

“Handloom Silk Textile”- A Path To The Development Of People In Assam: In Reference**To Sualkuchi ‘*Manchester Of Assam*’**

RITA SAIKIA, Ph.D Scholar
Assam University Diphu Campus
Ritasaikia111@rediffmail.com
Ph.no- 8721002580

Abstract

With the breathtaking natural beauty, teeming wildlife, immaculate tea gardens and warm, beautiful people, Assam is the most vibrant of eight states comprising the north-east. It's strategic location in the north-east of India, and it's accessibility from the rest of the country makes it the gateway to the northeastern states. Assam silk fabrics have earned immense recognition from all over the world. Assam's silk comprise with the three type of indigenous wild silks produced in Assam those are golden muga, white pat and warm Eri silk. The Whole Assam silk industry is now centered in Sualkuchi. One of the world finest artistic traditions fined expression in their exquisitely woven 'eri', 'Muga', and 'pat' fabrics. The traditional handloom silks still hold their own in world markets. In the present day India exports a wide variety of silks to Western Europe and United States, especially as exclusive furnishing fabrics. Mahatma Gandhi during his tour of Assam that to promote Khadi and Swadeshi, he remarked, "Assamese women weave fairy tales in their cloths. In the context of silk weaving in Assam, it provides self-employment to the masses, especially women. Due to the large number of cottage handloom industries popularly known as "Manchester of Assam". Here the people of Sualkuchi emerge as a centre of excellence and empower the aspirants through innovation and quality to discover their skill for over all development of the society.

This handloom silk textile helps to the people of Assam to develop themselves in their own way. Here in this paper I have discussed about the handloom silk textile with the reference of Sualkuchi handloom silk textile. At the same time the paper focus about the development of people or empowerment of people through this. There have some inconveniences in the development of people that would be discuss here and give some remedies for it.

Key words: silk, silk industry, development.

INTRODUCTION:

The handloom textiles plays a vital role in the socio-economic structure of the country in terms of providing employment, production of cloth and value addition while at the same time preserving and propagating the country's rich cultural heritage. 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. As one of the oldest and largest industry it is known equally for its pristine simplicity and unequalled charm. It provides direct and indirect employment to the weavers and allied workers in the country. Assam has a great textile tradition. Handloom weaving has an overwhelming presence in the socio-economic life of Assam since time immemorial. The loom is a prizes possession and has been a way of life in the state. Weaving in the handloom has been a very respectable day to day job for the Assamese women. This Assamese weaving tradition has been handed down from generation to generation by the Assamese women folk who excelled in production of extremely beautiful design in their looms. During the first visit to Assam in 1921, Mahatma Gandhi wrote that "every Assamese Women is a born weaver and she weaves fairy tales in her loom. Weaving in silk along with cotton yarns has been practiced since long". 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. In the days of the Assam kings however, wearing of apparels made of silk fabric. There are three types of major silk in Assam viz. Muga, eri and mulbary. Assam kings and other higher ranks people wore apparels made of a special variety of Muga Silk known as “Mejankari silk” which was reared in a special tree and was generally adored as a better quality silk than the common golden muga. 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. Those 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. 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.

Assam’s handloom industry is basically silk-oriented. Handloom silk textile is the way of development for the people of Assam. In Assam this sector is at present giving employment to a large number of people particularly in the rural area. Here I have presented a scenario of sualkuchi popularly known as ‘manchester of Assam’. There are some problems of weaver which have discussed in this paper.

OBJECTIVE:

1. To study the handloom silk textile of Assam.
2. To access the impact of handloom silk textile in the development of the people in Assam.
3. To identify the problems and remedies.

METHODOLOGY:

The study is basically analytical and descriptive in nature. Both primary and secondary sources of data have been explored. The secondary sources data are published and unpublished books, journal, articles and the internet sources have been used for the background materials. Focus group discussions and in depth interviews have been employed for collecting the primary data.

PROFILE OF THE STUDY AREA:

For my study I have selected a town city “Sualkuchi” of Kamrup District, Assam. It has 13,898 populations, of which 6809 are males while 7089 are females as per report released by census India 2011. Sualkuchi is in the northern bank of the river Brahmaputra which is the centre of Assam’s textile production. It is located 35 kms north of Guwahati. Sualkuchi is one of the largest textile centers of Assam. It has large number of cottage industry engaged in handloom.

