Through Missionary Eyes: Representing and Reforming the Assamese Subject in American Baptist Writings

Hemango Akshay Hiwale

Doctoral Research Scholar, Department of History, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya and Assistant Professor, Department of History, St. Anthony's College, Shillong, Meghalaya

Abstract:
This paper investigates how American Baptist Missionaries in the Brahmaputra Valley constructed and circulated a dichotomous image of the indigenous people through texts and photographs. Missionary records depicted a "before-version" of the people as unclean, indolent, deceitful, and spiritually lost, shaped by the racialized tropes of tropicality and moral deficiency. These depictions justified missionary presence and intervention. The "after-version" presented Christian converts as clean, disciplined, and spiritually elevated - embodying Christian virtue and Western modernity. Drawing on missionary writings, visual culture, and theoretical frameworks such as Orientalism and knowledge production, this paper argues that such narratives were not neutral accounts but ideological projects that helped legitimize colonial rule, missionary labour, and cultural transformation. These missionary representations actively shaped both imperial discourse and local realities, producing an "Assamese subject" who symbolized moral redemption and political utility. This paper situates these representations within broader debates on colonialism, religion, and identity in Northeast India.

Keywords: Missionary Representation, Tropicality, Brahmaputra Valley, Colonial Knowledge Production

Introduction:

An "after-version" photo depicting girls of the Nowgong Mission School along with two ABMs Ms. Long and Ms. Miller. Source: *Historical Series: Mission in Assam*, American Baptist Missionary Union, Boston.

The photograph before us captures a moment in early colonial Nowgong (present day Nagaon, Assam): two American Baptist Missionaries (ABMs), Ms. Long and Ms. Miller, sit poised at the centre of a carefully arranged group of Brahmaputra Valley women and girls outside the Nowgong Missionary Girls School. What might, at first glance, appear to be a record of community or cooperation soon begins to reveal something deeper and speaks volumes beyond the surface - a carefully composed visual statement about order, hierarchy, and transformation. It is not just a record of education or religious instruction, but a visual testament to a deeper project of transformation. In the hazy light of that morning, the girls - barefoot but neat, attentive and orderly - embody the very change the missionaries sought to achieve. Yet, behind this image lies a complex story of moral geography and cultural judgment. What did it mean, in the eyes of Ms. Long, Ms. Miller, and their fellow missionaries, for these women and girls in particular and the people of the Brahmaputra Valley in general to be "clean," "happy," or "redeemed"? What had they been before this transformation?

This paper explores how ABMs in the Brahmaputra Valley constructed a moral and cultural map that marked bodies, behaviours and cultural rituals as either virtuous or deficient. Missionary writings and photographs repeatedly depicted the people of the Valley as embodying negative traits -laziness, deceitfulness, and adherence to 'demon worship' - not as fleeting behaviours but as intrinsic qualities tied to place and climate. The tropical landscape was imagined as a site of degeneration, demanding intervention. Yet, running alongside this discourse of decline was a hopeful narrative of renewal. Missionaries chronicled visible signs of change among converts, contrasting what scholars like Pathak call a "before" and "after" depictions with images like the one attached here, where cleanliness, order, and Christian virtue stood in stark relief against earlier portrayals of disorder and moral failure (Pathak, 2023, p. 15). Conversion was framed as a comprehensive transformation of self - physical, moral, and social - and these narratives were powerful instruments of validation for missionary work.

This paper follows this arc of transformation. The first section, "Before-Version: Filth, Laziness, and Demon Worship," analyses how missionary texts and images cast indigenous people as inherently lacking discipline and moral clarity, a process of othering that defined the "tropical native" in opposition to Western modernity. The second section, "After-Version: Cleanliness, Order, and Christian Virtue," investigates how these negative images were countered by stories of redemption and civilization through Christianity. By tracing these dual narratives, the paper reveals how missionary accounts were deeply ideological. Far from neutral descriptions, they participated in colonial systems of classification and hierarchy, shaping not only perceptions but also lived realities. The missionary gaze, embodied in texts and images like the one here, became a mirror through which the people of the Brahmaputra Valley were taught to see themselves anew.

