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History of Handloom Industry in Assam with special reference to Sualkuchi

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Abstract

The Handloom Industry plays a vital role in the socio – economic structure of Assam in terms of providing employment and production of clothes. At the same time preserve and propagate the rich cultural heritage of Assam. Weaving in Assam is as old as human civilization itself and the art of weaving are being passed from one generation to the next. The existence of high-quality weaving skill and production of fine textiles is well documented in great epics like Mahabharata and ancient treatise like Arthashastra[1]of Kautilya (Choudhry, 1987). Chinese traveler Hiuen Tsang also gives rich description of existence of high-quality weaving products and their general liking of the Royal family and the nobility. Writing is the early 19th century, before the British annexed Assam, Francis Hamilton[2] has given an accurate account of the state of weaving in Assam (Sarma, 2012). This Industry was directly patronized by the state, so much so that queens established weaving schools in the palace, to teach the art of weaving to the daughters of the noble widows and other female members of the household of executed prisoners were also employed by the art for spinning and weaving as a means of subsistence. The neo – vaishnavite movement of the Shri Sankardev was an equally potent force in the development in the art of weaving, especially of figured cloth. After annexation of Assam by the British[3], the Handloom industry declined rapidly particularly in cities. Another British policy of de – industrialization of Assam, instead of export of cotton clothes and silk products, Assam became export of raw cotton and cocoon to fuel the Industrial Revolution in Britain. Despite, dwindling of textile weaving like all other arts with the fall of the Ahom rule, it never became extinct as many other branches of Assamese art. It is still a living art as much in demand as it had been in the medieval period (Goswami, 2012)

Keywords: *Assam, Handlooms, Industry, Sualkuchi, Women, Micro-History, Occupational History*

1. Introduction

Handloom refers to a traditional cloth weaving machine with the help of hand. Therefore, the handloom textile sector is at present giving employment to a large number of people particularly rural areas and in this respect, it is next only to the agriculture sector in Assam. However, the biggest problem being faced by the sector is that the handloom weavers being unorganized face problems in supplying their product of large orders in time due to absence of systematized production.

Some of the unique characteristic features of Assam handloom are as follows: -

a) Highest number of looms and weavers[1]

The 3rd handloom census conducted by National council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) in 2009 – 10 recorded that the total weaver household unit has increased to 14.01 lakh weaver household in the North –East Region from the 2nd Handloom Census record of 14.5 lakh weaver household in contrary to the national trend which has shown a decline trend over the last two decades (Dutta, 2017).

b) Large Number of weaver's clusters

During the last few decades, a number of rearers' and weavers' clusters have been created under various centrally sponsored schemes and other rural development schemes, such as Sualkuchi and Vijay Nagar in many small clusters.

b) Well spread and experienced weavers' cooperative but despite this it covers not more than 30 % of the total weavers.

c) Preponderance of women weavers. Above 90 % of weavers in the state are women.

d) Only place in the world to produce all four commercial important silks viz. Eri, Muga, Mulberry and Tasar. Apart from this it also produces other staple fibres like jute, ramie, bamboo, etc.

Despite the glorious past of Handloom Industry and its continued existence as part of Assamese culture, the handloom industry is still struggling for its survival.

The important reason for this is as follows:

- **Lack of Modernization** - The handloom industry still continues in age – old traditional fashion. Neither new techniques nor methods of production have emerged in the industry, nor, modern managerial practices are adopted.
- **Low wage rate** – Appallingly low wage rate to skilled weavers. This has led to drain of skill. Many former weavers took to other avocation and trade.
- **Lack of Formal Training to Weavers** – Most of the weavers come from weaving community such as, the art of weaving is acquired as member of the community which is passed from one generation to the next.
- **Shortage of Raw Materials** - With increasing area under human settlement and acreage of cash crops; the plantation of sual tree and other silk worm eating tree plant leaves has reduced. Apart from these raw materials are export abroad in the international market as well as in other Indian textile hubs.
- **Rise in Cost of Production** - Increase in labour cost and raw material cost has made Assam handloom industry high-cost low productivity industry.
- **Climate Change** – Fluctuation in temperature causing larvae disease.

The above-mentioned problems need immediate consideration so as to save one of the highest employment generation sectors and more importantly sustainers of rural economy.

Objectives:

In this paper an attempt has been made to study the History of Handloom industry and how it impacted the socio-cultural life of Assamese society. Focus of this work has been to understand the present conditions of handloom industry in Assam in the light of its historical background. This paper uses Sualkuchi as a special case in the study.

The objectives of the paper are as follows: -

1. To study the history of weaving and handloom industry and its evolution in Assam and its zenith.
2. To highlight the various causes of declined of Handloom and weaving Industry.
3. To point towards its role in freedom movement.
4. To discuss the re-birth of Handloom Industry under co-operative movement.
5. To discuss the half-hearted corporatization of Handloom Industry.
6. To discuss possible solutions to the problems faced by the industry at present.

2. Materials And Methods

Both Primary and Secondary sources have been used in the paper Primary Sources includes –

i) Oral interview – one to one interaction with CEO and other senior officers in the industry with pre-determined and set questionnaire. Informal and friendly interaction with women weavers and other supporting staff was also done.