HANDLOOM SILK TEXTILE: A PATH TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF ASSAMESE PEOPLE IN REFERENCE TO SUALKUCHI:

Since time immemorial, human beings have been weaving and producing cloths. The art of producing thread and weaving cloths have developed with the development of human civilization since ancient times. India is a big country and each region of the country has its unique process of weaving, design, style etc. These are influenced by the culture, tradition, social norms, believes, climate etc. of that region. Like many other places, Assam, a north eastern state of India has an age old tradition of sericulture and weaving. The colourful, artistically designed, fine quality handloom products of the state, particularly handloom products woven out of Assam silk

attracts the eyes of people all over the world. The production of the indigenous silk varieties of Assam can be seen throughout the state, but the activities are mainly concentrated in Sualkuchi area. Sualkuchi is called the Manchester of Assam. Most of the natural silk produced in the state is brought to Sualkuchi which is situated on the north bank of river Brahmaputra in the Kamrup district of Assam. Kautilya has mentioned in his Arthashastra about Sualkuchi as “golden land” because of the colour in the clothes woven by the folks of Sualkuchi. The natural silk produced in Assam is known as Assam silk. Assam produces the four varieties of natural silk i.e. *eri*, *muga*, *mulberry* and *tussar*. The natural silk *Eri* and *muga* are of indigenous origin and Assam is famous for these two silk varieties. *Muga* silk is found only in Assam. There has been being a long tradition of silk weaving at least since the 17th century, Sualkuchi is the prime centre of the silk hand-loom industry of Assam. Although originally it was a “craft village” having several cottage industries till the forties of the last century such as hand-loom weaving industry, oil processing in the traditional ghani, goldsmithi, pottery etc, the industries other than hand-loom are now almost extinct and the artisans have already taken up silk weaving as a profession. Sualkuchi as a silk weaving village was established in the 17th century by Momai Tamuli Barbarua, a great administrator of the Ahom Kingdom during the reign of King Swargadeo Pratap Singha (1603-1641). 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 looms. It is learnt from the historical records that, some of the Ahom Queens were also personally involved in patronizing 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 palace. The cottage industrial scenario of Sualkuchi is strengthened mainly by the role of handloom industry only. It would be an under-emphasis to consider the handloom industry of Sualkuchi only as producer of handloom fabrics, if its contribution to the rural economy of Sualkuchi is not observed. This cottage industry is based on traditional customs, practices and hereditary knowledge of weavers. It has been observed that the art and culture of not only of Assam but entire Northeast has been exposed to handloom since long.

At the early stage the clothes used for daily purposes were woven by the people themselves. In those days weaving was not done as a commercial practice. The first type of commercial dress woven for commercial purpose was the “*Garó Bhuni*”, the wedding dress of the Garó tribe. After this, *Dhara*, *Jem Seng* (Khasi dresses) were woven for commercial purpose. For about two hundred years, the weavers of Sualkuchi earned their livelihood by weaving these clothes. Dhara and Jem-seng are still woven at Sualkuchi. The present day roll (than) system of Muga cloth manufacturing was pioneered by Gondho Ram Moral, which can be dated to eighteenth century A.D. Weaving comes naturally to the natives of this village. It is ingrained in their lifestyle. Expert weavers from other districts also throng this place for its commercial prominence. Assam silk has a very good market both inside and outside the state due to its quality, bright colour, attractive designs and traditional values. Out of the three types of silks indigenous to Assam, the Muga silk is naturally golden in color and is known for its durability, often outliving its owner. This silk is produced by the silkworm *Antheraea Assamensis*. It is known to become glossier with each wash. The Pat silk is ivory white in color and is produced from the *Bombyx textor* silkworm. The light beige Endi or Eri silk is produced from the *Samia cynthia ricini* and is also known as the ‘Ahimsa silk’ as its production allows the development of

