clicked by non-professional photographers, and represent ‘certain non-elite categories.’ Whereas official ethnographic record had in mind collection of anthropomorphic data which was expected to lead up to a certain understanding about characteristics of ‘races.’ Missionary photographs deviate from that end though the civilizational differentiation persist in photographic representation. In the official photographs the agency of the individuals’ photographs, as specimens, was limited by their ‘tribal’ label, whereas in the missionary photographs heathen and Christian emerged as major delineating markers, and Christian converts assumed an individuality beyond their ‘tribal’ identity.

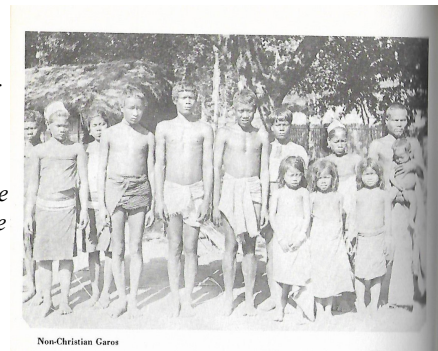
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<sup>2</sup> Schendel, *The ‘Naked Mru’ of Bangladesh*, p. 343

<sup>3</sup> Horsley, “Eyewitnessing? History and Visual Sources”, p. 1318

<sup>4</sup> Joy L.K. Pachuau and Willem van Schendel, *The Camera as Witness: Social History of Mizoram, Northeast India*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 2015, p. 12

*Image 1: The 'scantily' garo men and women. The 'unclean' appearance of these people served as a perfect case for conversion and salvation. Head hunting, heathen Garos needed to be saved. Studies in contrast, before and after were used to generate interest in the work of the foreign mission fields. (Image scanned from Frederic Harding)*



### Christian and Heathen: Stories of Before and After

The complicit nature of the relationship between the colonial state and the missions pushes its head up in every aspect: "Speaking of British colonialism and colonial evangelism in the south African context, John Comaroff (1995, p.226) remarks that it 'was two faced, everywhere a double gesture'. On the one hand, he argues, 'it justified itself in terms of difference and inequality: the greater enlightenment of the colonizer legitimized his right to rule and to civilize. On the other hand, the legitimacy was founded, ostensibly on a commitment to the eventual erasure of difference in the name of common humanity and modernity.'" Similar trajectory of knowledge production and circulation can be applied to the history of the missionary endeavor in Northeast India, where the American Baptist Mission "articulated notions of a common humanity, that is, a humanism, but at the same time promoted themselves as superior and civilized in comparison" to the tribes who they considered in need of "civilizing and conversion."

Therefore, parallel to the colonial state's civilizing mission ran the mission's civilizing mission, and how did the mission reconcile the apparently contradictory ideas of common humanity with notions of superiority.

Photography was an important tool in the American Baptist Mission project, useful for both the metropolitan and colony, becoming simultaneously an ethnographic record keeping, an administrative exercise, and also a record of the personal journey of the individual missionaries. Reproduced in the magazines at home it marked the triumphant journey of the mission, in the wild frontier, jungles, and hills marking a journey of first trials and success. Hence, "Stories and images of "Savagery" needed to be coupled with stories and images of salvation, achieved through narratives of conversion, statistics of burgeoning attendance at church, 'before and after' photographs..."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Richard Eves, 'Black and White, a significant contrast': Race, humanism and missionary photography in the Pacific", p. 725

<sup>6</sup> Richard Eves, 'Black and White, a significant contrast': Race, humanism and missionary photography in the Pacific" p.728



*Image 2: Unnamed woman with all jewelry and traditional dress. This was an often used photograph in the missionary magazine. The popular comment was regarding the heavy brass earrings that women wore on their ears, weighing several grams. (Image scanned from Frederic Harding)*

*Image 3: Dobaki, a Christian came from one of the earliest Christian families in Tura, which is the centre of Garo Hills. Here she is clothed in modern designs made with factory made clothes. She also has draped a shawl in a modern style. (Image scanned from Frederic Harding)*



Dobaki, daughter of one of Tura's first Christians.

This transition or transformation remains one of the focus of official mission narratives, wherein the visual field the numerous presences of the native or the indigenous communities are present. Generally, “In the colonial encounter, space and race are reciprocally related, spatial distance often being used to signify racial distance.”<sup>7</sup> But the mission photos do not tell the same tale of colonial segregation, but subvert colonial power by bringing together spatial proximity.

The encounter of the western missionary with the ‘heathen’ remained a fundamental, focal point of the narrative departure, marking the overcoming of challenges of race, fear and other barriers. The superiority of race is very profoundly realized in these early encounters, as if insurmountable challenges of racial difference makes evangelizing overwhelming. Hence the establishment of racial superiority and its fracturing is a part of the missionary posturing and poster too.