Secondary source includes – Books, Journals, Articles published in newspapers, Websites of Nedfi, Directorate of Sericulture, etc.

3. Results and Discussion

Historical Background Of Handloom Industry In Assam:

Assam has a great tradition of weaving. Since time immemorial the Assamese women, irrespective of caste and social status, have been weaving the daily requirement of their clothes and apparels and have

been taking pride in her works. Weaving in the handloom has been a very respectable day –to- day job for the Assamese women. This weaving tradition has been handed down from generation by the Assamese women folk who excelled in production of extremely beautiful designs in their looms. Mahatma Gandhi during his visit to Assam in 1921 wrote that "Every Assamese woman is a born weaver … and she weaves fairy tales in her looms'.[1] (Silk, June-2004, www.silknet.com)

The practice of weaving has been an important part of socio – economic life of Assamese people. It became part and parcel of Assamese Heritage and Culture. Besides, the professional weavers (tanteevayas)[2] (Choudhary,1987,339), there is evidence of production of cloths in every household. There is documented record of extensive manufacturing of cloths of cotton and of cottage industry. Silk weaving was particularly limited for the nobility and high class and for lucrative trade. Kalika Purana[1] mentions uses and manufacturing of cotton and woolen clothes in Assam (Choudhary, 1987,343).[2]

According to SL Boruah the art of rearing cocoons for the manufacture of various silk cloths was known to the tantuvayas as early as the days of Ramayana and the Arthasastras (3rd century B.C). Embroidery and dyeing were also known to them since ancient times (Baruah, 2013).[2]

Assam was probably known in the Ramayana as a "Country of cocoon rearers". Evidence of this may be had from the reference made in the Kiskindhyakanda, as to the countries one come across while heading towards the east, mention being made of Magadha, Anga, Pundra, and the "country of the cocoon rearers" (Nagen,1986).[2] In the epic Mahabharata, Assam is called Suvarnakanakanan meaning the silk producing province. Sericulture and cocoon rearing probably evolved in China and travelled to other parts of the world including Assam.

The Chinese traveler Hiuen Tsang gives rich account of gifts being presented by King Bhaskar Varman of Kamrupa to the Emperor Harsha vardana. He mentions, 'Silken clothes pure as the autumn moon's silk', 'wrappers of white bark silk' and various kinds of smooth – figured textiles (ibid, Nagen,1986).[2]

Bana too mentions about 'Abhoga' umbrella sent to Harsha by Bhaskar Varma, made of Dukula (white silk). There were also certain other presents which included, 'a variety of pat clothes, such as sacks of silk, woven out of pattasutra. PC Choudhury states that the presents included all the best specimen of edi, muga and pat silk.

SL Boruah refers a cap (called ho- la – li) gifted to Harsha by Bhaskar Varman as an example of existence of soft textiles. The clone mentioned cap was made of coarse skin lined with soft down and fine knitting designed to protect the pilgrims from rain.

Edward Gait refers to Tati as a caste of weavers' community existing in Assam since early history. The 'Tati' or 'Tantubais' were generally responsible for applying clothes to the royal families and the other dignitaries. Reference is also made by hunter, to the 'Tantis' a Hindu weaving caste, who manufactured various kinds of country clothes. Gunabhiram Boruah has made mention of the 'Jugi' and 'Katoni' caste, whose occupation was cocoon rearing and weaving (silknet, June,2004, www.silknet.com).[3]

Arthasastra makes an important reference to ksauma, dukula and patrorna fabrics from Suvarnakudya and other places in Kamrupa. Suvarnakudya was supposed to be a Suvarnakudya is another name of Karnasuvarna located in Bengal. But PC Choudhury refuted Chatterjee's argument and held that modern Sonkudiha in Kamrupa stands for Suvarvakudya. According to Dr Barua, the place was famous as a commercial centre and must have then contained a settlement of merchants who traded not only in silk but also in fabrics manufactured from fibers and fragrant substances. At present it lies at a distance of 14 km from Sualkuchi, near Hajo. Evidence also suggests that even in the 4th century A.D. Assam was celebrated for dukula fit to be kept in Royal Treasury (Barua, 2013).

Medieval Period:

Handloom and weaving reached to zenith at the time of Ahom Rule.

With the advent of Axom Rule in Assam, handloom industry reached its zenith. Ahom kings took personal initiative and interest for the development of weaving and handloom industry, particularly for the development of Muga Silk. Initially Muga Silk production prospered under royal patronage. And it was reserved for only royal uses. Gradually fabrics prepared out of Muga, Eri and Pat silk became national dress of the Assamese people. Silk dresses district which was the capital of the Ahom Kings became the home of all verities of silk.

In order to organize weaving and handloom industry Ahom Kings established separate department of weaving and maintain skilled weavers group Chutias and Kacharis were engaged to rear silk worms. So that there is continuous supply of clothes for the royal Wardrobe. The weavers received grant of rent - free land and other benefits in return for their services. In this content Samman cited example of

Madhuram Tanti (an expert weaver) who out classed all other weavers of this day, was granted rent free land by the king for his service to the Royal Family.

