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Handloom Weaving in Assam: Problems and Prospects

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Abstract - The Handloom sector plays a very important role in India's economy. It is a part of our culture and heritage and one of the largest economic activities after agriculture having the capacity of absorbing a greater number of manpower. In 2009-10 this sector provides direct employment to over 65 lakhs persons in India of which 60.40% are women. This sector contributes nearly 19% of the total cloth produced in the country and also adds substantially to export earnings. The ratio of handloom to power loom in terms of cloth in 2009-10 was 1:5.55.

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Handloom Weaving in Assam: Problems and Prospects

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The Handloom sector plays a very important role in India's economy. It is a part of our culture and heritage and one of the largest economic activities after agriculture having the capacity of absorbing a greater number of manpower. In 2009-10¹ this sector provides direct employment to over 65 lakhs persons in India of which 60.40% are women. This sector contributes nearly 19% of the total cloth produced in the country and also adds substantially to export earnings. The ratio of handloom to power loom in terms of cloth in 2009-10 was 1:5.55.

In India, Commercial looms formed 38.56% of the total looms owned, while 61.44% of the total looms were domestic looms. Of the looms in working order 40.90% looms were engaged for commercial purpose while 59.10% were used as domestic looms i.e., production of these looms was for personal consumption of the household. Moreover, out of the total weavers 47.51% are full time weavers and out of them 60% worked independently, 15% in cooperative societies, 18% under master weavers and the rest under private owners, state khadi and village industries. Moreover, weavers households were found to worked for 197 days in a year in India.

The reservoir of handloom skills is concentrated in the North-Eastern states of India, who together account for 16.83 lakh (60.5%) handloom households out of the total 27.83 lakh units engaged in the Country². Assam alone accounts for 12.41 lakh (44.6%) handloom households, whereas Manipur and Tripura have 1.79 lakh (6.4%) and 1.21 lakh (4.3%) such households, respectively. However, only 13.4% of the commercial looms of the country are in NEI and their contribution to the country's total production of handloom fabrics is merely 20%. In 2009-10, a total of 1403484 weavers are found engaged in this profession in Assam of whom 147042 are full time weavers while 1256442 are part-time weavers³.

Handloom weaving has an overwhelming presence in the socio-economic life of Assam since time immemorial. The loom is a prized possession and has been a way of life in the state. As one of the oldest and largest industry it is known equally for its pristine simplicity and unequalled charm. The techniques of weaving are handed down over generations, allusions to that are available in Assamese literature and scriptures. Assam's handloom industry is basically silk-oriented. The salubrious climate of Assam is suitable for sericigenous flora and fauna. The most prominent and prestigious being muga, the golden silk. Muga silk is not only sensuous and beautiful but also strong and durable. Assam's golden silk is obtained from the caterpillar; *Antheraea assama* Westwood. Widely distributed and cultured in the Brahmaputra valley, the silk worm is multivoltine and non-hibernating. As many as 260707 families are associated with sericulture in Assam in 2009-10⁴. Out of these families the highest 8902 families are involved in muga culture followed by 7623 and 4704 families respectively in "eri" and mulberry culture. The "eri" (Non-mulberry) silk is used in manufacture of warm clothes for winter.

According to tradition, the skill to weave was the primary qualification of a young girl for her eligibility for marriage. This perhaps explains why Assam has the largest concentration of handlooms and weavers in India.

The spinning and weaving activities were popularized and became an indispensable profession of every Assamese household during the days of Ahom regime (1228-1826). The weaving of cloth was not considered as a degraded profession; rather it was practiced by the Brahmins and lower castes irrespective of their social status⁵. Momai Tamuli Barbaruah, a minister of King Pratap Singha (1603-1641) made it an obligatory duty for every household to spin and weave.

There were many looms under the supervision of Royal house, called 'Rajagharia looms' for producing special types of silk fabrics for the use of the members of the Royal family. Such Royal looms were operated by expert female weavers drawn from various places of Assam. Such weavers received grant of rent-free land and other favours in return for their services. These Royal looms were not sufficient enough to fulfill the requirements of the Royal family; therefore, skilled weavers from outside the palace were appreciated for supplying good quality silk fabrics to the Royal house. It

¹Annual Report, Ministry of Textiles, Govt. of India, 2009-10

²Handloom Census of India, Development Commissioner (Handloom), Ministry of Textiles, Govt. of India, 2009-10

³Economic Survey, Govt. of Assam, 2010-11.

⁴Statistical handbook of Assam, Govt. of Assam.

