

The Postcolonial Reimagining of Northeast India Through Photography

By Disha Bijolia

During our conversation, Mridu K Rai, an anthropologist & Visual Culture Researcher and co-founder of The Confluence Collective from Sikkim, recalls looking through an album contributed by one of her collective's members, Ashwin Sharma, whose mother, Sandhya Sharma, had played an active role during the Gorkhland Movement as a volunteer for the Gorkha National Women's Organisation.

Centred in the Darjeeling hills, the movement demanded a separate state for Nepali-speaking Indian Gorkhas on the grounds of distinct cultural, linguistic, and historical identity and became one of the region's most violent political agitations in the 1980s. In public memory, Mridu says, the movements had largely been associated with male leaders, activists, and named political figures. But the photograph suggested otherwise. As Ashwin's mother began identifying colleagues in the photographs, she told Mridu about leaving in the morning to attend protests, and returning early in the evening to make dinner; a whole life lived in revolt. "If these photos did not exist, maybe I wouldn't have been able to say anything. I would just be a silent figure," she told Mridu.

The postcolonial coinage¹ of the 'Northeast' has been made legible to the rest of the country, often through directional names charged by a sense of strangeness. Scholarship on the region repeatedly returns to a narrow national vocabulary that labels aggrieved communities through the prisms of insurgency, security, and underdevelopment. The region enters the national imaginary as a 'latecomer' to the nation, justified as needing tutelage and protection within a state of durable disorder. Studies on media representation make the same problem visible in everyday public knowledge, producing a region that

appears politically urgent only through a pedagogy of violence. The injury is representational and infrastructural at once, reinforcing a lived essentialism rooted in stereotypes and leaving little space for the poetics of a homeland through which people understand themselves.

Two collectives, in response, have taken upon themselves to create the conditions for their communities to enter their own subjectivity through engagement with archival and contemporary photographic practices in the region. Northeast Lightbox began in 2017 to build a shared space for art-making rooted in Assam and the Northeast, responding directly to clichés that exoticised the region, undermined it politically, or placed it at the margins of Indian contemporary art discourse. The Confluence Collective works from the Darjeeling–Sikkim Himalayas through family photographs, studio images, institutional archives, oral storytelling, workshops, and mobile exhibitions; its members describe this as an attempt to tell hill histories through voices, materials, and memories emerging from within the place itself, and find new methodologies and theoretical frameworks to engage with colonial archives.



The Social Life of Photographs

In his book *Camera Indica*, anthropologist and art historian Christopher Pinney argues that the significance of a photograph is generated through its active participation within society. He shifts the analytical focus away from the technical properties of the camera or the internal psychological response of a viewer toward the way images move through different environments over time. In this view, a picture's meaning is produced by its movement across space and its integration into specific cultural, political, and religious systems, a process where the image becomes a dynamic participant in human affairs. Consequently, the medium does not possess a single, unified identity; rather, its role and the way it is understood change depending on the specific institutions or individuals that employ it. By tracking how photographs move from private homes to public archives or from places of worship to government offices, Pinney shows that they are constantly being redefined by the shifting power dynamics and visual traditions of the world they occupy.



Image courtesy of Aswin Sharma
Family Album / TCC Photo Archive

The Confluence Collective's practice is rooted in this movement of the image across domestic, archival, and public life. Founded by six photographers and two researchers, the collective emerged because its members felt that working together made sense as their values were aligned around creating a more critical and creative space in the region. One of their first projects was the TCC Archive, which began by collecting photographs from families, photography studios, and institutional archives such as Dr. Graham's Homes, described by Mridu as connected to the history of Kalimpong as a city. This collecting and digitising work began informally and grew into an archive of over 20,000 photographs, with the collection continuing to expand. Prashanti Biswakarma, has now joined the collective as the Digitisation and Photo Archive Coordinator, supporting TCC's archival processes.