Ahom's Kings encouraged expert weavers from outside Assam to come and settle in their Kingdom to promote weaving and handloom industry. Swargadeo Rudra Singha requires special mention in this initiative. He brought eight Muslim weaver families and made them settle within his kingdom[8]. Swargadeo Pratap Singh also initiated settlement of weavers in the Kamrupa district. Accordingly, weavers from southern and other parts were mobilized and settled at Sualkuchi. Pratp Singha also passed a circular and ordered so families of weavers in Sualkuchi to produce finest silk for Mughal emperor of Delhi (Wade, J.P., 1972) and also extended royal patronage. Probably this may be one of the reasons for emergence of Sualkuchi as an important centre of silk production and trade.

During the reign of King Pratap Singha, Momai Tamuli Borborua (minister) made it compulsory for every adult able bodied female to spin certain quantity of hanks of yarn before sunset. There was also convention to deposit one – fourth of a seer of silk yarn to the Royal Treasury in a year by every Assamese household.

According Edward Gait Ahom Kings also encouraged trade in handloom products particularly silk. Assamese silk was in great demand in adjoining countries – Nepal, Bhutan, China and Tibet. There was also extensive barter of silk and salt between Assam and Bengal. Gait also mentions that Ahoms maintained sufficient quantity of clothes of different verities for presentation to foreign courts and dignitaries.

During the early years of the Koch rule, textile industry had received state patronage in western Assam and Baranagar and was a great centre. There is also document evidence of Koch King Naravarayana presented textile gifts like flowered silk saris, gomcheng silk, chit or chinlz and ghagari and other dress materials produced in Baranagar and the request of Koch King's brother Chilarai, Sri Sankardev took up the project of tapestry weaving for which he engaged the weaver of Tantikuchi or Barpeta[9] . Their leader was one Gopal, a master weaver. The tapestry was 120 cubits long and 60 cubits broad and it took about a year to finish the weaving. Since the scroll depicted Krishna Lila Scenes, it was known as the Vrindavani Vastra. The designs were woven with a large variety of coloured threads like red, white, black, yellow and green of the colours some were evidently mixed colours or Misravarna like Kach – Nila, Gaura – Syama, the above colours are still popular in Assamese loom embroidery work. The scenes depicted included those from Krishna's birth in the prison of Kansa, to the vanquishing of Kansa, by Krishna. Even today Vrindavani Vastra is preserved in the Madhupur Satras, in Coach Behar and London's Victory and Albert Museum (www.fibre@fashion.co).[7]

During this period Assamese dress also evolved in the form of riha, mekhela and Chadar for women; Kinkhab Mejankari and other embroidered clothes for Ahom males. Initially silk clothes were only used by Kings, Royal families and nobility. As such these products were held in high esteem and people using these products were respected. The indigenous clothes not only attained the status of prestige but also a symbol of good fortune. A convention emerged among Assamese warriors to wear a special type of clothes known as 'Kanach Kapor' (shield cloth) hand woven by their wives and sisters, with the belief that such clothes would make them invincible.

Modern Period:

Decline of Handloom industry under British Rule

Annexation of Assam by the British East India Company brought significant changes in economic, social and cultural life of Assamese people. Before the advent of British rule Assam economy which was forced to open up for foreign goods. British encourage immigration of people from Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and other parts of mainland India; initiating the process of influx from the east and consequential demographic change. British also introduced currency in the name of introduction of modern economic system. But the hidden objectives were systematic revenue collection and maximization. The above British policy also broke the age-old coordination between agriculture and industry. All these changes destroyed the traditional self – sufficient economy of Assam and brought ruination of handloom industry (Goswami,2013).[10]

Even before the colonization of Assam by the British it suffered from prolonged Moamaria Rebellion and later Burmese invasion in the early 19th century. This impoverished and depopulated Assam. All these events brought rapid declined in handloom industry. Apart from the above-mentioned causes breakdown of Ahom novelty and consequential cut – off of royal patronage acted as a death nail to indigenous handloom and cottage industry.

The newly emerging middle class and educated youth were more inclined towards western dress, following change in values and taste. For example, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and other modern educated Assamese use to wear western dress on special occasions and during their meeting with British people. They also held that western dress was more fashionable and modern in comparison to indigenous clothes. This led to diminution of traditional superior status of indigenous clothes. The Christian missionaries in their pursuits to spread Christianity published journals, newsletters and papers; these also include articles on new designs and embroidery for weavers. This brought modification in traditional designs of clothes.

The main objective of British in Assam was to exploit its abundant natural resources to its fullest extent. This led to conversion of Assam Economy from producer of five quality of textile and fabrics to supplier of raw materials – raw cotton, cocoon, yarn, tea (for dyeing) to feed Industrial Revolution in Britain. This created planned shortage of raw materials for handloom and cottage industries in Assam.

The British vision to turn Assam into a market for Britain manufactured products lead to the purgation of de – industrialization policy in Assam. British pushed Manchester and Lancashire textiles to the extremes of Assam border by introducing Railway and development of transport and communication.