⁵S.N.Sharma, Socio-Economic and Cultural History of Medieval Assam (1200-1800), Govt. of Assam, 1989, Guwahati, p.252.

is learnt from the historical records that for supplying silk fabric to the Royal Family, grants of lands were conferred upon the weavers⁶.

The Ahom kings created a separate administrative machinery to look after the silkworm rearing, reeling of silk yarn & weaving of silk fabrics. During the reign of 'Dihingia Raja' alias 'Shuhungmung' (1497-1539), the mother of 'Bhawanipuria Gopal Ata', who was very expert in weaving, was entrusted with the charge of superintending the twelve score of royal looms⁷.

From the historical records it is learnt that, some of the Ahom Queens were also personally involved in patronising silk industry in Assam. King Siva singha's (1714-1744) consort queens 'Phuleswari', 'Ambika' and 'Sarbeswari' were personally in charge of training the young girls on the art of weaving, as well as looking after the activities of the royal looms in the palace⁸.

A class of people called 'Katonii' or 'Jogis' was famous for spinning and weaving during the Ahom period. It was also found that⁹ weavers known as 'Tantis' and 'Jholas' (Mohammedan weavers) who migrated from other places of India had started weaving silk fabrics in Assam. During the Reign of 'Jayadvajasingha' (1648-1663), Mohammedan experts in embroidery work were brought from Delhi and were established in Assam, which encouraged Assamese people to learn the art of embroidery for the upliftment of indigenous crafts in Assam¹⁰. King Rudrasingha¹¹ (1696-1714) also brought new ideas, techniques & design of the art of weaving from other parts of contemporary India through his envoys and encouraged the Assamese weavers to practice those ideas. These types of encouragement made by the Ahom king gave a boost to the Handloom industry of Assam.

Muga silk fabrics were also exported to the hill districts¹² and Countries like Tibet, China and Bhutan¹³ where it was much appreciated. The silk cloth was an article of trade in Bengal as well as in the Coromandal and Malabar Coasts in the early 17th Century.

The handloom industry is a rural based cottage industry, where spinning, weaving and other processes were done only by hand. Therefore, the labour content in

pre-weaving and weaving operation is predominant as compared to mechanical operations. Handloom industry apart from providing one of the basic necessities of life also plays a pivotal role through its contribution to industrial output, employment generation, and the export earnings of the country. Export of handloom has, therefore, been identified as a "Thrust Area" for the overall development of the sector. The Government is exploring the possibility of making optimal use of the resources to enhance production capabilities of exportable handloom products. The Indian cotton handloom fabrics and made-ups occupy a place of eminence in the sought-after markets of USA, UK, Germany, France, Sweden, Belgium, Netherlands, Japan and Australia. The main items exported belong to the segment of home furnishing which constitutes about 90% of our total handloom exports.

Handlooms have an umbilical linkage with various sectors like transportation, financial services, marketing services, maintenance services, cotton farmers and the rural farm economy and hotels. Many handloom centres are well known tourist spots, drawing visitors from far places of India and foreign countries as well. Moreover, Agricultural labour gets employment in handloom sector during the non-agricultural season. The sector has self-sustaining mechanism, including training for young weavers, irrespective of gender.

Handlooms are environment-friendly. A handloom is an independent and autonomous technology. No energy is required except for the machinery that spins the yarn used. In addition, the way most handloom weavers live is approximately 1/3 the carbon impact of an average Indian and an average Indian uses approximately 1/16 of the world's resources as an average North American. There are no building or transportation costs because most looms are set up in the homes of the weavers or within the village and the looms themselves are anywhere from 20 – 100 years old. They even use bicycles to transport materials from village to village. When one examine a garment by the energy used to produce it, approximately 29% of the energy is used in the weaving of the cloth, according to the environmental group Earth Pledge it is safe to assume that the reverse is also true. The sector thus lends itself to sustainable development policies aimed at reduction of negative impacts on environment and ecology.

Handloom can play vital role in the state's economy; proving sustenance to a large section of the people and at the same time, facilitating economic growth of the region. For this, it is essential to understand the role of handlooms in its proper perspective. In the rural areas, weaving activities are considered as an additional household chore to enhance family incomes and thus raise standards of living. Therefore for the economic upliftment of a large section of the population the development of this sector

⁶W. W. Hunter, *Statistical Account of Assam*, Vol. I., Delhi, B. R. Publishing, p.415.

⁷S.Rajguru, *Medieval Assamese Society*, Nagaon, Asami, 1988., pp.303.