Before-Version: Filth, Laziness, and Demon Worship:

The ABMs, like their colonial counterparts, arrived in the Brahmaputra Valley with preformed categories through which they would interpret and reframe the peoples and landscapes they encountered. This interpretive lens was shaped by a broader imperial knowledge system which, as Driver and Martins argue, sought to map moral and psychological inferiority onto colonized peoples and spaces in order to legitimize Western intervention (Driver & Martins, 2005, p. 7). These narratives operated within a dual framework: on the one hand, the Valley was rendered as a lush and bountiful landscape teeming with potential, and on the other, its people were depicted as morally, physically, and spiritually deficient. Thus, in the construction of the "Assamese subject" through ABMs' writings, the first and most decisive narrative arc

was one of deficiency. The missionary writings – whether reports, journals, hymns, or visual documentation – did not merely describe; they actively constructed a before-version of the native subject. Before transformation could be imagined, this "Before-version" – an image of degeneracy had to be fully rendered. This was not simply a backdrop for missionary labour – it was the moral and intellectual rationale that made their work imperative. The missionary gaze cast the people of the Brahmaputra Valley as embodiments of tropical disorder: physically unclean, morally deficient, spiritually misguided, and pathologically lazy. These were not incidental impressions, but deliberate inscriptions that worked to establish a dichotomous worldview between the tropical native and the temperate Christian – a dichotomy that was central to the missionary project and the colonial apparatus alike.

The process of othering within these missionary accounts was more than a question of ethnographic misreading; it was a structural feature of colonial knowledge production. As scholars of tropicality have noted, the tropics were not merely imagined as geographic zones of heat and humidity, but as spaces of moral and civilizational lag – zones where time itself was thought to have stalled (Arnold, 2000, p. 6). In this framework, the physical environment supposedly shaped character, justifying the portrayal of the indigenous as slothful, irrational, superstitious, and inherently backward. The ABM writings on the Brahmaputra Valley functioned squarely within this epistemic frame. As Pathak points out, photographic and textual representations of "before" and "after" conversion became tools for illustrating transformation; the former captured subjects as "unclean, unkempt, and inert," the latter as "modernised, clothed, and alert" (Pathak, 2023, p. 15).

In missionary discourse, this moral geography was continually reaffirmed. The people of the Valley were described as deceitful, idle, and addicted to both substances and superstition. They were portrayed as caught in a spiritual fog that not only deformed their moral compass but also compromised their physical health. Even Robinson, a colonial officer stationed in Assam, for instance, linked the supposed laziness of the local people directly to the prevalence of disease, suggesting a causal relationship between moral failing and bodily decay (Robinson, 1841, p. 21-22). In this, we see the extension of biblical moral categories – particularly the sin of sloth – mapped onto ethnographic bodies and communities. Such evaluations were not confined to individuals but extended to communal rituals, agricultural habits, and even climate itself.

This language of deficiency was frequently accompanied by narratives of disgust and disappointment. Ella Marie Holmes, an ABM stationed at Gauhati (present day Guwahati), afflicted with malaria, noted that what troubled her more than her illness was the closeness of what she termed "naked heathenism" – a phrase that reduced lived cultural difference to a sensory offense (Holmes, 1925, p. 50). Similarly, Oscar Levi Swanson, an ABM stationed at Golaghat, described the Nagas as "naked savages," their betel-chewing habits rendering their teeth red and disfigured, while Mrs. Jessie Trevor Moore, stationed at Nowgong, lamented the constant bargaining and "deceitfulness" of local sellers, which she interpreted not as economic strategy but as a reflection of cultural moral failure (Swanson, 1944, p. 62; Moore, 1901, p. 8). Sarma argues that such descriptions of "wildness" and "uncivilized" spaces in nineteenth-century travel writing on Assam were not neutral observations but discursive acts that constructed the Valley as a tropical other, in need of moral and environmental control (Sarma, 2018, p. 4–5). Such tropes, consistent with colonial discourses elsewhere in South Asia, functioned to pathologize native life and legitimize missionary intervention (Said, 1978; Chatterjee, 1993).