British Government also facilitated Britain made textiles in India by removing tax, customers and other barriers. Simultaneously British Government in Britain levied high customs duty on import of goods from India. This created one-way free trade condition in India including Assam. This unequal competition leads to closure of many household cottage industries and gradually de-industrialization of Assam.

Decline of handloom industry was also the consequences of introduction of currency and modern economy. Because in the absence of currency handloom products were used as a medium of transfer of value and store of value. i.e., handloom products were bartered for other products. Handloom products were also paid as tax instead of money. All these advantages of a traditional handloom industry vanished in modern economy and thus its demand declined. Similarly, abolition of Paik System also leads to closure of Royal Silk and cotton Cottages.

Apart from the above other reasons of declined of handloom industry during this period are as follows: -

i) Frequent wars dislocated the normal life of the people.

ii) Revenue collected was not spent in India for creation of income but drained out to England.

iii) Frequent famine and natural calamities had broken the backbone of the cultivators beyond repair who also happened to be recovers.

iv) The traditional market outlets such as village fairs, festivals, weekly markets, pilgrim centers, towns, etc decline in importance.

Through cotton production, raw silk production (cocoon) tea plantations were encouraged under British Rule, but it is for the purpose of export. It was only after the beginning of National Movement for freedom in, Assam the reversal of trend could be observed. That is, Assamese people re- started taking pride in weaving and wearing indigenously produced clothes

Nationalists Effort to re-gain the Lost Glory of Handloom industry in Assam:

In the struggle for freedom movement nationalist leaders realized that for ending colonial rule in Assam, end of colonial economic exploitation was pre – essential. In order to achieve this goal nationalist leaders started popularizing and propagating the indigenous handloom and weaving products. Following call from their leader's Assamese people abandoned foreign manufactured clothes and preferred indigenously made cloths. For, instance during non-cooperation movement, the congress subsidies to encourage weaving and spinning in a large scale, especially in Kamrup, Darrang, and Assam khadi Boad is established with it headquarter at Jorhat (Goswami, 2013).[11]

However, replacement of foreign manufactured clothes by indigenous handloom products was uphill task. Because the indigenous handloom industry could not sustain competition from cheap machine manufactured textile products.

Despite above challenges, in order to restore lost glory of handloom industry the nationalist demanded custom protection from the government and financial assistance to indigenous weavers. In 1918, a separate Department of industries was created by the government for the promotion and growth of indigenous industries in Assam mainly for the growth of handloom weaving and sericulture. In 1938 following formation of Bordoloi government the government made a survey of the cottage industries

of the province and later passed a resolution to established an Industrial Board for preparing a scheme for starting new industries , in particular cottage industries , in particular cottage industries, for the purpose of employing the unemployed youth of the province Bordoloi Government also passed resolution to start some state managed small industries in different suitable parts of the province . In 1946, a clear Industrial Policy was formulated, which envisioned state support to cotton spinning and weaving, hosiery industry and sericulture. But because of financial difficulties little practical steps were taken and handloom and weaving industries continued in precarious condition till independent was achieved (Banu, 2010)[12].

Handlooms Industry in post-independence Period:

Assam was at a low stage of industrial development at the time of independence. The transport and communication system in the whole province was very poor. The railway and steam services that were introduced in pre – independence period was primarily geared to meet the requirements of British interest (Daimari, 2008)[13]. Assam had no capital no marketing facilities and no technical knowledge. Added to this many of the cottage and village industries were closed down due to unequal competition for cheap factory manufactured goods.

In this backdrop the Gopinath Bordoloi Government presented the Industrial Policy in 1946 making clear government vision of support to indigenous industries and state sponsored industries. Following this the Report of the Industrial Planning and Development of Assam 1948 was presented which categories cotton spinning of weaving and hosiery industry as agro – based industry and sericulture as animal product-based industry. Similarly[14], the government of India appointed a high – pioneered committee under the chairpersonship Mira Seth, a member of Planning commission in July 1995 to review the performance of the handloom sector in the decade since the New Textile Policy came into effect in 1985 and suggested measures for its development. The report of the committee, submitted in December 1996 (Srinivasulu,2004). Thus, Committee visited in the state of Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh, for assessing the ground realities and also held discussion with officials of the state – government, weaver's service centers and credit institutions, representative of primary apex co – operation societies and handloom cooperative, exporter, designers, and all concerned.

But these visit and discussion do not seem to have made any significant impact on the final outcome! And these financial constraints and pressing were needs to develop industrial base, most of the finance were allocated for development of heavy industries such as electric power generation, paper Mills, Jute Mills, cotton and textile Mills, etc. The vision was to provide a congenial atmosphere with good infrastructure for development of village and small industries.

Then started the Five-year plan of Assam[12] (Ranjit Dutta, handloom policy of Assam 2017-18) . During 1st Five Year Plan a Cottage Industries Training Institute was established in Guwahati to provide technical skill to the industrial workers. For the development of sericulture industry, four additional farms – one muga, five Eri – seeds farms, seven boa-kata societies and 3 reeling units were established. A sericulture research Stational Titabor for research work on silk, a Khadi and Endi Production Centre at Roha and a number of emporia and museum to propagate marketing of products were also established.