As this piece of auto-biographical writing by Frederic Harding demonstrates his conundrum regarding mission work among the Garos:

*“On the first sight these Garos were repulsive to me and I was disappointed. I wonder how I could ever come to these people. I wondered how I was going to live the rest of my life for them...their smell, Ugh! Ugh! “Na’kam,” Ugh! Ugh! Ugh!”*<sup>8</sup>

Such was the disgust that the stench of the food was compared to sin. Its all-pervading nature and deep presence needed to be challenged and civilization be brought to the Garos and cleanse them of sin. Narrowing the racial fissure was the challenge of the

<sup>7</sup> Richard Eves, p.729

<sup>8</sup> Frederic Harding, p. 51-52, Na’kam is dry fish and is considered an essential staple for the Garos. The Garos are a tribe belonging to the northeastern state of Meghalaya. But they are also found in Assam and Bangladesh.

missionary, which required the dissolution of segregation premised on the concept of love and redemption. The work of the missionary hence required realization about both, as Harding wrote:

*“Once I heard a Garo preacher use ‘na’kam” as an illustration. He likened it to sin. Men who sat in “Na’kam” shops got so used to its stench that they never smelled it. Sin was like that. One could get so used to it, one did not notice it...I knew that if I did not honestly love these Garos, my coming out would be in vain.”<sup>9</sup>*

The schools, the preaching, the touring, the church and even the home brought different people together. These photos while constructing a before and after narrative bring together the plausible imagery of a Christian brotherhood, which was not merely breaking racial barriers but also breaking tribal barriers.

The schools drew pupils from diverse background, and imparting knowledge often was not handled by the white missionary alone. Native teachers were actively taking part in teaching since the early days of the mission. Teaching broke hierarchies, since at the very onset the missionaries themselves had to educate in the language of the people. Since it was impossible to reach the people without their language the relation between a pupil and a teacher was established even before the schools started and the civilizing mission took off. Every activity in the mission was in close collaboration, it was unthinkable to move the mission without native presence. The preaching and touring were dependent on indigenous preachers and support bases in villages.

The domestic space which was with colonial authority an inconceivable idea to penetrate was the site of traffic of ideas and objects. As the mission quite successfully moved into the private space of the indigenous communities the private space of the missionary home was not sacrosanct either. Though servants were a feature of any colonial official bungalow, or a tea planter bungalow, it was also a common feature of the mission bungalow or home. The strict hierarchy and social distancing of the sahib bungalow was not replicated in the domestic spaces of the mission bungalow.

These photos do have an afterlife, as demonstrated by Geraldine Forbes' work on Samuel Perrine, who was an American Baptist Missionary in Nagaland. He was an avid photographer and after his stint as a missionary he became a travelling lecturer, and he used his rather large collection of photos from India, some clicked by him and some by others. This shift of profession also marks a shift in the narration about the photos as Geraldine Forbes writes: “Perrine, the missionary believed the hill tribes of northeast India would accept Christianity and with this acceptance, begin their inevitable climb out of darkness towards the light. In contrast, his popular lectures consigned these peoples to lives of savagery.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Frederic Harding, p. 52

<sup>10</sup> Geraldine Forbes, *Good Christians and Bloodthirsty Savages: Samuel Perrine's Presentations of the Nagas*, ICHR lecture Series publication, lecture xxxii, ICHR, NERC, Guwahati, 2016, p.3

### Sartorial Changes: From 'Naked' to 'Civilized' in Missionary Photos

Photographs also reflect the change in sartorial taste in the new converts in northeast India. The debates around clothing, traditional wear had become a controversial debate in colonial India, the debate moving away from the issue of local industries and western machine-made clothes to the clothes and the idea therein. Hence, clothes and clothing in this context “becomes a marker of civilization and authority.”<sup>11</sup> While many of the ethnographic photos showed the tribes in the indigenous dresses, mission photographs convey the sartorial change, the transformation from ‘naked or semi-naked savages’ to civilized subjects as the “the visible cast of the body was considered a marker of character” for the mission.<sup>12</sup> The new mode of clothing “signified that the wearer had converted to Christianity or has at least come under its influence.”<sup>13</sup> Clothes marked a severance of a relation with the past. Mission influences marked the identity which played out on the body of the convert as a canvas. Missionaries were concerned with notions ‘decency’ or ‘indecent’ and hence the question of attire of women in India, especially in context of nudity or semi-nudity became fundamental in the civilizing mission. Modest dressing code was a universal for Christian womanhood and Indian experiences could not depart from the norms. Bernard Cohn writing about the breast cloth controversy marks out the trajectory of covering the upper body of Nadar women, a shift which challenged existing caste hierarchies.<sup>14</sup>

As critiques of ‘savage’ ‘naked’ communities grew the new converts needed to be clothed. Initially some Naga converts adopted the “Assamese Jacket and body cloth. Later, more explicitly European Styles were adopted, such as long shirts, mauve coats, khaki shorts, or white blouses imported from the plains.”<sup>15</sup> Exploring a similar idea Satish Kumar and Sajal Nag writes, Missionaries detested the tribal insistence on wearing their respective costumes. At the first session of the Ao Baptist Association held in 1897 it was acrimoniously discussed “by what changes in food, houses, sanitation and clothing shall Christians better their mode of living?”<sup>16</sup>