the pupae into adults and then only the open-ended cocoon is utilized for silk manufacturing. Eri is famous as shawls because of its natural warmth & softness. For evidence, the demand for *muga* silk which is exclusive to Assam is growing day by day and it is gaining popularity as high-end fashion fabric both in India and abroad. As one walks the numerous tiny streets of Sualkuchi, one can hear the rhythmic sounds made by the looms and the flying shuttles. It is spellbinding to see these women & men at work. This sector provides a self-employment to the rural masses, especially for women. The handloom industry is a rural based cottage industry, where spinning, weaving and other processes pre-weaving and weaving operation is predominant as Compared to mechanical operations. In weaving, each loom provides direct employment to one weaver were done only by hand. The younger aged boys and girls are generally employed as assistant on monthly salary basis. The loom, however, do not remain busy in weaving throughout the whole year. The weavers, specially the hired ones, go on leave on various occasions such as Bihu, Puja, marriage in family, sickness etc. 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. It has to be seen 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 centers 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. Due to their poor economic condition the weavers cannot convert their looms to fly shuttle one. Assam silk industry is an unorganized industry. Most of the people engaged in production and marketing, are small entrepreneurs, less educated and do not know, how to market their production systematically in

the market. There is no effective mechanism to standardize the quality and price. Some clever middlemen and traders are taking advantage of this situation and making money by betraying the original silk producers and weavers. This handloom silk textile is one of the ways of entrepreneurship for the people of Sualkuchi. It is open a path of Income to taken care of their family and their children. According to official sources currently there are about 17,000 Silk looms working in Sualkuchi to produce different range of silk products like Mekhela Chaddar, Riha etc. More than 25,000 people are directly or indirectly employed under the silk industry in Sualkuchi.

Assam silk is too costly in comparison to other state silks. Nowadays, the rising prices of these indigenous silks have led to some weavers importing cheaper yarns from other places like Mysore and Bhagalpur. This has led to the mixing of these imported ones with the indigenous ones making them more affordable at the cost of quality. The streets of Sualkuchi are lined by numerous silk shops, selling variants of traditional, native silk with the blended ones. These are visited by locals, national & international visitors who take away with them, with these immaculately woven pieces of fabric is a sensory treat to be cherished all their lives.

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEMS:

1. Due to the lack of proper training people doesn't use the machinery things for weaving.
2. Due to the increase price of Assam silk people uses cheap imported Chinese silk or artificial/synthetic silk yarns.
3. Lack of proper market the weavers of Sualkuchi are forced to sell their genuine products at throw away prices to the bulk buyers who have a hold in the market.
4. Less education is one another problem of Sualkuchi people. Because of this people of here do not know, how to market their production systematically in the market.

5. As Sualkuchi is situated on the north bank of Brahmaputra, landslide is common in there because of this here decrease the area of Sualkuchi.
6. As most of the customers are ignorant of the silk quality, some dishonest traders are taking advantage of this situation and earning huge profit by selling blended fabric as pure silk fabrics.
7. Urbanization and shortage of skilled agricultural labour is another reason for the shortage of Assam silk production.
8. Central and state govt. have a good number of schemes for the development of sericulture and weaving, however, people are yet to see a significant benefit of these schemes. Although a huge amount of money is spent, the result is pathetic. This is because of poor planning, poor implementation and corruption.
9. In Assam, Muga activities are not practiced as a whole-time occupation. Therefore, commercialization of Muga silk rearing and weaving activities will create immense scope for both full and part-time employment. Generally, no extensive, systematic and scientific plantation of food plants for silkworm is noticeable.
10. Shortage of electricity is one of the problem that faced by the weavers of Sualkuchi. As it is known that weaving is an activity which requires sufficient lights. But inadequate light, due to shortage of power and frequent power cuts has been seriously affecting the silk production in the town.

