

Traditional Handloom and its Impact on Weavers: A Study in Assam

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Abstract:

Traditional handloom and weaver have an unending relationship in Assam. Both tribal and non-tribal people are engaged in handloom activity. The proposed study was conducted in the Ligoribari village of Sivasagar district, Assam. Data was collected from the weavers using focus group discussion, personal interviews, and non-participatory observation. Results revealed that traditional handloom is a part of livelihood strategy among the Ligoribari handloom weavers. Along with agriculture, they give the same priority to the handloom as a means of securing the needs of life. There is a positive scenario towards the weaver's or women's social empowerment. But at the same time, there are some problems related to handloom and their daily life.

Keywords: Assam, Traditional handloom, Livelihood, Employment, Weavers

Introduction:

Traditional handloom is a cultural heritage of Indian society. This handloom weaving tradition is the art of making clothes and other fabrics. In simple meaning, a handloom is a device operated by hand, in contrast to a power loom. The artisan and skilled workers engaged in this sector are known as weavers. From the Indus valley civilization to the 21st-century Indian weavers has an unending relationship with weaving. Handloom weaving played a dominant role in the Indian Textile Industry. Handloom weaving is the second largest after agriculture in the context of providing employment. According to the 2009-2010 handloom census of India, handloom has provided employment opportunities to 4.3 million people (Handloom Census of India, 2010). North Eastern Region has the highest concentration of handlooms in the country. Out of 25.4 lakh units engaged in handloom activities, 14.6 lakh units (household and non-household) are concentrated in five states only, i.e. Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, and Tripura as per the handloom Census 1995-96 (Annual Report, 2008). Among these five states, Assam alone accounts for 12.41 lakh (44.6%) handloom households,

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whereas Manipur and Tripura have 1.79 lakh (6.4%) and 1.21 lakh (4.3%) such households, respectively (Economic Survey Assam, 2011). This indicates that Assam has a great contribution to the traditional handloom sector. Weaving in Assam is so replete with artistic sensibility and so intimately linked to folk life that Gandhiji, during his famous tour to promote khadi and swadeshi, was so moved that he remarked: "Assamese women weave fairy tales in their clothes!" (Government of Assam, 2020). In earlier Assamese society, the skill to weave was remarked as eligibility of a girl or woman for marriage. This reflects the importance of traditional handloom in Assam. Mainly the rural women engaged in this activity. Their socio-economic status is related to this activity. So, focusing on the village women weavers authors selected the Ligoribari Village of Sivasagar district from Assam as the field. The village was declared the first Model Textile Village in Assam in the year 2017. We are all concerned that traditional handloom is our cultural identity. From time immemorial traditional Assamese clothes like mekhela, sador, gamucha, dhori, seleng are produced in the handloom. The tribal people's traditional clothes are also making in this handloom. So, study the socio-cultural impact of handloom is important. Due to the industrialization and privatization of different sectors, the power loom has come and this power loom is working under the private sector. There is less importance of corporate society and the social welfare of the people. The power loom is mainly individual and profit-oriented. But, on the other hand, handloom is related to the co-operative sector and works manually. For the social welfare and development of a social relationship traditional handloom is an important matter for study. Along with this, study the problems and challenges of weavers and the handloom sector is another necessary work.

Objectives of the study:

The study is followed by three objectives:

- I. To know the prospects of traditional handloom weaving as a livelihood in the Ligoribari village of Sivasagar.
- II. To know the role of traditional handloom in the social empowerment of weavers.
- III. To know the problems and challenges of handloom weavers in Sivasagar.

Methodology:

The field of this proposed study is the Ligoribari village of Sivasagar. More than 300 women from 370 households are associated with handloom weaving. The field is selected purposively to observe how traditional weaving helps women as livelihoods and empowerment. There is less study done on Ligoribari village. Though

it is the first model textile village of Assam less study is conducted about weavers. So explore all these issues used the explorative method of study. The method of this study is qualitative. Employment, livelihood, empowerment, and problems are described qualitatively but quantitative data has been represented in tabular form to show numbers of people, socio-economic profiles, etc. The people that work in handloom weaving activity directly or indirectly are the universe of our study. The universe is selected purposively to select handloom-related people. The proposed study covers 147 respondents from Ligoribari village those are a permanent resident of the village. In the selection of respondents, we used purposive sampling.