During the 2nd FYP Karve Committee recommended for decentralization and employment-oriented village and small industries in states. According State Handloom Advisory Board were set up. Apart from these two industrial estates one at Guwahati and the other at Dhekiajuli, 32 emporia, a pilot project project on village and small industries were undertaken.

Similarly, during the 3rd fYP a number of small industrial estates were set up Nalbari, Guwahati and Tinsukia.

During all the FYP traditional Tea industries and oil industries were dominating the Assam economy, hence much paused.

It was in 10th FYP that emphasis on development of technology and industrial sector including handloom, handicrafts, and agro – based industries forest-based industries, etc was given. It also gives thrust on the objective to provide adequate infrastructure thrust on the objective to provide adequate infrastructure for setting up of Industrial Units particularly SSI Units, Tiny Units, Handicrafts Units and Small-Scale Business Enterprises (Daimari,2008, 170).[16]

Despite various taken under FYP the growth of handloom industry was not satisfactory. In 1954 the Textile Enquiry Committee found that 95 % of handlooms in Assam consist of female members of the family during their leisure time and hence the handloom industry was not working in commercial lines.

Many handlooms produced a very small quantity of fabric only for domestic requirement. Apart from non – professionalism the handloom industry growth was retarded because of non – availability of raw materials, financial handicap, marketing Bottleneck,

Cooperative Societies:

One of the major sets for the promotion and development of Handloom Industry in Assam was passage of Assam Cooperative Societies Act, 1949[14]: Under this act the Handloom weavers' Cooperative Society was set – up. A 3Tier cooperative system comprising of –

i) Apex Level Society ii) Regional Level / District Level Society iii) Primary Weavers Cooperation Society was established, to function in the state for the benefit of the handloom weavers.[15]

In 1977, Assam Apex weavers and artisans Cooperative Federation Ltd. (ARTFED) was set –up as an apex level Handloom Textile to supply yarn to the member Primary Cooperative Societies, to procure finished products of hand-woven fabrics from them and to sell the products through their established 51 show rooms inside and outside the state. The ARTFED also implements different Scheme of Government of India and state Government for of the weavers of the state.

There are about 4000 Primary Cooperative Societies registered under the Directorate of Handloom Textile in the state. Each society has a minimum of 100 weavers (members). These societies are involved directly in production of handloom fabrics. Each society is run by a Managing Committee consisting of 15 members headed by a elected president.

Despite the fact that the area of operation of the Handloom Cooperative societies are well spread the coverage of weavers by these societies is not more than 30% of the total weavers. Thus, there are a large number of weavers outside and a lot to do to bring maximum number of weavers under cooperative fold.[16]

Administrative System:

In order to institutionalize various facilities and benefits from the government an elaborate administrative system in the state was developed since independence under the Handloom Textile and Sericulture Department. This department has the following six vertical under its direct administrative control.

i) The Directorate of Handloom Textiles.
ii) The Directorate of Sericulture.
iii) The Assam Government Marketing Corporation (AGMC)
iv) The Khadi and Village Industries Board (KVIB)
v) The Sericulture college.
vi) The Assam Apex Weavers and Artisans Cooperative Federation LTD.

These entities have a large number of assets involving the whole range from production to marketing of silk and textiles.

The above initiatives had led to growth of both quantity of handloom production and enhancement of quality (Ranjit Dutta, Handloom Policy of Assam2017-18)[16].

Silk and other Raw Materials:

Assam does not produce much cotton. But it is very rich in production of staple fibers like silk, jute, ramie, bamboo etc. It produces 80% and 64% respectively of Muga and Eri silk alone. Together with the other NE states it produces 99% and 92% respectively of the two silks according to handloom census 2009-10. The state alone produces about 125 MT of Muga silk every year and has earned the geographical Indication (GI) Certification on Muga because of its endemic nature. Assam as produce about 2600 MT of Eri Silk yearly as per handloom census 2009 – 10. According to recent data published by Assam Government in Assam Tribune Newspaper, the production of Muga, Eri and Mulberry in Assam has gone up in 2016 – 17, Eri production reached 3600 MT

Muga Production 141 MT

Mulberry production reached 45 MT.

The average consumption of raw materials in percentage for production of Handloom Fabric in the state as follows:

Approximate percentage of use							
Muga silk	Eri silk	Mulbery silk	Cotton	Wool	Acrylic	Polyester	Others
6.27	12.20	7.33	53.00	5.0	9.20	4.87	2.07

In the table we see the the consumption of raw material is limited to about 6.27 percent and that the Eri silk is limited to about 12.20 percent. thus, most of the Muga and Eri produced in the state are exported raw (Huntere,1998, p.55)[20].

Employment under Handloom Industry:

According to state Textile Ministry website approximately 14 lakh people are associated with handloom industry in the state. It forms around 65 % of total weavers in the country.

