



# Mediated Aesthetics: A Study of Beauty and Wellness among Two Tribal Communities of Assam

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**Abstract:** Communication always results in the exchange of messages between two or more groups/persons. In recent years, the media has started to play a vital role in the dissemination of knowledge across cultures. In this paper, an attempt is made to find out how the media can influence two speech communities on topics related to beauty and wellness. The Sonowal Kacharis and the Mishings are the two Scheduled Tribes of Assam, with two distinct cultures. They come in contact with different forms of media, the impact of which can be noticed in their perspectives towards beauty and wellness. The paper intends to discuss the different forms of media as channels of communication and their influence on these communities. It tries to find out how the media makes its forays in the world of beauty and wellness among these tribes.

**Keywords:** Media, Channel, Communication, Beauty, Ethnography of Communication

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The tribes were historically characterised by relative isolation, with minimal interaction beyond their immediate communities. The nineteenth century, however, marked significant shifts across various domains—most notably in education and in the development of transportation and communication systems. These changes produced profound transformations in both village and tribal life-worlds in India. The expansion of education and the growing influence of media, particularly mass media, accelerated this process of social change. Increased engagement with the broader world—facilitated by

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transitions from subsistence-based livelihoods to diversified occupations, the emergence of local and regional markets, and heightened exposure to formal education—reshaped the perspectives and everyday practices of tribal and rural populations (Saikia, 2019, p. 200). Within this broader landscape of change, the role of media remains especially significant.

Traditional forms of communication, though influential, were confined to audiences who could directly watch or listen to the storyteller, musician, or Harikatha performer. Village ballad singers and Harikatha artists played a significant role in conveying folk songs, folk narratives, and the great Indian epics (Kuppuswamy, 1994, p. 492), thereby sustaining local traditions within their communities. As science and technology advanced and India's political and economic landscape evolved, a shift in social attitudes followed. Exposure to new ideas helped reduce rural–urban divides and weakened barriers of caste, religion, and language. Modern communication media, with their rapid developments, are now attempting to reshape these dimensions. Put simply, in the absence of robust and effective communication, both economic and social progress are bound to slow down (Kuppuswamy, 1994, p. 493).

By reading a newspaper, or listening to a radio or TV programme, an individual can become a member of a participant society and can find freedom from their own tribe or caste group. However, there is a strong correlation between literacy and the role of media, especially the print media, and only a literate person will identify himself with these new aspects with his rational thinking. But media, especially radio and television, are bringing about a total change in outlook in both rural and urban societies.

This paper analyses how mediated communication interacts with Indigenous knowledge systems among the Sonowal Kacharis and the Mishings. Focusing on the Mishings and the Sonowal Kacharis living in the districts of Dibrugarh and Lakhimpur, the study examines the points at which their cultural worlds intersect with contemporary media practices, particularly in relation to notions of beauty and wellness. Dell Hymes (2001) proposed combining ethnography, the description and analysis of culture, with linguistics, the description and analysis of language. His idea was that such a synthesis would elucidate important relationships between language and culture. Drawing on Hymes' *Ethnography of*

Communication, it examines how media operate as a communicative channel, how messages circulate within speech communities, and how individuals interpret aesthetic cues in relation to beauty, wellness, and bodily care. The analysis is based on qualitative fieldwork conducted in Tenakhat (Dibrugarh) and Panigaon (Lakhimpur) of Assam, supported by observational and interview-based data. The Mishings and the Sonowal Kacharis are both recognised as Scheduled Tribes in Assam. The Mishing language belongs to the northern branch of the Indo-Tibeto-Burman family (Padun, 1972, p. 340, cited in Mipun, 2000, p. 62). Their contact with the Ahoms from the early sixteenth century onwards has made Assamese a familiar linguistic resource, and many Assamese terms have since entered the Mishing lexicon. The Sonowal Kacharis, also speakers of a Tibeto-Burman language, similarly use Assamese with ease, as it functions as the state's official language.