This evaluative discourse extended to religious practice. Moore's observations about the Garos and Kacharis reflect a consistent view of indigenous spirituality as demonic. The belief in appeasing evil

spirits, rather than being seen as a complex cosmology, was dismissed as "demon worship" (Moore, 1901, p. 11). In a particularly vivid account, a Hindu boy's conversion to Kachari belief is met with ritual atonement by a priest – a scene narrated with a tone of incredulity that subtly mocked the seriousness of local rituals (Moore, 1901, p. 81). The message was clear: non-Christian belief systems were not only false but grotesque. This aligns with Gogoi's insight that missionary travel literature often filtered indigenous religiosity through the lens of Christian epistemology, rendering it as demonic or childlike (Gogoi, 2016, p. 45–47). Even within the Christian convert population, the missionaries saw lingering signs of moral weakness. Holmes recounted a betrayal involving a native pastor's daughter, using the episode to point to a broader theme of "moral impoverishment" within the Indian Christian community (Holmes, 1925, p. 53-54). This tendency to view conversion as fragile and constantly under threat from cultural relapse underscores the extent to which the missionary project was imagined as an unending moral battle. The converted native remained, in their eyes, a perpetual work in progress.

The language used to describe local lifestyles often oscillated between pity and disgust. The Deshwalli squatters, in Holmes' writings, are portrayed as living in semi-animalistic conditions – "sitting, smoking, eating, and suffering with fever" in the middle of the road, "heedless and rude," their children "semi-imbecile." The moral lens here is unmistakable. What we see is not just poverty but a perceived collapse of the very faculties of conscience and moral awareness. Their perceived unawareness of their condition was, for Holmes, the most damning evidence of moral death. And yet, as she reminds herself, the gospel could "cause even such as these to arise from the dead" – a theological narrative that simultaneously dehumanized and justified her mission (Holmes, 1925, p. 178-179). This pattern extended into missionary interpretations of work, labour, and efficiency. The people of the Valley were seen as unskilled, procrastinating, and dependent. Swanson, describing the construction of his Golaghat bungalow, vented his frustration at workers who were reluctant to act without direct oversight. The leisurely pace of construction, and the reliance on white direction, were attributed to an innate tropical sloth – a trope consistent with biblical condemnations of laziness, such as those in Proverbs 24 (Swanson, 1944, p. 71). In the eyes of the missionaries, these traits were not just obstacles to development but evidence of spiritual sickness.

The missionaries' experiencees with groups like the Karbis further highlight this pattern. Swanson's descriptions focused on opium addiction among Karbi men and an "animalistic existence" among the women. Even poverty itself was redefined: not merely as a lack of resources, but as an absence of moral and religious substance. Swanson declared their souls so "mired in sin" (Swanson, 1944, p. 78) that redemption seemed nearly impossible – a rhetorical move that both emphasized the missionary challenge and sanctified the missionary role. Throughout these writings, resistance to conversion was interpreted not as a matter of personal or cultural conviction, but as stubbornness – a refusal to accept truth. Moore's recollection of a Hindu widow insisting, "Our scriptures are also good," is framed as frustrating rather than as evidence of pluralistic conviction (Moore, 1901, p. 51). The implication was that reason and faith resided with the missionaries; reluctance was thus equated with ignorance or pride. This recoding of religious diversity as moral obstinacy was fundamental to the logic of missionary redemption.

Fig 2.5: A woman of 'good caste' with her children at her home. Source: Ella Marie Holmes, *Sowing Seed in Assam: Missionary Life and Labours in Northeast India*, Fleming H. Revell Company, New York.