Despite quite appreciating figure, the handloom industry in Assam is still backward and facing growing competitiveness in the textile industry both in national and international market and the free trade opportunities emerging the post MFA environment, a growing need has been felt for adopting a focused, yet flexible and holistic approach in the sector to facilitate handloom weavers to meet the Challenges of a global environment. A need has also been felt to empower weavers to chart out a sustained path for growth and diversification in line with emerging market trend (ibid, Ranjit Dutta, p.7).[17]

Sualkuchi: Manchester of The East

The village of Sualkuchi is a small census town on the north bank of Brahmaputra in Kamrup district of Assam[18]. It emerged as a prominent silk weaving centre of Assam. Kautilya has mentioned in his *Arthashastra* about Sualkuchi as "golden land" because of the colour of the clothes woven by the folks of Sualkuchi. P.C. Choudhury has identified 'Suvarnakudya' an ancient silk production and trade centre as 'Sonkudiha' which lied at a distance of 14 km from present location of Sualkuchi village. Thus weaving in Sualkuchi can be traced back to ancient times which flourished in the medieval period under the patronage of Pala dynasty and Ahom dynasty.[19]

Present location of Sualkuchi on Assam Map

Traces of other art forms such as oil processing, pottery, gold-mining, etc. has also been found in Sualkuchi. But at present except weaving most of the other art forms has become extinct. Initially weaving and handloom was confined to Tanti community but gradually it was adopted by the other inhabiting communities of the villages, like the Kaibartas (fishing community) and Brahmin, as a primary means of livelihood. Here agriculture comes next to handloom industry. Weaving has become the prime source of income generation for both farmer-weavers and whole-time weavers. An attractive feature of weaving at Sualkuchi is engagement of the whole family into the profession, making it all professing occupation, cutting across age and gender. Hence, weaving is not confined to any class or community of the society.[18] Weaving skill comes naturally to the natives of Sualkuchi, as this art form has been inherited by the people from generations to generations. Here, the art of weaving reached its high level of perfection because of three main reasons. First, the continuity of weaving practices for a very long period of time. Second, the skill of weaving and spinning (Bowa – Kata) has been held as one

of the highest attainments of the Assamese women. Third, the close association of weaving practices with Vaishnava cultural life. Over the period of time Sualkuchi emerged as one of the largest congregation of weavers. Sualkuchi is primarily famous for Muga Silk and Muga products (Mekhla). H.K.Barpujari held that Sualkuchi is the most important Centre of muga silk weaving specially mekhla made of muga silk. But Sualkuchi also produces large quantity of other silk (Eri & Pat) products. Cotton and Khadi fabrics are also woven in Sualkuchi.

A set of mekhela chadors made of Muga Silk arranged around a japi

Weaving was done in country loom. But after World War II, Fly Shuttle Looms were inducted. The Pit loom and the Throw Shuttle Frame loom had replaced the Loin loom in the process of technological improvement. The Jaguared and the Dobby machines are used for flowering and designing. Semi-automatic looms were introduced in Bengal before independence, but it is not yet accepted by the weavers of Sualkuchi in particular and Assam in general.

The streets of Sualkuchi is filled with numerous silk product shops and showrooms displaying some of the most vibrant colour *chadors, mekhla ,riha, gamusas*, etc; made of silk and cotton. But, as one approaches deeper in the lanes of the village, he/she gets attracted by the soft and rhythmic *dhak–dhuk* sound of the shuttle flying across the frame looms found in every home in the village.

A woman weaving cloth on indigenous shuttle loom

Presently, Sualkuchi has emerged as an important destination and symbol of pure silk production center of the world. And therefore, is rightly called Manchester of the East.

Findings from Sualkuchi Survey

Methodology of Survey:

i) Oral interview to get first-hand information from persons in responsible position.
ii) Interaction from weavers and workers.
iii) Informal feedback from customers.

Most of the primary information on silk industry was given by Chandra Mohan Kalita (CEO of Silk Resham Samabai Ltd). According to him there is still ample scope for growth and development of silk industry in Sualkuchi. He mainly pointed the scope for export of Assam Silk Made Products particularly Muga Silk Products. He emphasized the need for skilling and training of weavers and workers. He also expressed disappointment on government's attitude towards silk industry. He was critical of sudden changes in government policies, such as withdrawal of incentive on silk production and marketing. Kalita also pointed towards the decrease in number of Soalu trees in the neighborhood of the village on which Muga worm feeds. He also referred to the new emerging centres of silk production providing stiff competition to Sualkuchi such as Kokoya and Chotlarpar.

Apart from above Mr. Kalita expressed his empathy and concern for the weavers and workers in the silk industry, who are denied their rightful wages and social security. For instance, many firms do not adhere to labor laws and had discontinued the provident fund money deposit in workers PF account. He also stated that in the informal sector the condition of weavers is even more pitiable.

The weavers and workers in the industry had expressed their helplessness and anguish over low wages and lack of other benefits. They expressed their inability to meet their high domestic expenditure at current income level.

The living and working conditions of weavers were also found poor because of low wages and piece rate system. Piece rate system is forcing weavers to work more and produce more, unsuited to their physical strength. Added to this, most of the weavers are female and many among them are widows how had to meet the entire expenditure of the family from weaving leading to much hardship to women weavers.

Problems of Handloom Industry in Assam.