⁸(a) R.Dasgupta, *Art of Mediaval Assam*, N.D.,Cosmo publications, 1982,p.190.

(b) L.Gogoi, *Tai Sanskritir Ruprekha*, Dibrugarh, Banalata, 4th ed., 1994., pp. 75 & 203.

⁹S.Rajguru, *Medieval Assamese Society*, Nagaon, Asami, 1988., pp.305

¹⁰E.A.Gait, *History of Assam*, Ghy.,LBS Publications, 1982,p.190.

¹¹B.C.Allen, *Monograph on the Silk of Assam*, 1858.

¹²S.L.Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, 1985, Dibrugarh,p.438

¹³*ibid*, p.437.

is of critical importance. In a recently conducted survey, NABARD has identified handloom along with other 9 sectors for development for creation of additional employment in the rural areas. If the government extends its support, the tatters handlooms can transform themselves into engines of rural revitalization.

In a study made during 2009-10 among 70 sample weaving centers with 251 looms of Assam, it is found that the production of "Mekhela" (lower part of traditional women apparel) and "Chadar" (upper part of traditional women apparel) sheet together constitutes 76.64% of the total product produced by the sample centres in the reference year. The uses of such traditional apparels are not widespread outside Assam. Therefore, the production is meant mainly for consumption within the state. Other important modern women apparel like "Saree" however has a great demand throughout the country. But the weavers are interested in catering to the needs of the local Assamese customers who prefer traditional apparel to modern apparel. So they produced "Saree" in limited quantity (3.34%), though it has wider market potentials. This indicates that product diversification has not yet taken place among the handloom weavers of Assam.

The actual production of a loom per annum varies depending upon the quality of fabrics, design woven and regularity of the weavers in attending the looms. The annual average production of a loom producing purely plain fabric is as high as 516 m², whereas it is only 142.88 m² if the loom produces fabric with sophisticated designs.

In weaving, each loom provides direct employment to one weaver. Hence, 251 looms of the 70 manufacturing units in the entire sample districts provide direct employment to same number of weavers. However, one assistant (helper) is required between 2 and 3 commercial looms (average 2.5 looms) for preparatory works and also to assist the weavers in the looms for smooth functioning of the units. In small units, exclusively family members of the loom owner do the job of assistant. In the entire sample-manufacturing units, 101 hired assistants are found assisting 251 muga loom weavers in 2009-10. The tender aged boys and girls are generally employed as assistant on monthly salary basis. The assistant after doing the job for two to three years learn the art of weaving and then sit in the looms as learner weavers. The learner weavers are also paid on monthly basis.

The loom, however, do not remain busy in weaving throughout 360 days. The weavers, specially the hired ones, go on leave on various occasions such as traditional festival (Bihu), religious festival (Puja), marriage in family, sickness etc. It is estimated that the working days of a commercial loom is 270 days (9 months). Hence, the total mandays created by the weavers (both family & hired) and hired assistants is 67770 and 27270 respectively. The mandays created by

family members working as assistants in big or medium units could not be estimated, as they only occasionally help the weavers.

Out of 251 weavers employed in the entire sample units, only 19.52% (49) are family weavers. Out of the total 49 family weavers 40 are female and 9 are male. Since the male are primarily busy in managing the unit, they cannot get time to weave.

As per male: female participation rate in weaving in terms of mandays created by the weavers and assistants is concerned, it is found that the female dominate the entire sample units with 55.68% of mandays. In "Sualkuchi" of Kamrup district of Assam, where the commercial weaving centers are highly concentrated, it is more or less equal (male=50.90%, female=49.10%), while in other areas (non-commercial areas), females are dominant (76.92%). This is because, weaving is not popular among the male in the non-commercial weaving areas. Out of the total mandays created by the male hired weavers employed, 93.68% are found in Sualkuchi in 2009-10.

It is also found that most of the weavers did not take any formal training for learning the production process as they learn on-the-job while observing and helping the older family members as well as master weavers. But a few of them took formal training course at the Government centres for both skilled and ordinary weaving styles.

Moreover, in traditional non-commercial areas it was observed that the weavers preferred throw shuttle looms having low productivity which is easier to operate and also cheap. The weavers due to their poor economic condition cannot convert their looms to fly-shuttle one.

The loom owners of Assam are getting a readymade domestic market for their products. But there is no proper marketing channel for displaying and selling the products outside the state, particularly 'Sarees', which could get a good market in the national arena.

