

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH HANDLOOM AND HANDICRAFT: UNVEILING THE WEAVING CULTURAL IDENTITIES OF ASSAM

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between women's empowerment, traditional handicraft and cultural sustainability in Assam, India. The study focused on the art of weaving, and transformative impact of this age-old craft on the lives of women artisans in the state. It is qualitative research where interviews and observation method were conducted to collect the information. This study unveils the multifaceted dimensions of empowerment experience by women in traditional weaving practices. Traditional crafts like Muga and Assam Silk are renowned for their intricate designs, not only these contribute to the economic landscape but also empower women by breaking traditional gender role. Women in the state has a significant role when in counts for the economic contribution and making them independent. The study examines the role of weaving in transmitting traditional knowledge across generations, ensuring the continuity of age-old weaving techniques. Almost every house in a village in Assam are into weaving as women artisans become custodians of skills and weaving different textile material out of it. Also, these women play a significant role in preserving the Assam's cultural identity and heritage. The research further sheds eye in the social impact of women's participation in weaving handicrafts and fostering community cohesion. This study focusses on the interconnectivity of women's empowerment, weaving traditional handicrafts and sustainability of cultural identities in Assam. The key contribution of women towards the cultural preservation, economic independent, skills enhancement and community ties has been discussed in depth.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Weaving, handicrafts and cultural preservation

INTRODUCTION

The North Eastern Region of India comprises of eight states Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. The eight states that make up India's North East Region (NER) account for around 4% of the nation's total population and almost 8% of the nation's total land. The majority of people i.e. 84 % of them live in rural areas and rest are outside in cities and towns. The area is rich in natural resources and has a substantial amount of deep forest covered roughly 65% (NECS 2015). Crafts have always been an integral part of Assamese culture, with its rich heritage of artifice and indigenous weaving traditions. The state of Assam is known for its exquisite handwoven fabrics, metalwork, crockery, and basketry, among numerous other crafts (Ramswamy, 2013). These crafts aren't only a means of livelihood for the original communities but also a way of conserving their artistic identity. The rising trend of women's commission through colourful socio- profitable programs, the crafts sector has surfaced as an important tool for empowering women and promoting artistic sustainability in Assam (Ramswamy, 2013). The importance of crafts in the contribution towards women empowerment, its impact on artistic sustainability, and the challenges faced by this assiduity in Assam (Devi, 2013). Crafts have been an integral part of women's lives and have played a significant part in their socio- economic development. The traditional crafts in Assam are primarily run by women, who have been involved in colourful aspects of the product process, including spinning, dyeing, and weaving (Devi, 2013). This assiduity provides employment openings, especially in pastoral areas, where women have limited options for work (Kashyap, 2018). Traditionally, women in Assam have been confined to the domestic sphere, but through their involvement in the handicrafts sector, they've set up a voice and gained confidence. The culture and knowledge passed down from their mothers and grandmothers have been a source of pride and a way to assert their artistic identity. As they produce beautiful handwoven fabrics and other crafts, they aren't only conserving their artistic heritage but also inspiring the youngish generation to value traditional artifice. Assamese cloth designs have traditionally been inspired by the epics and Mother Nature, with significant geometrical/ flowery motifs made in pictorial tinges for ethnical apparel. Brindavani fabrics were the most well- known traditional Assamese fabrics, with patterns portraying numerous incorporations of God Vishnu. Kimkhab, Boro diamond, Ohol jonberi, Cosa sazia, Miri, and Hatipati patterns are now utilised for ethnical fabrics and include geometrical, flowery, nature- inspired, and traditional carnivals. With the operation of fitted looms, the elaboration of traditional cloth design in the dominating handloom assiduity has been observed throughout the couple of decades after Indian independence (Gadey, 2020). The region's major traditional clothes are Mekhla- Chadar, dhoti- kurta, dokhna, sarees, riha, and japi, all of which make expansive use of