The study is based on both primary and secondary data. The relevant secondary data is collected from census reports, government reports, newspapers, books, articles published in various journals. The primary information is collected from the field directly based on personal interviews, non-participant interviews, case study and analyzed the data by classification and tabulation.

For collecting the data we used three techniques of data collection. These are mentioned below-

- i)* Non-participatory observation
- ii)* Interview schedule
- iii)* Case study

Results and Discussion:

Handloom in Assam

Assam is famous for its handloom culture. From time immemorial people of Assam, mainly women have a relationship with the handloom. Two main silks are produced in Assam (e.g, Muga and Eri). Muga is adored world over for its lustrous golden colour and therefore known worldwide as the golden silk. This silk has an extremely high tensile strength which makes it last for several years even on constant wearing. Assam contributes about 80% of the country's Muga production(Government of Assam, 2018). Large amounts of golden silk productions are produced in the Sualkuchi village of Assam. The Sualkuchi village is known as the weaving village and Manchester of Assam. This place is located near the riverbank of Brahmaputra, about 35 km from Guwahati. The handloom sector is dominated by the rural women of Assam irrespective of caste and community. According to the third National Handloom Census, 2013 total 1,388,653 women engaged in weaving activity. The number of female adult handloom worker (1,468,453) is higher than the number of male handloom workers (15,411) as per National Handloom Census, 2013 (Chowdhuri & Lobo,2020). Assam ranks 3rd amongst raw silk producing states in India contributing over 80% of Muga silk over 60% of Eri silk

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produced in India. The state houses more than 13 lakh looms out of the total 28 lakh looms in the country (Government of Assam, 2018). Currently, the directorate of handloom textile covers 13576 villagers of the state under 209 handloom demonstration circle with 14.01 lakh weavers for its handloom activities.

Table 1-Statistics of handloom and textile in Assam

Sl. No	Numbers
01	11,11,577 numbers of looms
02	24099 number of commercial looms, 263,068 semi-commercial looms, 691105 domestic looms
03	12,40,817 numbers of weaver households
04	695,060 fulltime weavers

Source: Directorate of Handloom & Textiles, Assam

Handloom as a Livelihood in Ligoribari village of Sivasagar

State rural livelihood society report defines livelihood as a set of activities of a household engages in a regular basis to generate adequate cash and non-cash income to maintain a minimum desired standard of living both on a day to day or a longer period(Coway,1992). A livelihood means making a living and it compasses people's capabilities, assets income, and activities required to secure the necessities of life.

In the Ligoribari village, 300 female are members are associated with handloom. After 2017 declaring as model textile village government provide of fund of 65 lakhs from that each of the members got two sets of weaving chille and weaving machine. Directorate of Handloom Textiles organized training for the members since they produce the product worth three lakhs per month by 300 female weavers of the village. Directorate of Handloom Textiles takes the responsibility of handloom weaving in the year 2017. Before that, they associated with weaving as a domestic weaver since 1954. But after declare as a model textile village and receiving the funds helps them to increase their products as well as income. In the initial stage, they only produce traditional Mishong dresses because all the 300 members of the textile society belonging to the Mishong community. But gradually they started to produce Assamese traditional dresses and make a special dress on customer orders. They produce Mekhela (lower garments of women), Chadar (upper garments of women), Gamucha(towel), Eri chadar (warm wrappers), Shawl, and Gallok (Mishong community traditional dress). After the establishment of

the Directorate of Handloom Textile in 1983 in Assam all products taking in an organized way. In Ligiribari also the handloom and textile society formalized the price of their product after 2017. According to data provided by the president and secretary of society below mention the price of their product. In time interval this price may up or down.