¹ Sanjib Baruah, *In the Name of the Nation: India and Its Northeast* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020)
https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4393779



Buns & Jalebis, Dr. Graham's Homes birthday celebration, 1933
 Photo: Dr. Graham's Homes / TCC Photo Archive

Among their collection is John Stephen Dick's 1944 photographs from Dr. Graham's Homes that return to Kalimpong the history of an institution founded for Anglo-Indian children born to Indian mothers and British or European fathers, many of whom had been abandoned and left at the margins of both colonial and local society. The 1933 Buns & Jalebis photograph captures the warmth of a birthday celebration against the dark history of abandonment and exclusion. The Margaret's Hope Shootout photo turns to the tea gardens, where six workers were killed and more than 240 arrested in 1955 after demanding wages, bonuses, and dignity; their struggle sparked a mass movement that brought systemic changes across the tea gardens of Darjeeling, Terai, and Dooars. A 1954 photograph of a Deusi-Bhailo group records a singing tradition embedded in Himalayan and Nepali-speaking communities practised during Tihar, a festival that honours the harmony between gods, nature, animals, and humans and is rooted in the Kincentric Ecology³ of indigenous communities. Another photograph is from the time when a historic, British-era concrete arch bridge built in 1933 (Anderson Teesta Bridge) was destroyed in 1968, and communities built the Pharkay Bridge using bamboo and locally available materials. After the 2023 Teesta Glacial Lake Outburst Flood washed away more than eleven bridges, the Lepcha community in Dzongu constructed a traditional cane-and-bamboo Ru-Soam footbridge that reconnected North Sikkim. These photographs document local responses to environmental crises through endogenous knowledge systems. Sourcing these images is part of the collective's ongoing work to build the visual histories of the Eastern Himalayas and reframe them through local, indigenous, and postcolonial lenses.

The collective's work came from the understanding of exhibitions as a way of bringing people from different walks of life into contact with images, histories, and artistic processes, and so did their workshops, inspired by the work of Nepal Picture Library, while adapting those practices to a region where artistic infrastructure still remains in its early stages. The visual storytelling workshop became an annual programme, joined by basic photography workshops, a writing workshop for people who want to write about their own images or another practitioner's work, and an online Reading Circle on visual cultures, archives, and art in public space. Through these initiatives, the collective has enabled the photograph to extend beyond preservation, placing it within a pedagogical framework in which looking, writing, conceptualising, and critical image-making become shared regional practices.

In their latest exhibition, बाउको धुरी छैन / *Father Has No Roof Over His Head*, conceived in collaboration with the Royal Geographic Society-IBG and an Arts and Humanities Research Council UK funded project 'Other Everests' led by Jonathan Westaway, they liberate² the images of Everest expeditions from the Eurocentric narratives of 'the white man conquering the mountain.' The collective entered that vast archive through Chetten Habadar Wangdi and Ang Tsering Sherpa, a translator and a porter, and then moved from the institutional collection into family conversations. The exhibition used their lives to illuminate the broader history of local labour and presence in Everest expeditions, highlighting the people whose knowledge, bodies, and endurance made mountaineering history possible.



Deusi toli, Kalimpong, 27/10/54
 Mithilesh Baraily / TCC Photo Archive

² Mark Anthony Sealy, *Decolonizing the Camera: Photography in Racial Time* (PhD thesis, Durham University, 2016)
https://etheses.durham.ac.uk/id/eprint/11794/1/Sealy_Revised_PhD_Decolonizing_the_Camera_Photoraphy_in_Racial_Time_.pdf

³ Enrique Salmón, "Kincentric Ecology: Indigenous Perceptions of the Human-Nature Relationship," *Ecological Applications* 10, no. 5 (2000): 1327-1332. <https://doi.org/10.2307/26underdocumented41288>

Feminist Counter-Archives

In their work, *Critical Feminism in the Archives*, scholars Marika Cifor and Stacy Wood argue that beyond just preservation, the archival process actively constructs history through repetitive institutional acts that have favoured patriarchal and colonial perspectives. To challenge these systemic exclusions, the authors describe how marginalized social movements utilize archiving as a vital strategy for self-representation and self-historicization⁴. Self-representation occurs when a community takes control of its own image and narrative, producing its own information and records to counter the stereotypes or lack of attention found in mainstream accounts. Meanwhile, self-historicization is the proactive effort to document and preserve a group's own trajectory and experiences as a means of ensuring community continuity and political agency.

Much of Northeast Lightbox's practice, founded by visual artist Devadeep Gupta and photographer/social worker Hrishikesh Chowdhury responds to a similar act of revisiting histories that remain fragmented and underdocumented. "Through collaborative and archival practices, we create spaces where researchers, artists, students, local communities, and practitioners can collectively participate in memory building and think through questions of identity, land, ecology, migration, and political belonging," shares Hrishikesh.