indigenous Assamese patterns for fabric decoration. This composition includes a study of Assamese traditional cloth patterns, as well as their use in the handloom assiduity for ethnical and ethnical apparel in the state (Gadey, 2020). Assam, the motherland of true Northeast Handloom goods, specialises in a variety of trades and crafts, including club and bamboo workshop, sitalpith, brass and bell essence workshop, ivory, woodwork, shola pith, crockery, and fibre craft. It is also known for its unique silks, the most striking and notorious of which is Muga. piecemeal from Muga, Pat, and Eri/ Endi the fabric of peace, the primary weaving accoutrements employed in the product of warm clothes are Muga, Pat, and Eri/ Endi the fabric of peace. The Handloom goods of the state are world- famed for their Eri, Muga, and Paat fabrics, which represent Assam's oneness and ethnical traditions (Gadey, 2020; Ramswamy, 2013).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

India's handcraft has a small share of the global request but it has the implicit to grow briskly (Fabeil, 2012). request experts estimate that the handcraft request grew faster than the former time. handcraft product demand is adding day by day. Indeed, it partake one- third of its import chance to the U.S. request which has worth 647.57 billion in 2020 worldwide and is anticipated to grow 10.9 per cent in 2022- 2027 (Rahman, 2019). The dominance of manly society and gender isolation have the most pivotal part in considering women to be the vulnerable sections of society which have led to a drop in the moral values of women (Bhat, 2018). As they were always being treated as undergraduate citizens of deprived openings. numerous handlooms and handcraft diligence are generally furnishing support to these women to ameliorate their image them by giving equal openings (Rahman, 2019). The policy of empowering women is being initiated by including them in colourful crafts conditioning and the product of accoutrements. Women are trained in the crafts sector which would give them with employment. This small- scale assiduity has the power to estimate the political disciplines also by supporting them with fiscal power (Heider, 2019). The culture of work is veritably important that could help to develop a sense of equivalency as compared to men to bring a sense of commission in women. Women are generally emphasizing defying colourful programs to develop their chops to increase their creativity position which would boost the frugality (Laine, 2021). The handcraft assiduity has tried to ameliorate the condition of women by fastening on boosting the profitable culture of women as they give vast openings for upping the culture of women as per the socio- profitable condition of women (Laine, 2021). The development of numerous crafts stores in the state of Jammu and Kashmir has led to vast openings for the development the woman to be more productive in their life. This new aspect of productive openings helps women to set a new way in their life (Khanduri, 2021). Assam in the Nineteenth Century Industrialization & Colonial Penetration argued that the manufacture of the silk was left entirely in the hands of the women (Goswami, 2012). Every ménage was in possession of a impend. Spinning and Weaving of both cotton and silk were carried out by women of the family basically for making clothes for particular use. The handloom assiduity in Assam especially the Sualkuchi's handloom assiduity. In malignancy of the host of contending lustrous fabrics and man- made filaments (Bhuyan, 1985).

Sericulture on which the silk assiduity survives is by far the stylish pastoral assiduity to give jobs and induce income in the pastoral areas. It also helps creating a humanized niche of green cover in the face of the adding ecological declination around us (Prasen, 2008) in his book he argued that cabin and handloom diligence have great significance in an agricultural frugality like Assam The strength challenges of the handloom's assiduity of Sualkuchi (Shaieka, 2023). He stressed about the extremity of the handlooms, its modernization, open requests, rising prices of the silk accoutrements, impacts of G.S.T over the silk assiduity of Sualkuchi, Changing request frugality and so on. The part of women engaged in the handloom sector, in the product of the handloom fabrics (Sarmah, 2006). The handloom sector in India's frugality and handed 19 per cent of the country's cloth product, contributes to the country's import earnings (Phukan, 2012). The Sualkuchi, its societies, socio- political life of the people of Sualkuchi, religious morality, education, its product process of handlooms besides the changing frugality of Sualkuchi (Sharan, 2020). Handlooms are an ancient art and serve well in terms of employment generation, generating around 4.4 million direct and circular jobs across India. The total handloom product exported in 2018 was valued at US\$355.91 (Foundation, 2020).