One of the more extreme examples of this moralizing gaze comes from Nathan Brown's account of the *daini*. Here, he detailed the ritual practices surrounding sudden or violent death, including supernatural beliefs and symbolic violence associated with witchcraft. Brown's account - likely filtered through multiple layers of linguistic and cultural translation - nonetheless portrayed these rituals as barbaric, drawing a stark contrast with the spiritual "clarity" of Christianity (Barpujari, 1986, p. 182-183). Similar accounts described the communal feast and cremation practices of the Karbis, such as wrapping bodies in coarse bamboo mats or storing cremated remains until a feast could be held, as evidence of primitiveness, against which Christian burial was framed as "promotion" - a term suggesting spiritual and civilizational ascent (Moore, 1907, p. 26). Pachuau and Van Schendel have shown that missionary representations of indigenous funerary rites across Northeast India often became key battlegrounds for asserting civilizational hierarchy through visual and textual means (Pachuau & van Schendel, 2015, p. 55–56).

This emphasis on moral degradation extended even to the realm of medicine. In the *Orunudoi*, a letter by Majfar Hussain criticized local cholera treatments and urged the adoption of Western medicine (Brown, 1855, p. 173-174). The very act of publishing such a letter suggests the strategic deployment of "native" voices to reinforce missionary authority. Western medicine was not just a cure for disease but a marker of rationality and modernity. As scholars have noted, missionary medicine in the tropics often served as a wedge to introduce Western cosmology into indigenous epistemologies (Hardiman, 2006, p. 8–9). Thus, it was never apolitical; it served as both a humanitarian project and a mechanism of social control (Eaton, 1984, p. 16–18).

The rhetoric of transformation was always built upon this foundation of degeneracy. As Dasgupta observes in her work on missionary engagement with the Oraons, the very tropes of savagery and moral disorder were necessary to construct a rationale for intervention (Dasgupta, 2016, p. 453). Likewise, in the Brahmaputra Valley, it was only by insisting on the native's moral collapse that missionaries could stage themselves as redeemers. This was not only a theological logic but a political one. Through narrative and image, the ABMs created a subject who could only be made whole through Christian discipline and

Western medicine. These accounts therefore did more than reflect the missionaries' experience; they produced a specific version of the Brahmaputra Valley's subject - one marked by lack, distortion, and impurity. It was a vision tailored not just for internal use, but for external validation: in letters to donors, appeals to church boards, and reports to fellow missionaries. The subject constructed in these pages was both pitiable and redeemable, primitive yet human, foreign yet capable of being Christianized. It was a version that necessitated continued missionary presence - and in doing so, made that presence not just desirable but morally urgent.

After-Version: Cleanliness, Order, and Christian Virtue:

Where the "before–version" painted the people of the Brahmaputra Valley as filthy, idle, and spiritually lost, the "after-version" - as Pathak identifies - portrayed them as renewed, orderly, and morally upright (Pathak, 2023, p. 15). Missionaries like Mrs. Moore contrasted images and descriptions of native Christian converts with those of their non-Christian counterparts, signalling a linear progression: from unclean and ignorant to clean, conscientious, and godly. This narrative of transformation was not just a personal testimony of faith - it was a cultural script asserting the West's moral ascendance and the ideological backing for missionary intervention.

Mrs. Moore's descriptions of the Garos are emblematic:

"As we looked about upon their clean, happy faces, we thought what wonders the gospel can do for even these wild demon worshippers." Here the shift in language—from "wild demon worshippers" to "clean, happy faces" (Moore, 1901, p. 81).

This signals a broader ideological claim: that Christianity instilled not just spiritual salvation but cultural refinement. This asserted a civilizational hierarchy, where Christian converts were visibly elevated in hygiene, demeanour, and civic poise - virtues aligned with Western ideals (Gogoi, 2014, p. 1-7). Photographically, the distinction was equally deliberate. Missionaries arranged converts in Western-style clothing, neat rows, and proper posture - as seen in the image of Ms. Long, Ms. Miller, and the Nowgong schoolgirls. These visual statements functioned as evidence: proof that mission work produced measurable moral and social reform (Pathak, 2023, p. 16). The photographs were not ethnographic records but advocacy tools - designed for missionary reports, publications like the *Orunodoi*, and appeals to donors. Gogoi's analysis of Assamese missionary travel literature reveals this strategic usage: images and narratives of conversion served to assert religious authority and legitimize the broader colonial presence (Gogoi, 2016, p. 39-50). The missionary narrative portrayed the Christian convert as not only morally but socially improved. Stories described students and village converts as diligent, peaceful, and spiritually reflective - contrasting sharply with prior depictions of drunkenness, quarrelling, and opium use. Katharpi, in her study of colonial modernity in the 'Mikir' Hills, notes how Christianity served as an entry point into education, discipline, and even early political awareness (Katharpi & Dhanaraju, 2021, p. 738). The "after-version" was not just spiritual - it was a cultural remake, positioning converts as functional, literate, modern subjects.