In view of the important role played by the handloom industry on the people of Assam, it has been worthwhile to identify the problems and prospects associated with the industry in Assam.

The problems can be broadly studied under two heads – Traditional problems and Emerging problems.

Traditional problems are simple yet existing for long time. It is simple because it can be easily found out such as lack of capital and finance, capacity, etc. Whereas emerging problems are complex and emanates from the changing market dynamics and innovation in science and technology. It requires clinical analysis and thorough investigation to find the causes and then reach an out of box solution[21]

Traditional Problems

Traditional Method of Operation: Here traditional method refers to use method of production, packaging and marketing. Most of the work is done by owner, who is a weaver turned entrepreneur. As such he/she is all – in – one. He himself functions as manager, designer, producer, etc. The equipment's used are also out – dated (as mentioned in the chapter no.3). Production Operation is not organized on the basis of scientific method but on the basis of interest and individuals' ability of weavers engage. These make the traditional method of operation inefficient.

Lack of Resources: Assam lacks resources for the development of handloom industry with the most important being financial resources and human resources.

There is acute shortage of capital in handloom industry because Assam is a low per capita income and low saving economy. Therefore, capital formation does not take place.

To solve financial problems weavers organized themselves into cooperatives to pool their resources and help mutually. Governments also support it by passing Cooperative Societies Act and providing financial assistance at low interest rate. To help at the grass root level and very small weavers' government encouraged formation of Self – Help Group (SHG) and also roped in NGOs. But due to lack of financial inclusion and low bank credit the problem persists.

This is also impression that Assam is rich in human resources. But in reality, it is contrary. There is dire shortage of skilled weavers. Most of the weavers are crudely strained as they lack formal training. Recently government also started formal training for weavers and also provided provision for stipend to young apprentice. But it lacks in its reach.

Competition from Mill Made Products: Handloom Industries use human labour for production. Therefore, it is time consuming and arduous. It makes handloom products costlier. But modern textile mills use sophisticated machines like spinner, autoconers and auto – appliers. The technological advantage increase efficiency and reduces cost drastically. Hence handloom products are competed out by mill products.

Unorganized Industry: Most of the handloom units are very small employing on an average below 10 weavers. Many units are run solely by family members. Therefore, there is lack of initiative from the producers to formalize their work and get organized. Other two most important reasons for existence of large number of unorganized handloom units is low education of weavers and production unit owners and cumbersome processes of registration and maintenance of account books.

Lack of Basic Infrastructure: Handloom industries are based in rural areas. These areas are devoid of almost all basic amenities and infrastructure. For example, there is no electricity coverage, no all-weather roads, no provision of safe drinking water, banking facilities, etc.

There are many schemes of the government for providing basic infrastructure such as Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) for rural road connectivity; Grameen Vidyulikaran Yojana for electricity, etc. But still, it is inadequate.

Emerging Problems

Shortage of Raw Materials and its rising cost: The consumption of handloom products has increased with the increase in population. But the increase in supply of raw materials is not in tandem supply lags far behind the quantity demanded. This automatically leads to rise in price of raw materials and consequently increase the cost of production.

For solving this problem government is promoting new plantation and increase in average of existing plantation by providing financial assistance. But lack of remunerative price of raw materials in market is deterring. Polu (Silk) rears to increase production further.

Government is also supplying subsidized yarn to weavers. But lack of efficient functioning of cooperatives and lack of coverage of weavers under organized sector is keeping them out of government benefits.

Marketing Challenges: For increasing the sale of handloom products aggressive marketing is the need of the hour. This requires modern marketing strategies such as brand building, standardization of products certification of purity and quality high voltage media campaign, etc.

But the present handloom industry of Assam relics on traditional method of marketing such as selling the products in weekly fairs/ hot, small-town producers themselves start small shops and showrooms in the neighborhood, etc. They rely on traditional loyalty of customers and traditions and customs.

Though some initiative has been taken by ARTFFD and Directorate of Handloom and Textiles to popularize the products in national and international markets by opening showrooms on prime locations of the world and participating in international trade fairs expos but still it is not satisfactory.

Plagiarism: In the neighboring state of Assam many unscrupulous traders and manufactures plagiaries the Assamese handloom products such as gamosa, sadar, etc… It is negatively affecting sales volumes as well as brand image. Because these plagiarized products are most mill made and inferior in quality.

Global Competition: Since the economic reforms of 1991, India has been gradually opening its market to foreign players. This has brought in cut – throat competition in the market in terms of price and quality. Already Chinese yarn is dominating the international market, it has also made substantial in – road in the domestic market of Assam.

Climate Change: Like all other aspects of human life, climate change is also affecting handloom industry both directly and indirectly. Larvae are very sensitive to rise in temperature and fluctuation in temperature. It causes disease among larvae, and subsequently death. Though climate resistance variety of Polu (Silk Worm) has been produced but its commercial exploitation is still questionable.

Indirectly handloom industry is most affected because most of the weavers are indigenous people schedule caste and tribe. And this section of people also happens to be most affected by climate change. For example, the Bodos and Mising community.

Besides the above problems there are many other challenges such as lack of entrepreneurship, lack of logistic, long chain of marketing (existence of middle men) non adherence to international quality standards, digital divide, etc.