### **Print Media and the Circulation of Aesthetic Knowledge**

Among the various forms of media playing an active role in influencing these people, print media is one such type. Print media includes newspapers and periodicals. The dailies of the metropolitan cities of India had the largest share of circulation, and most of them reach Assam, especially Guwahati. The local dailies of Assam, both in English and in the vernacular language, are also available in almost all parts of the state. Each of these dailies carries a health or beauty-related article either on a weekday or for the Sunday reading. Depending upon the circulation of these dailies, it has been noticed that it influences the people to a great extent. But the most important fact is that it will bring impact on the literate ones, whether from rural or urban areas. For centuries, India remained largely an "oral society" (Singh, 2006, p. 56). With illiteracy being high, the oral form of communication was the main mode of contact for a very long time. The print media soon added a new dimension to the communication process (Singh, 2006, p. 56). Publication of local dailies in the vernacular language, together with advertisement of goods, especially beauty products, led to a change in lifestyle even among the rural and tribal folks. The bulk of the people in rural areas have education either up to middle school or high school, and are not very interested in national or international events. But they get influenced by local events or

regional ones, and the advertisements compel them to purchase such items if available in the local markets. The Mishings and Sonowal Kacharis of Assam, particularly of the above-mentioned districts, when interviewed, replied that they are mostly interested in the advertisements that are displayed on these local dailies. Mina Pegu, 24 years old, a resident of Panigaon village, stated that situations like marriage ceremonies, weaving clothes, bathing ghats, visit to the local markets are the ones where conversation starts among friends and they share and receive new ideas on beauty products and beauty tips. Each speech situation is different from others with regard to the type of participants and the objectives behind it (Misra, 2000, p. 115). She is a class 10th dropout, and she said that she has interests in reading the beauty columns in the vernacular newspapers and magazines. The knowledge acquired is disseminated through chats with friends either in the courtyards of the house, village markets, where they meet friends or in weddings of friends and relatives. Even males are influenced by these advertisements and write-ups. Bimal Kachari, 40 years old, of Tengakhat village, narrated how he treated his skin problems by reading Sunday supplements of *Khobor* and *Sadin* (Assamese dailies). He said that in the afternoons, they sat by the roadside teashop of the village and read newspapers kept in the shop. In the process, they came to know of the various news of the world and also got information on such beauty and wellness tips. These may deal with health and wellness tips, and if he found a solution to one of his problems, then he would definitely try to apply that principle. Bimal mentioned how he was suffering from hair problems and read about the use of castor oil. He was using mustard oil as hair oil for a long time. After reading an article on the Assamese Sunday column, he started to use castor oil purchased from the market. The visible results made him happy, and he even shared this information with others in the village. Generally, the tea shops and village paan (betel nut) shops are the places where the male folks gather in the evening and chat. This is how knowledge gained through some forms of media (traditional or modern) is shared by all members. The advertisements in newspapers and magazines also give a fillip to the sale of some products. Products like toothpastes, shaving creams, face creams, lipsticks, hair oil, shampoos and so on are advertised so convincingly that these people are lured to use these products.

Earlier, it was through oral traditions communicated from mouth to mouth that people learnt to take care of their well-being and look better. Now the channel of communication is media like print media, internet, televisions, movies and the like. With regard to print, the genre may vary from articles to advertisements.

Print media consumption in the field sites is anchored primarily in Assamese-language dailies such as *Amar Axom*, *Dainik Janambhumi*, *Dainik Bhumiputra*, *Dainik Axom*, *Niyamia Barta*, *Sadin*, and *Khobor*. While *The Assam Tribune* and *The Sentinel*—the two English dailies available locally—circulate to some degree, they do not occupy the same communicative centrality as the Assamese papers. Readership trends reveal modest fluctuations: several dailies have gained readers in recent years, whereas *Khobor* appears to have lost ground, a shift respondents attribute either to irregular supply in the villages or to a gradual decline in interest.

Periodicals read by community members consist largely of Assamese-language magazines produced within the state. Publications such as *Priyo Sakhi*, *Nandini*, *Saundorjyo Aru Swasthya*, *Soporibar*, *Bismoi*, *Sasthya Aru Jivan*, and *Sasthya* circulate widely and form part of everyday media practices. Across both groups, readership levels remain broadly similar: 68 per cent of the Mishing respondents and 69 per cent of the Sonowal Kachari respondents reported regular engagement with newspapers and magazines.

A notable feature of the media landscape, however, is the complete absence of national and international newspapers or magazines from the reading habits of both communities. This absence appears to reflect a mix of factors—educational background, linguistic comfort with Assamese, and the limited relevance of distant news contexts to daily life in these rural settings. Yet, despite these constraints, specific genres of media content achieve considerable traction. Articles relating to beauty, bodily care, and wellness draw a consistent readership and have become influential sources of cultural cues. Respondents described how such content encouraged them to visit local beauty parlours and adopt new routines of skincare, haircare, and facial grooming, signalling the ways in which mediated representations of the body circulate into, and reshape, existing aesthetic practices.