This transformation narrative reflected broader tropes of colonial paternalism: Western missionaries as civilizers illuminating the moral and physical darkness of tropical subjects. It sits within Said's framework of Orientalism, wherein the West defines itself by making its citizens appear morally superior to the colonized "Other" - while assuming the latter must be rescued (Said, 1978, p. 7). The clean, Christians of the Brahmaputra Valley were proof of Western benevolence; the unconverted, proof of destiny needing saving. However, this constructed linear progression ignored indigenous agency and selective acceptance.

Mrs. Moore's "clean, happy faces" could mask individual faith and culture expressed in unique ways. As Pathak and Gogoi argue, missionary writings and photography captured only carefully arranged scenes, not the complexities of lived conversion. The narrative erased local voices and forms of expression, replacing them with a sanitized image of Christian citizenship (Pathak, 2023, p. 18; Gogoi, 2014, p. 1-7). The narrative thus served multiple functions: it offered validation to donors, legitimacy to colonial administrators, and moral justification for missionary presence amid rising indigenous critique. Missionaries couched their work as transformative not only spiritually, but culturally and politically - producing the "modern Assamese." By representing the post-conversion subject as a model citizen, they claimed credit for transformations tied closely to colonial modernization. But as Pathak emphasizes, the "after-version" rested on a binary logic: pre-conversion inferiority and post-conversion moral superiority. This narrative compressed deep cultural processes into a neat before-and-after, ignoring continuity, negotiation, and indigenous appropriation (Pathak, 2023, p. 20). Such simplifications reflect broader colonial discourses in Northeast India, where Christianity was seen as a bulwark against local identity, and un-Western modernity. Seen through this lens, the "after-version" is more than an image of religious success - it is a cultural artifact of colonial power, produced to sustain a moral and political logic of Western superiority. It is a visual and textual promise that Christianity - and the West - cultivates virtue, hygiene, discipline, and progress.

Conclusion:

This paper has traced the ideological arc of representation in American Baptist Missionary writings and photographs from the Brahmaputra Valley, focusing on the binary of the "before" and "after" versions of the native subject. Initially portrayed as slothful, deceitful, morally degraded, and steeped in demon worship, the people of the valley were constructed as embodiments of tropical disorder - products of a geography believed to foster spiritual and physical decay. This representation was deeply entrenched in colonial frameworks of tropicality and othering, in which climate, landscape, and race were interlinked to justify intervention and moral reform.

The "after-version," by contrast, presented converts as clean, orderly, modestly dressed, and morally uplifted. This binary framework was neither accidental nor benign; it functioned as a foundational narrative in legitimizing missionary presence, casting Christianity as a transformative force and Western influence as salvific. Photographs and testimonies were deployed not merely as documentation, but as persuasive instruments, reinforcing the missionaries' civilizing mission to both home audiences and colonial administrators.

Through this constructed dichotomy, the ABMs helped create what can be called the 'Assamese Christian subject': a hybrid figure, selectively modern, loyal, and purified of indigenous spiritual and social "deficiencies." This subject was at once a symbol of progress and a silent testimony to the supposed failure of native cultural systems. The missionary archive, then, is not a transparent window into the past, but a curated site of ideological production. It shaped both how the people of the Brahmaputra Valley were seen and how they were taught to see themselves. Understanding these constructed images - textual and visual alike - allows us to critically revisit the intersections of religion, colonialism, and knowledge-making in the Northeast, and prompts a re-reading of history that centres indigenous complexity over imposed dichotomies.

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