NELB spent two years documenting and digitising the archives of the Samiti, one of Assam's pioneering women's rights organisations, which now includes photographs, testimonies, personal accounts, and print materials. Curated from the Samiti archives, the exhibition *Sisters of Tezpur* wove a history of the women's movement in the Brahmaputra Valley highlighting a century of grassroots women's movements, activism, and social reform starting from the 1920s. The project situated the women of Tezpur within a socio-political timeline of Assam, building an alternate feminist history of the region.

The same archival field also carries the complex positions women occupy in situations of armed conflict. The material gathered in the document names women relatives of armed activists and state armed forces, women militants and combatants, women as shelter providers, women as victims of sexual and physical abuse, women as peace negotiators, and women's rights activists who raise questions around decreasing democratic spaces, political violence, and control over their bodies. The emphasis falls on how women are differently positioned by community and family affiliations, while remaining marked by unequal power relations and stereotyped roles.

Hosted by Northeast Lightbox and NEN in collaboration with the Assam State Museum, The North East Network archival residency, *Eyes That Saw Are Wide Shut* brought together Akhu Chingangbam, Chingrimi Shimray, Lapdiang Syiem, and Pranami Rajbangshi, curated by Kumam Davidson Singh, inviting audiences to interact with artists and practitioners, to understand the processes and underlying issues that led to the work, and gain insight into aspects of women's movements in the Northeast through archival micro-histories in artistic translations. In *Inter-Archives Conversations*, initiated by Asia Art Archive in India, they collaborated with Members of Malaysia Design Archive to discuss the need to work with communities across disciplines and knowledge systems. The conversation was part of The Collective School, a project exploring artist-driven and collective models of learning.



Donation drive led by Tezpur Mahila Samiti during the Chinese Aggression of 1962



Reception Committee for the Fiftieth Annual Conference of All Assam Pradeshik Mahila Sanmilan, 1975

Sustaining such work hasn't been easy. Alongside logistical challenges like limited long-term institutional support, the constant labour of writing proposals, applying for grants, managing timelines, and reshaping projects around funding structures, the collective also had to balance individual livelihoods, artistic practices, research, and everyday responsibilities, eventually stepping back so members could focus on their own professional and artistic journeys. Northeast Lightbox has been dormant for a while. "We still continue conversations, exchanges, collaborations, and relationships with individual practitioners, researchers, and collectives across the region," shares Hrishikesh.

Mridu, too, has had many a conversation with Devadeep from NELB, sharing grievances over building forms of cultural infrastructure. For The Confluence Collective, the 'white cube' experience does not translate into the hills, so exhibitions take place in parks, open spaces, villages, and mobile settings. Its members want to foster a more critical approach to both image-making and community engagement. Yet, the labour that makes this possible remains largely voluntary. The archive is sustained by people who are already photographers, studio owners, researchers, and academics; the work remains a passion project with the needs of a full-time job. Grants support particular projects, but the day-to-day costs of running an archive sometimes mean members taking turns to pay the rent — the sociopolitical imperative of decolonising the region's image and building an independent, self-authored visual culture comes at its own costs and sacrifices.

The entirety of Western thought can be traced back to the Cartesian Dualism that split the mind from the body, creating a hierarchy where art is valued as 'high' intellectual creation and craft is dismissed as 'low' manual labour. This division consequently led to the 'invention of fine art'⁵ as an elitist European construct. Since then, not only are indigenous practices frequently relegated to the domain of the 'body' — dismissed as craft or 'minor arts' because they remain embedded in social, religious, and political community life instead of existing for disinterested contemplation, but their identities too become sites upon which metropolitan fantasies of alterity are continually inscribed. Redefining art, then, through a recontextualization of the region's visual culture — as cultivated by these collectives — is inseparable from the agency of meaning-making itself, which enables a community to autonomize.

⁴ Marika Cifor and Stacy Wood, "Critical Feminism in the Archives," in "Critical Archival Studies," eds. Michelle Caswell, Ricardo Punzalan, and T-Kay Sangwand, special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2017) <https://journals.litwinbooks.com/index.php/jclis/article/view/27>

⁵ Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001) https://monoskop.org/images/9/9d/Shiner_Larry_The_Invention_of_Art_A_Cultural_History_2001.pdf