## **Radio and Television: Broadcast Media as Communicative Channels**

Radio and television function as major channels for circulating information on regional, national, and international events, while simultaneously serving as educational resources and everyday sources of entertainment. Their extensive network of transmitting stations and language-specific channels allows them to cater to diverse linguistic and cultural audiences. With the expansion of satellite television, access to broadcast media has become common even in remote rural areas. Both All India Radio and Doordarshan offer a wide repertoire of programmes that consciously incorporate folk and tribal cultural traditions, enabling the circulation of indigenous knowledge across communities.

Within this mediated environment, content related to beauty, health, and bodily care travels easily between groups, facilitating subtle forms of cultural exchange. Respondents noted that radio and television programmes—particularly those tailored for women and children—regularly feature advice on wellness, skincare, and personal grooming. Such broadcasts hold a prominent place in their media consumption and often serve as reference points for everyday practice. Improvements in communication infrastructure have also reshaped local markets: products advertised on radio and television have become readily available in nearby shops, making it easier for community members to adopt the commodities and routines promoted through these media. In this way, advertising and health-and-beauty programming not only inform but also influence consumer behaviour and aesthetic preferences within both communities.

Television programmes of the kinds described above draw viewers across generations, with both younger and older members of the communities engaging with them regularly. Women, in particular, often set aside time in the evening—after completing their daily household work—to watch these shows, which they describe as both relaxing and enjoyable. Assamese films, serials, interview-based programmes, and televised discussions on health, beauty, and wellbeing consistently hold their interest. Many respondents reported feeling encouraged and motivated by such content, especially when programmes emphasise looking and feeling good.

Practical advice shared in these broadcasts often translates into everyday routines. Tips on skincare or haircare, especially those relying on

natural or locally available materials, are viewed as especially accessible and appealing. The serials and entertainment programmes also expose viewers to new styles of dressing, grooming, and make-up application, subtly shaping aesthetic sensibilities within the communities. In this sense, television becomes not only a source of leisure but also a channel through which ideas about self-presentation circulate and take form.

### **Cinema and Visual Influence**

With the expansion of satellite television into even the most remote parts of the country, home viewership of films has become commonplace among households that can afford a set. Cinemas in both Hindi and regional languages circulate widely and often blend entertainment with educational or reformative messages. Within the Mishing community, films such as *Jomud Kai* and *Muksub Yalo* are well-regarded examples of cinema produced in their own language. Likewise, *Miri Jiyori*, available in both Assamese and Mishing versions, offers a vivid portrayal of Mishing social life and cultural practices.

The Sonowal Kacharis, who identify themselves as early contributors to the evolution of the Assamese language and culture, have not produced films exclusively in Sonowal Kachari. However, works such as *Dhuli*, a popular comedy filmed in high definition, incorporate the Sonowal Kachari language and depict elements of their social and cultural world.

These films, whether locally produced or mainstream, do more than entertain. Respondents noted that visual representations of clothing, grooming, and bodily presentation often inspire younger viewers and women to pay closer attention to their appearance. Exposure to cinematic styles and beauty norms thus becomes another pathway through which ideas about self-care and aesthetics travel into everyday life within the communities.

The Sonowal Kacharis, much like the Mishings, continue to rely extensively on Indigenous knowledge systems for everyday practices of health, bodily care, and well-being. Unlike the growing beauty-consciousness visible in many communities under media influence, the Sonowal Kacharis do not articulate concerns about “beauty” as a separate domain; rather, bodily care is embedded within routine cultural practices and the use of familiar plants, herbs, and locally recognised remedies.

## Indigenous Knowledge and the Persistence of Local Practices

For both groups, Indigenous knowledge circulates primarily through oral traditions and everyday communicative practices. Drawing on the ethnography of communication, where language is understood as a key site for the production and transmission of culture (Keating, 2013, p. 294), these practices unfold in the shared linguistic worlds of the villages. Knowledge related to skin care, hair care, and minor ailments is passed down intergenerationally in vernacular conversations—exchanged in courtyards, on village commons, at wedding gatherings, or during visits to the neighbourhood shop. These informal conversations serve as the primary channels through which traditional health knowledge is learned, reiterated, and adapted.

The communicative ecology of the community extends into seasonal agricultural life. During harvest, for instance, women and men work together in the paddy fields, singing songs that mix labour with humour and sociability. Such moments are not merely expressive but constitute subtle acts of knowledge exchange, where stories, techniques, and plant uses are shared and affirmed. Because these discussions take place in the mother tongue, the identification of herbs, the naming of remedies, and the instructions for preparing them remain widely accessible.

Community gatherings further reinforce these networks of knowledge. Among the Sonowal Kacharis, various *Sabhas*—such as Lakhimi Sabha, Aai Sabha, and Poriyal Namabali Sabha—act as periodic collective spaces that enable the circulation of information related to health, wellness, and everyday care. These gatherings, while ritual in their origin, also function as forums where practical concerns and embodied experiences are discussed and evaluated, ensuring that traditional knowledge remains both relevant and socially validated.