Five distinct categories of market functionaries of handloom fabrics are identified. These are selling fabrics, (i) directly to the consumers, (ii) to the private silk stores, (iii) to the private peddlers and vendors, (iv) to the sales centres of Co-operative societies and (v) to the sales centres of Governmental agencies viz. The Assam Apex Weavers and Artisan Co-operative Federation Limited (ARTFED), the Assam government Marketing Corporation (AGMC), Khadi and Gramodyog Board etc. The producers often sell their products to those who offer better price. Therefore, some manufacturers sell their products to more than one category of market functionaries.

Under direct category of sellers the manufacturers sell their fabrics directly to the consumers. Some of them have their own selling counters for this purpose. Some manufacturers sell in

trade fairs, exhibitions etc., and still some more sell directly to the ultimate consumers who visit the manufacturing units for this purpose. It is found that out of total 100 sample loom owners of Assam, 49 sell a part of their products through these direct marketing channels. The quantity of fabrics sold through these direct channels has been 9550.61 square metres (25.17% of the total fabrics of 37944.43 sq.metres produced in 2009-10).

The second category of sellers, i.e., Private sellers plays a very crucial role in marketing fabrics. There are about 100 private silk stores in Sualkuchi itself and numerous such stores are there in other parts of Assam. Silk-store owners or their representatives from outside Sualkuchi come to Sualkuchi and collect silk fabrics, from the weaving units. However, sometimes, fabric producers themselves go to the silk-stores for selling silk fabrics. The silk-stores sometimes order for silk fabric of a specific design as per requirement of the final consumers. It is also reported that some of the silk-stores supply necessary yarn on credit to the poor weavers on the condition that the products would be delivered to them. It is found that 57.57% of the sample producers sell 55.74% (21150.23 sq. metre) of their products through these stores in 2009-10.

The third category of sellers are the peddlers and vendors, who usually collect fabrics from the loom owners and resell them to the ultimate consumers in different areas of Assam. The operational jurisdiction of each of them is restricted to a locality, so that there is no competition among them. 27% of the sample producers sell a part of their products to such vendors who purchase about 13.81% (5240.13 sq.metre) of the total products of the entire sample units in 2009-10.

Only 4% of the sample loom owners sell a part of their products to cooperative societies. Generally, the sales counters of cooperative societies collect products from their member weavers only, but some time they collect fabrics from non-members also. The role of co-operative in marketing the products is, however, negligible; they sell products of about 3% of the workshops in Sualkuchi¹⁴. During the period under reference, this category of sellers purchases 0.83% (314.93 sq. metres) of the total products from the sample units.

There are two centralized marketing agencies set up by the Government of Assam for marketing products of the handloom weavers of Assam. The Assam Apex Weavers and Artisan Co-operative Federation Limited and the Assam government Marketing Corporation, both are registered with Department of Cooperatives, Government of Assam, for providing marketing support to the weavers and artisans. Both the organizations organize a number of

district, state and national level fairs with cent percent central assistance every year.

ARTFED possesses 52 sales counters, one weaving unit in the state and 5 sales counters outside the state (1 each at Kolkota, Delhi, Joypur, Indore & Kanpur). They collect fabrics from some reputed weavers of Sualkuchi. During the period under reference, ARTFED collects 3.62% (1373.59 sq. metres) of the total annual products from the sample units. They generally collect plain sheets where the ARTFED designers put designs on for selling them both in national and international markets. It is to be noted that ARTFED is the only channel through which handloom products are exported to the USA, the UK, Japan etc., and the products so far exported are muga quilt, pillow cover, cushion cover, plain sheets, bed cover, curtain etc.

AGMC also possesses 14 sales counters for selling handloom and handicrafts product in the state and 3 for national market (2 at Kolkota& one at Delhi). They also procure fabrics from the reputed master weavers or manufacturers of Sualkuchi. In 2009-10, AGMC procures 0.83% (314.94 sq. metres) of the total products of the entire sample units for sale. Thus ARTFED and AGMC together sold 1688.53 sq. metres (4.45%) fabrics of the entire sample-manufacturing units in 2009-10.

The sales counters of 'Khadi and Gramoudyog Board' (56 nos) procure fabrics from their own production units. There are about a total of 22 production units of 'Khadi and Gramoudyog Board' in Assam.

The handloom products of Assam are mainly marketed in the domestic market and a little amount exported to different part of India as well as Abroad. There is a great demand of Muga plain fabric in Japan for making their traditional dress called "Kimanu". The main fabrics exported are Plain muga fabrics and design "Saree" of Muga and Mulberry silk.