Table 2-Price of the product produce by the weavers of Ligiriri

Sl no	Product name	Price (In INR)
1	Mekhela (lower garments of women)	1500 Rs
2	Chadar (upper garments of women)	1500 Rs
3	Gamucha(towel)	250 Rs to 2500 Rs
4	Eri chadar (warm wrappers)	6000 Rs
5	Shawl (Mishing community traditional dress)	600 Rs
6	Gallok(Mishing community traditional dress)	500 Rs
7	Seleng Chadar (Traaditional dress)	500 Rs
8	Riha (upper garments of women)	600 Rs
9	Traditional hand bag for women	150 Rs to 500 Rs
10	Masks (since lockdown)	20 Rs to 50 Rs

Source: Primary Data

According to the above prices of their products if one member of the society produces a minimum of one set of dress in one month their minimum market value around three lakhs for 300 members. It also increases during the festival season. After an interview with members of society, this is found the minimum income of one household in 5000 per month. Those who have trained in especially earn more than 5000 from the handloom weaving. Handloom weaving has become an employment creator in Ligiribari. Along with the increasing demand for traditional handloom weaving products, a large number of people get the opportunity to engage in traditional handloom and earn a livelihood through the handloom.

Income through handloom

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In Ligoribari and the people of Sivasagar district chose the handloom as livelihoods. According to the respondent of the study, they got a monthly average of 4000 to 10000. It's enough to maintain to a minimum their households. Because of this income, they got opportunities to buy the necessary product for the family and support their male partners to maintain their family. It's helping them to arrange education for their children.

Table 3-Monthly Income of the Respondents

Sl No	Income per month	Number of respondents	Percentage
1	0-1000	11	7.49
2	1000-2000	23	15.65
3	2000-3000	27	18.36
4	3000-4000	31	21.08
5	4000-5000	12	8.17
6	5000 & Above	43	29.25
7	total	147	100%

Source: Primary Data

Role of Handloom in Weaver's Social Empowerment

Empowerment is a process of being aware of injustice, inequality, social and economic independence, freedom of thought, self-realization, and self-realities of the potentialities. Social empowerment is a dimension of women empowerment, where women weavers can develop a sense of autonomy, self-confidence, having equal control over their own lives, equal opportunities and decision-making power. Social empowerment is a pre-requisite of a nation's development. The main aim of social empowerment is all sections of society should be equally empowered. Traditional handloom plays a major role in the socio-economic empowerment of Ligoribari handloom weavers. Their working participation rate is higher in the handloom sector. The data provided by the president of Ligoribari Handloom Weaving Centre 300 hundred women are engaged in weaving. They are self-employed. When they are economically empowered, automatically their way of living style is increased.

Table 4- Age-wise distribution of respondent/ Participation of weaver's in the basis of age

Sl No	Age of the weavers	Numbers of weavers	Percentage
1	10-20	12	8.17
2	20-30	37	25.17
3	30-40	41	27.90
4	40-50	28	19.05
5	50& Above	29	19.72
6	total	147	100

Source: Primary Data

Changes in social attitudes:

The social empowerment of weavers is related to social attitudes towards their development like traditional beliefs, superstitions, traditional norms, and values, etc. After completion of the fieldwork, we are getting to know that in earlier times they faced some problems related to traditional norms and gender bias. The women did not get much scope of mobility because of the integral part of religious, economic, and kinship structures. Society and kin members aspect women to be inferior to men. As respondents said in earlier times they don't get that much importance. But, when they become economically independent it changes their life. Now, they can take their responsibilities, along with the children. When weaving becomes the main source of income among the women or weavers, the attitude towards the girl child has been changed. One respondent said the village people with the help of Mahila Hamiti returned two girls due to the marriage of before 18th years. These two cases reflect the upward status of girls in the Ligoribari village. It is analyzed from the study that the perception that sons are the major sources of income is still relevant but despite some young generation parents say daughters are supporting economically. Along with their education, they also learned the weaving skill for their future benefit. The women weavers not only act as a main source of income, they also keep the ancient and traditional forms of art of their Mishing community through their diverse artistic skills. They prepared two types of dress; I) General dress and II) special dress for festivals and special occasions. The respondents said that the costumes for the festival are the special product of their handloom. Different colors, (e.g red, black, green, yellow) are used for this special dress. Besides the traditional dresses now the women weave shawls, stoles, table clothes, bag, curtain, shirt, kurta, etc. The religious aspects of weaving are highly popular in Ligoribari

village. The printed clothes are made which told the stories of God and religious ancestors. They offer printed cloth to the temple (*Namghor*).