Writing about Garo Hills, Harding notes about non-Christian attires: “They were scantily clad. A piece of cloth six feet long and as broad as a primitive kerosene stove wick, wound around the loins, constituted a Garo man’s overalls, while a piece of cloth twice the size of a man’s hanky tied around the hips constituted the usual dress of the women – this piece of cloth, plus a many beaded necklace and huge brass

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Eves, p. 729

<sup>12</sup> Richard Eves, p. 734

<sup>13</sup> Richard Eves, p. 734

<sup>14</sup> Bernard S Cohn, p. 87-88

<sup>15</sup> Richard M Eaton, p.13

<sup>16</sup> Satish Kumar and Sajal Nag, “Noble Savage to Gentlemen: Discourses of Civilization and Missionary Modernity in North East India” in *Contemporary India*, Vol 1, No. 4, Oct-December 2022, p. 123



rings worn in the ears, as much as 15 lbs. in weight, and often tearing the lobe of the ear.”<sup>17</sup> As the comparative visual eye was active, his later notes made during a tour commented on the very apparent difference and transformation: “These Christian Garo boys were clean, unsmelly, and more decently clad in dhotis and undershirts and their hair was cut and tidy. How different they were from the jungly Garos I had met that same morning! It seemed much easier to like and to love and to live for these Christians Garos. One sign that a Garo is thinking of becoming a Christian is that he begins to use soap and water. But these Christians had once been just like these wild men before they were won for Christ.”<sup>18</sup>

Richard Eaton observes that by the early decades of the 20th century sartorial preferences became a controversial topic between the missions and the colonial state. J.P Mills who was stationed among the Aos, in Naga Hills from 1917 to 1937, “vigorously attacked this practice, stating hot, baggy western clothing not only exposed converts to new diseases and interfered with their field work, but had the adverse psychological effect of causing its wearers not to see themselves as Nagas, but in some ways as foreigners.”<sup>19</sup> So serious had this controversy become that, in 1925 British local officers refused to allow the Mission to start work in a new area until they agreed not to impose western clothing on their converts.” Colonial officials like J.H Hutton, in fact, accused the missionaries of creating a market in the hills for cloth traders of the plains.

H.K Barpujari, one of the early historians of northeast India to have worked on the Baptist Mission and also British relations with tribes wrote “The Cross followed the British flag.”<sup>20</sup> This line is instructive as it establishes the link between the mission and colonialism which makes it a different entry point from the earlier mission histories. As he goes on to mention: “Political and security reasons, not so much of evangelism, that had actuated the local authorities to welcome missionaries into Assam or Northeast Frontier.”<sup>21</sup>

Before the arrival of the missions, colonial ethnography and race theories constructed ‘tribes’ as ‘savage’, ‘blood thirsty’ and ‘uncivilized’. Early encounters with Garos and Lushais in the Bengal frontier and Nagas and Kukis in the Assam frontiers concretised on this definition based on barbaric practices, like raiding and head hunting. The success of the missionaries in Burma and in some fields of Africa was encouraging enough to test whether evangelising would civilize the ‘savage tribes’ and ‘tame’ these ‘unruly’ elements.

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<sup>17</sup> Frederic Harding, p. 51

<sup>18</sup> Frederic Harding, p. 52

<sup>19</sup> Richard M Eaton, “Conversion to Christianity among the Nagas, 1876-19”, IESHR, Vol, 21, Issue 1, March, 1984, p. 14

<sup>20</sup> H.K. Barpujari, *The American Missionaries and North-East India (1836-1900 AD)*, p.xi

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. xiii



To 'Humanise' the Garos who were always at feuds and at times carried their raids into British Districts, as early as 1826, David Scott asked for help.<sup>22</sup> Jenkins, another official reiterated that colonial position: "To put an end to their outrages, there could be no other means than a reformation of their feelings and habits through religion."<sup>23</sup> Moreover as briefly discussed by Roderick Wijunamai the East India Company's economic interests especially of tea and oil well explorations were also served by missionary interventions.

Missionaries arrived in the region informed with notions of 'work among savages.' Hence early missionary texts reflect this knowledge, their own racial superiority. Everything about the tribes, their way of life, mode of cultivation, way of dressing, food, social customs, consumption of alcohol and opium, seem barbaric. This refrain is constant.

Hence, becoming Christian meant a total transformation, at least for the early mission, which would mean developing a 'Christian character' involving morals and ethics and a change of everyday life. Some aspects of social life received more importance – like temperance, hygienic living, role of women being defined in a Victorian way, halt to inter-tribal warfare and headhunting and abolition of certain tribal institutions like bachelor's dormitory and slavery.

Though such transformations slowly took place and it in return shaped the society but over a period of time the notions of identity were incorporated into this newly fashioned self for the tribes. As theological historian Frederick Downs mention Christianity did not sharply break the tribal societies, the challenge of change was tempered with dialogue where the tribes continued with many of their traditions and some traditions were Christianised.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. xx

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