The Government is exploring the possibility of making optimal use of the resources to enhance production capabilities of exportable handloom products. A provision of Rs. 26 crores was made to implement the Handloom Export Scheme during the 10th plan. From 2002-03 to 2006-07, 57 Export Projects were sanctioned and Rs. 802.42 lakhs were released to various agencies covering 3942 weavers. During the same period, financial assistance of Rs. 1165.20 lakh was released for participation in 47 international trade events to the Handloom Export Promotion Council (HEPC), Association of Corporations and Apex Societies of Handloom (ACASH) and Handicrafts and Handlooms Export Corporation of India Limited (HHEC). During the year 2008-09, 399 marketing events were organized, which includes 17 National Handloom Expos, 74 Special Handloom Expos, 301 District Level Events and 7

¹⁴ P.Baisya, *The Silk Industry of Assam*, Spectrum publications, Guwahati:Delhi, 2005, p.118.

Craft “melas” (exhibition) besides promotion of Handloom Mark through publicity.

The foremost requirement would be to cover weavers with poor education and economic condition in to institutional network like Cooperative. This only help them to mobilize limited resources, provide avenues for collective action and overcome constraints associated with size, promote technological development and enhance their ability to compete in the local and global markets.

Another most urgent need is to ensure that quality raw materials are available to the weavers to participate in an evolving market economy and to break out of the subsistence production cycle. It is found that most of weavers are unaware of the latest designs. The weavers are producing fabrics of obsolete design, no link to seasonal fashion forecasts, the looms has hardly changed leading to low productivity and overpriced fabrics, no change in product profile, low value addition resulting in subsisting wages, weavers are dependents on master weavers and there is no rewards for innovations and little opportunity to develop entrepreneurship. Therefore there is always remaining a gap between the design preference of the consumer and the designs produced by the weavers.

Adaptation of various ethnic designs and styles to contemporary fashions and needs can open a new vista for the sector that can even have global dimensions. The impact of globalization has been seen in the handloom industry of the state. In the backdrop of rural unemployment, new opportunities for employment in rural areas will have to be largely in the non-agricultural sector like handloom weaving. Training should provide in two ways: training to produce new designs and operate the upgrade looms. During the training period the weavers should be paid stipend to compensate the loss of wages during the training period.

A number of scheme also have been taken up by the Govt. of Assam which aim at providing weavers for production of quality fabrics, modernization of looms, creation of commercial motivation amongst the weavers, extension of training facilities, development of textile design etc. the no of beneficiaries (weavers) under Central Sector and Centrally Sponsored Scheme and Programme was 20918 and the total expenditure incurred were Rs.710.71 lakhs in 2006-07. In the same year the Government of Assam has organized 14 nos District level fair and one nos National Handloom Expo for promotion and publicity of handloom products. The Directorate of Handloom and Textile Department directly runs 102 Handloom Training Centers, 98 weavers Extension Service Unit and 20 Handloom Weavers Production Centers in Assam. It covers 11570 nos of villages for its Handloom operation and the total no of weaver engaged is 1313213.

As a part of product diversification, the Govt. promoted organization for silk that will be used for making Jeans. According to Chairman of Central Silk Board (CSB), Govt. of India, the CSB has also developed fabrics that will be used for making every day wear T-Shirts other than “Saree”s and women’s dress material. The CSB has been trying to revamp the image that Indian silk is often associated with women’s wear and is meant for rich and well-to-do. In a move towards product diversification, the CSB have introduced a slew of items like carry bags and visiting cards made out of soft yarn, due to recession, the demand for Indian silk has gone down drastically and exports have fallen by Rs.1000 crore in the last one year. Cheap Chinese silk is giving stiff competition to Indian Silk in the International and National market. Chinese textile products are 10-20 percent cheaper than Indian ones.

The Ministry of Textiles, Govt. of Assam has taken an initiative to promote the “Silk Mark”, an official mark on items made of silk, on the lines of “Hallmark” for precious metals and “Wool mark” for woolen products in order to differentiate pure silk from fake silk. These steps will not only help to promote Indian Silk but also help to beat the double whammy of the economic slowdown and slump in demand.

For upliftment of handloom sector it is most essential to identify the problems faced by this industry. Poor marketing and insufficient market linkage outside the state ails the industry from growing and earning more revenue. Apart from other, innovations in design to cope up with the latest market demand are not sufficient and have posed a threat to this indigenous industry. Therefore, it is high time that all round efforts are made to revive this important and unique industry.

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