SUGGESTION:

Though the muga silk industry has occupied a place of pride in the socio economic and cultural life of the people of Assam, the industry is now facing a lot of serious problems, which have already been discussed. 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. 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. Increased production will ensure regular supply of silk yarns to the weavers at reasonable price which will ultimately make the Assam silk garments price competitive in the market. Scientific technology should be implemented to increase Muga production. Demand for Muga products are always on the rise and so more Muga farms should be established. Advance training should be given to muga farmers, as regards rearing practices, disinfection of rearing house. To overcome the financial constraints govt. should be given financial assistance both cash and kind to the weaver families. Encouragement should be given to the rearers for scientific and systematic plantation of food plants and necessary technical assistance should be provided free of cost by the Government. ‘Muga Research Institute’ may be established with modern, sophisticated scientific apparatus to study the causes of degeneration in the character of muga worms, and to. prevent diseases and device suitable methods to increase cocoon production by improving host plants, seed, rearing and reeling practices. The government should take required steps to include sericulture course in the syllabus at the Higher Secondary and College levels as an elective subject with provision for necessary facilities to selected institutions. The information gap between the government and the rearers as well as weavers, as regards sources of finance, availability of modern technology, market etc. should be bridged by a network of publications,

Radio, television, public meeting etc. This will, in turn, help in the emergence of entrepreneurs from the new generation. Govt. should take necessary steps to organize discussion, seminar and workshop on cooperative education from time to time in order to make the weavers aware and educate on modern weaving techniques.

CONCLUSION:

Sericulture and weaving always have been traditional pursuits for the rural Assamese people, supplementing their agricultural incomes as well as fulfilling their personal requirements of cloth. Handloom weaving constitutes an integral and inseparable part of the Assamese household. It is a vital sector of the rural economy. We may conclude with an optimistic note that there is a good prospect for development of the muga silk culture in Assam, which is expected to provide employment and additional income to rural people engaged in the enterprise and thereby will help poverty eradication. It is hoped, if the aforesaid recommendations are properly implemented, the muga silk industry would prosper greatly. In present time government has initiated some scheme to develop the condition of Sualkuchi. “Project Sualkuchi” is one of them. For the development of Sualkuchi silk handloom industry it will be necessary to improve labour efficiency and arrange marketing of products. Systematic planning of production is therefore, related with its effective organization control and regulation of the various activities associated with the process of production. This study may be concluded that the Sualkuchi silk Industry has a good prospect to provide direct and indirect income to rural people engaged there and thereby will help in poverty eradication.

REFERENCES:

1. Aggarwal J.C., “Development and Planning of Modern Education”, Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi.

2. Akhtar. Nazneen, “Socio-Economic and Structural analysis of Cottage Industry Workers: A case study from a remote area of Assam”, India, The Clarion, International Multidisciplinary Journal, Vol- 2, no-2 (2013), ISSN: 2277-1697
3. Andal .N. “Women in Indian Society”, Rawat Publication, Jaipur and New Delhi.
4. B.C.Allen, “Monograph on the Silk of Assam”, 1858.
5. Bhosle Smriti, “Education for Empowerment and Development of Women”, University News 47 (02) January 2009,
6. Dr. Raju phukan, “Handloom Weaving in Assam: Problems and Prospects”, Global Journal of Human Social Science, vol-12, issue-8, may 2012.
7. E.A.Gait, “History of Assam”, Ghy.,LBS Publications, 1982.
8. Gunabhiram Baruah, Asom Buranji (Assamese), 1972
9. Kochhar S. K, “Pivotal Issues in Indian Education”, Sterline Publisher Pvt Ltd. New Delhi, 2005.
10. Handloom Census Book, Directorate of Handlooms & Textile, Government of Assam, 2000-01
11. L.Gogoi, “Tai Sanskritir Ruprekha”,Dibrugarh, Banalata Publication, 4th ed.,1994
12. P.Baisya, “The Silk Industry of Assam”, Spectrum publications, Guwahati:Delhi, 2005.
13. S.L.Baruah, “A Comprehensive History of Assam”, Dibrugarh, 1985.
14. Samannoy Baruah, “Assam silk market: problems and probable solutions”, International Journal of innovative research in science, engineering and technology, vol-5, issue-7, july 2016.

Websites:

1. www.assam.gov.in/en/main/ASSAM%20silk
2. <https://asdm.assam.gov.in>
3. <https://assam.gov.in/en/main/women&childwelfare>
4. www.kamrup.nic.in/sualkuchi.htm
5. www.assaminfo.com/tourist-places/32/sualkuchi.htm