Changes in decision making at household:

The women's or weaver's decision-making power at the household level plays an important role in achieving gender equality. We have seen in most of the societies that the male person decides any kind of decision and activities. The socio-economic factors influence decision making power at home. Now a day this concept has been changed. Decision making is the ability or a source of empowerment. The weaver of Ligoribari village is one of them in Assam. They take household decision making like take care of their health, making major household purchases, making a purchase for daily household needs, household economy, food production, food security and visit their family or relatives, providing their thoughts and discussed on their problems in the family.

Problems and challenges of Traditional Handloom

Handloom weaving is important in various terms for Assamese society. After 70 years of independence, these sectors remain unchanged. Society also focuses on modern production made in power loom. In Sivasagar after some of the government help and support, they have face some types of the problem here we discuss the various problem face by weavers of Ligoribari, Sivasagar.

i . Low productivity of traditional handloom:

Low productivity is a problem face by the traditional handloom sector as compared to the power loom sector. They fail to fulfill the demands as per the needs of customers. As a result, their annual earning has become very low so they face problems to take handloom as their sole livelihood.

ii. Traditional handloom faced tough competition from the power loom sector:

The traditional loom is needed more time and effort than the power loom sector. The power loom sector can produce more products at lower cost and effort. So the power loom sector can sell its products at a lower cost than that of the traditional loom sector.

iii. Inefficient market for traditional handloom:

Inefficient Marketing also an issue faced by the handloom weaving sector. Their product has a different price in a different state. Lack of proper authority for pricing the middle man got the chance to fix the price in his favor. The actual weavers are remain deprived of deserving price. They sell their product in the local market

only. In recent time they got the chance to sell their product in an exhibition in other state but is limited once a year opportunity. So they face the problem of the market.

iv. Lack of bank credit to weavers:

The handloom weaver faces the problem of credit of loan from the bank. Without support from a bank or other institutions, they faced problems to produce their handloom. Nowadays some microfinance provides loans but the interest is very high so weavers face problems collecting the capital for handloom products.

v. Lack of study about handloom :

The traditional handloom products are unique continued from time immemorial. People want this type of product to continue their tradition. This sector needs special care because it's related to the culture of the society but there is less study conduct on a handloom.

vi. Lack of training in handloom:

This handloom weaving is continued from time immemorial. In the past Assamese society, weaving is a prerequisite skill for marriage. They train their daughter for weaving, but to compete with modern power loom there is a need for training to increase their productivity.

vii. Inefficient promotion and advertisement of handloom:

The handloom weaving sector has no proper advertisement and promotion activity to develop this sector. In the age of social media, there is a need for a proper advertisement to attract customers. The weavers now using Facebook, WhatsApp to connect with customers. So the government may take a step to promote the handloom.

viii) Other problems:

Covid-19 pandemic badly affects the economy of Assam. In keeping view of the spread of covid-19 Assam government also implemented the lockdown and isolation rule in the state. It also hit the weavers of the Ligoribari village. In the season of the Rangali Bihu (major festival of Assam) the women engage in traditional handloom facing loss. By the following lockdown, they are staying away from the work. After the lockdown, they faced the problem of the financial crisis. The weaving is done only by women in their house. The selling rates are decreased after the lockdown.

Conclusion:

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Handloom weaving has an important role in the Indian economy. Traditional handloom weaving is continued in Assam from time immemorial. Assamese handloom has a huge demand in the national and international market. In Assam, large numbers of rural women are engaging with traditional handloom. Handloom weaving helping them to earn a livelihood as well as all-round development of their life. It's helping to improve the status of women in society, it's also helping in rural development. Traditional handloom also reflects the culture of the Assamese society. The present government is working hard to improve the conditions of weavers. After the establishment of the Directorate of Handloom Textiles, there are different types of societies form to increase the handloom of Assam. Recently in 2017 and 2018, two handloom policy was taken to upgrade the socio-economic status of poor women engage in handloom. The proper initiative can create a better condition for the weavers in near future.

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