Prospects of Handloom Industry in Assam

It is recently concluded survey; NABARD has identified handloom along with other 9 sectors for development for creation of additional employment in rural areas. If the government extends its support, the later handloom can transform themselves into engines of rural revitalization.

Another research also found that handloom industry is most suitable in Assam because of existence of large concentration of indigenous weavers. According to State Textile Ministry approximately 14 lakh weavers or 65% of the total weavers in the country are concentrated in Assam. Apart from being labour intensive it requires low investment and low technical knowledge and small infrastructure base which can be created in rural areas with ease.

According to one study in 2009-10, it was found that 76% of the total production constitutes “Mekhela” and “Chador” which is worn by Assamese women. This indicated that handloom industry is primarily catering to the needs of the local Assamese customers who prefer traditional apparel to modern apparel. Whereas, production of saree is limited to only 3% of total output, though it has great demand throughout the country.

Therefore, there is a strong case for product diversification; production of saree, jeans, T-shirts, carry bags, visiting cards, etc. can be undertaken. Besides, there is a need to break the store-type that handloom products are meant mainly for rich and well to do and it associated with particular religious ceremonies or customs. Handloom industry should equally try to produce apparel for man and children. That is, handloom industry to expand its customers based beyond women category and traditional users.

There are also findings that there is large gap between demand and supply in the domestic market itself. The local handloom industry is not even able to meet the local demand. Therefore, in all-out effort should be made to increase production. Thus, these following measures may be adopted: -

- Making available raw materials (yarn) at reasonable cost.
- Promotion of cluster approach of production and ultimately converting it to hub and scope model where there is large trading center of global standard linked with production centre in the rural Assam.

- Increase investment of both private and public sector. The public investment should act as crowding-in agent where public facilitates the private sector.
- Development of human development indicators away many weavers and ensuring or dignified life to weavers.
- Convergence of handloom industry with other sector such as agriculture to make it more remunerative.
- Leveraging technology – conversion of all archaic looms with modern looms. For example, replacing throw shuttle loom with fly shuttle loom. Technology should be adopted keeping in mind that it does not change the basic production techniques so as to lose its traditional value.
- Formal training to weavers and association of designers within with production unit to increase production, enhance quality and introduce new designs and products.
- Conversion of subsistence system of production to production on commercial line, form an important source of income generation rather than leisure time avocation.

Besides production, marketing should also be given considerable focus. On recent research paper it was found that 58% of the output of handloom industry is sold through sole-proprietor stores / shops and only 3% of the output is sold through cooperatives and other large government marketing institutions such as ARTFFD and AGMC. Sale through e-market is still insignificant. Therefore, there is requirement of complete overhaul of market strategies and position of its products in the market.

Very small quantity of handloom products is exported abroad, despite its great demand. Though raw silk with 81% of market share followed by India with only 15%. Therefore, there is huge scope for increase in export of raw silk. The silk and silk products are in great demand in Japan, US and Europe but it constrained by quality standard maintenance and lack of logistic to deliver goods on time.

Recent change in global taste for economic friendly products can also be seen as a boon for handloom industry. Because the products are not only eco-friendly but the handloom sector also promotes tackle global warming challenge because of its agro based input and low energy consumption.

The above study shows tremendous scope for growth and development of handloom industry in Assam, if sufficient marketing linkages are established outside state, innovation in design is undertaken to adopt ethnic design to meet contemporary fashions, quality of fabric is improved, looms are modernized, weavers are motivated to function on commercial line, training facilities are extended, etc. In nutshell, there are bright prospects foe handloom industry in Assam provided it is guided by enlightened policy and innovative entrepreneurs.

4. Conclusion

It is well established fact that weaving and handloom has been practiced in Assam since time immemorial and in no civilization weaving and handloom practices is so deeply embedded as in Assamese civilization. And also, no place on earth has such a large concentration of weavers as we have in Assam. But despite these glorious facts, the handloom industry has to look upon government for helping hand to survive.

The caused of this abysmal status of handloom industry lie in the nearly two hundred years of colonial rule in India. But long time has passed since India attained independence. Now the handloom industry is not only free from obnoxious colonial industrial policy but also from control economy. And in this globalized world handloom has huge prospects for growth and expansion and bring prosperity in Assam.

Today, Assam is suffering from many socio-economic problems like unemployment, low per capita investment, lack of industrial base rural, distress low motivation of youth, etc. To all this problem handloom is the panacea.

For handloom industry to exploit its full potential it has to abdicate its outdated practices and adopt modernity. It has to adopt modern practices such as scientific production system for market, instead of production for solely domestic consumption and means of leisure time amusement.

Integrating the domestic market to national and international market so as to leverage global supply chain. Adopting modern marketing strategies such as positioning among well targeted consumers and market brand building and gaining customers loyalty leverage of modern technology etc. While adopting modernity it has to keep in mind that the handloom industry maintains its distinct Assamese identity and its geographical indication. This will not only preserve Assamese culture tradition but also give competitive edge in highly competitive market. And at the end, bring laurels and prosperity in Assam.

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