Through these communicative practices, indigenous knowledge persists not as a static inheritance but as a shared cultural process that continues to shape how communities interpret well-being in the context of changing media landscapes.

The circulation of global commodities and treatment practices has expanded rapidly, introducing new medicines, beauty products, and therapeutic methods into rural markets. Yet, in parallel with these

developments, media discourses across television, print, and digital platforms increasingly foreground the value of indigenous and “natural” remedies. This dual visibility—of modern treatments and traditional knowledge—has shaped the ways in which the Sonowal Kacharis and Mishings engage with health and beauty practices. Rather than displacing local traditions, globalisation has prompted a renewed awareness of indigenous methods, as community members recognise their distinctiveness and attempt to preserve them for everyday use.

Media scholars have long argued that audiences are not passive recipients of information; they interpret, negotiate, and repurpose messages in accordance with their own cultural frameworks (Schiller, 1988, cited in Singh, 2006, p. 60). The present ethnographic observations mirror this understanding. While mass media transform viewers into an “audience,” the people in this study respond actively, adopting certain ideas while simultaneously reaffirming long-standing traditions. Exposure to television, magazines, and advertisements has not eroded their dependence on indigenous healing systems. Instead, it has reinforced the relevance of natural remedies, especially for beauty and well-being.

Empirical observations from the field indicate that the use of local plants and herbs remains widespread. A considerable proportion of Sonowal Kacharis (around 25 per cent) and Mishings (about 45 per cent) continue to depend on naturally available resources for skin and body care. These practices cut across gender and age, although concerns around beauty and wellness are most visible among younger adults, particularly those between 25 and 35 years. Elements of traditional hair-care routines—elephant apple, myrobalan, alkali, mustard, sesame leaves, and rice water—are still in regular use. Among the Mishings, both men and women experiment with locally sourced herbs for skin and hair. In the case of the Sonowal Kacharis, women remain the primary practitioners of such methods.

Interviews reveal that media exposure often encourages a return to, rather than a departure from, indigenous products. Articles on health in newspapers, columns on natural beauty care in magazines, and instructional segments on television and radio have influenced community members to revive the use of oils such as mustard, coconut, sesame, and castor. In this way, global media flows and local knowledge systems intersect, creating

a hybrid space in which traditional remedies persist—not as relics of the past, but as meaningful, contemporary practices shaped by both cultural heritage and mediated messages.

Field observations indicate that the reliance on natural and locally available plants remains substantial among the study communities. Around one-quarter of Sonowal Kacharis and nearly half of the Mishings continue to use indigenous herbs for skin and body care. Concerns around beauty and wellness are most pronounced among younger adults—men and women in the 25–35 age group—who engage with both traditional and emerging practices. Hair-care routines in both communities still feature well-known elements such as elephant apple, myrobalan, alkali, mustard, sesame leaves, and rice water. Among the Mishings, these herbal practices are adopted by both genders, whereas among the Sonowal Kacharis, women remain the primary users.

Interview narratives reveal a subtle but notable shift: exposure to media has encouraged a renewed turn toward natural products rather than a complete move away from them. Many respondents reported re-adopting oils such as mustard, coconut, sesame, and castor for hair and body care, inspired by health and beauty columns in newspapers and magazines, as well as television and radio programmes that advocate “natural solutions.” Media messaging, in this context, does not function as a force of cultural replacement but as a catalyst that reshapes how indigenous methods are valued and incorporated.

The influence of the wider world is nevertheless evident in shifting consumption patterns. Random sampling among the Mishings and Sonowal Kacharis points to a decline in the use of traditional items such as rice powder, black gram, and *thekera* (a sour fruit), alongside a rise in the use of turmeric, mango, and *tulsi* (basil). What stands out is not a wholesale rejection of the old but an adaptation shaped by availability. Herbs that can be grown easily at home have increased in use, while those foraged from the wild are now less commonly used, reflecting both changing lifestyles and changing access.

Another significant shift emerges in how community members engage with media content. Rather than following health advice uncritically, many now actively seek clarification for specific problems—pigmentation, hair

loss, skin conditions—and consult accessible sources. Since the programmes they watch or attend are largely in Assamese, linguistic barriers are minimal, enabling a comfortable flow of information. Media, in effect, connects these tribal communities to a broader world of products, ideas, and health narratives. It also provides avenues to address everyday concerns such as obesity, gastrointestinal issues, and ENT-related ailments, reaffirming the role of mediated communication in shaping contemporary health practices while Indigenous knowledge persists in adapted and hybrid forms.

### **Digital Media and the Emerging Aesthetic Practices**

Despite uneven digital connectivity, many community members are active on social media platforms, frequently sharing selfies, photographs, and images of ceremonial events. These visual exchanges have contributed to a growing consciousness around appearance, dress, and ornamentation. One indirect consequence of this shift has been the emergence of beauty parlours in rural areas, a phenomenon virtually absent a generation ago. Social media, through its circulation of images from weddings, festivals, and community rituals, provides a comparative window into practices elsewhere. For the Sonowal Kacharis, rituals such as *tulani biya* (puberty rites) and weddings remain distinctive; among the Mishings, however, Christian converts have modified several customary elements, bringing ritual changes into sharper public view. Posting photographs online facilitates an exchange of styles and ideas, influencing choices in clothing and jewellery and subtly reshaping aesthetic preferences.

While new telecommunication technologies expose these communities to global consumer goods and beauty cultures, they also contribute to the reassertion of cultural identity. The Sonowal Kacharis and the Mishings have long relied on Indigenous knowledge for addressing everyday health concerns. Globalisation, through wellness columns, beauty programmes, and the proliferation of commercial products, has undoubtedly widened its range of options. Yet many of these products remain financially inaccessible, prompting continued reliance on local remedies for common ailments. Importantly, the global turn toward “natural” beauty care resonates with their existing practices, reinforcing—rather than replacing—the relevance of indigenous methods.

## Interpretation, Negotiation, and Cultural Resilience

Theoretical discussions on media often emphasise the transformation of community members into audiences, but as Schiller (1988, cited in Singh, 2006, p. 60) argues, audiences remain active interpreters and producers of meaning. Ethnographic findings from this study affirm this point. Even with increased exposure to diverse media forms, the core dependence on traditional knowledge systems among the Sonowal Kacharis and Mishings has not declined. Rather, the media becomes one more layer through which ideas are evaluated, adapted, or selectively integrated into pre-existing cultural logics. In this sense, cultural resilience and mediated modernity coexist, shaping new forms of practice while sustaining older ones.

Using Hymes' Speaking model as an interpretive lens, the communicative practices observed among both the Sonowal Kacharis and the Mishings reveal how everyday interaction extends and reinforces shared cultural systems. The key participants in these exchanges are often younger men and women, who engage in discussions that circulate knowledge about beauty, wellness, and bodily care. The *ends* of these interactions—disseminating information, evaluating practices, and negotiating new influences—shape the tone and direction of the conversations. Speech acts range widely, from questions and clarifications to expressions of approval or scepticism, producing lively dialogues, informal interviews, and exploratory exchanges.

These communicative events unfold across diverse settings: family meals, community gatherings, festivals, bathing ghats, cultivated fields, and other familiar social spaces. The *genres* that emerge include not only casual conversations and gossip, but also songs, dialogues, and the mediated forms of communication encountered through advertisements and popular media. Together, these everyday modes of speaking provide crucial insight into how media messages are interpreted, circulated, and incorporated into local understandings. They reveal that the uptake of media among these tribes is neither passive nor uniform; rather, it is mediated through culturally embedded forms of talk that anchor new influences within long-standing social practices.

Mediated communication—whether through print, broadcast, or digital platforms—plays a crucial role in shaping how the Sonowal Kacharis and the Mishings engage with both traditional and contemporary practices of

beauty and wellness. While each community maintains its own indigenous language, Assamese functions as a shared communicative medium in public and semi-public spaces. This linguistic commonality enables seamless access to health columns, radio broadcasts, and television programmes, ensuring that mediated knowledge circulates without barriers.

The evidence from this study demonstrates that media does not erode Indigenous knowledge; rather, it creates a dialogic space in which global information and local traditions intersect. Through mediated forms of communication, tribal populations across different districts gain exposure to a wider repertoire of practices while continuing to rely on familiar remedies rooted in their own cultural histories. In this sense, the media becomes a bridge between modern beauty concepts and longstanding indigenous methods, facilitating selective adaptation rather than wholesale transformation.

## **Conclusion**

Mediated communication has broadened the horizons of the Sonowal Kacharis and the Mishings, exposing them to global aesthetic trends and new forms of bodily care. Yet, the resilience of indigenous knowledge systems remains striking. Rather than eroding traditional practices, media fosters hybrid forms of engagement where global and local sensibilities intersect. The interaction of media and culture among these communities reveals an active, interpretive audience for whom modernity and tradition coexist, shaping a dynamic field of aesthetic negotiation.

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