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This is explanatory qualitative research conducted through investigation (Willis, 2007). Research was conducted secondary information. This research helped in reviewing and analysing being information in the public domain similar as government periodic reports and publications, journals, online articles, books and helped in understanding the ground situation or reality through critical assessment of these reports and publications.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To understand relationship between handicrafts and women empowerment in Assam.

- To study the importance of role of women in preserving the cultural identities of Assam through weaving.

LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

- The study is focused on only weaving industries in Assam.
- The study being secondary based research with limited resources may not be applicable to the Universe.
- Time constraints to conduct in-depth research.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Assam has a long and fabled tradition of handloom weaving, dating back to ancient times. The craft has been passed down through generations, with each hand worker honing their chops and contributing to the rich shade of Assamese culture. The handloom fabrics are further than just apparel they're depositories of culture and heritage. Each weave tells a story, with motifs and patterns reflecting the state's history. Supporting this diligence is a way of conserving and promoting Assam's unique identity. One of the most direct ways in which supporting Assamese handloom empowers original crafters is through profitable upliftment, numerous needlewomen in Assam, especially women, calculate on handloom weaving as their primary source of income. By copping these handcrafted fabrics, gives a sustainable livelihood for these crafters, enabling them to support their families and communities. Handloom and handicraft weaving is a complex and intricate art that requires times of practice to master. The handloom has played a vital part in empowering women in the state. numerous women in the State aren't just professed needlewomen but also entrepreneurs who manage colourful aspects of the product process.

Handloom weaving has challenged traditional gender morals in the State. It has handed women with a platform to showcase their bents and entrepreneurship, changing societal comprehensions of women's places in both civic and pastoral areas. This has led to a significant shift in the way women are viewed in Assam's society. The handloom garments aren't just a piece of history; they're a style statement that can be painlessly incorporated into everyday fashion. Muga silk sarees, a highlight of Assamese handloom, are famed for their dateless fineness. Their natural golden colour and intricate designs make them a perfect choice for colourful occasions, from formal events to casual jaunts. Pairing them with contemporary blouses and accessories can bring a touch of the State's charm to ultramodern fashion.

The organised weaving industry of the Assam reveals the following data:

Sl. No	Particulars	Units in No.
1	No. of Handloom Households	12.69 lakh
2	No. of Handloom Weavers	12.83 lakh
3	No. of Handlooms	12.46 lakh
4	Part-time weavers	8.88 lakh
5	Full-time weavers	2.19 lakh
6	Female weavers	11.79 lakh
7	Male weavers	1.04 lakh
8	Average working day of weavers in a year	171 days
9	No. of weavers produces Gamocha	3.55 lakh
10	No. of weavers produces Mekhela-chadar	6.16 lakh
11	No. of weavers produces furnishing clothes	0.27 lakh
12	No. of weavers produces dress materials	0.22 lakh
13	No. of weavers produces other fabrics	2.47 lakh
14	No. of weavers uses Muga silk yarn	54,508
15	No. of weavers uses Eri silk yarn	43,685
16	No. of weavers uses Mulberry silk yarn	5,401
17	No. of weavers having one or more nos. of looms	10.20 lakh
18	No. of weavers without looms	76,981
19	No. of weavers under co-operative fold	54,809
20	No. of weavers under SHG/JLG	1.65 lakh

Source: Government of Assam: Handloom Textile & Sericulture, Directorate of Handloom & Textile
<https://dht.assam.gov.in/about-us/detail/state-profile-0>

As per 4th public Handloom Census conducted during 2019- 20, further than 12.83 lakh needlewomen and 12.46 lakh handlooms are available in the state. Apart from the organised industry, the Assam has a rich

and wide unorganised weaving sector in the state, which prevails in every house of the Assamese community. Knowing their traditional weaving is considered as a rich cultural and are respected across their society. Assam's Mising indigenous ethnical community has a rich tradition of weaving. A Mising woman, despite being engaged in paddy field work, forest wood collecting task, is likely to spend some time on her impend every day. The women make garments, substantially for everyday use, on handlooms (Preeti, 2023). They also weave majestic products for special occasions. Mising women weave in advance five to 10 sets of mekhela chador, a traditional women's vesture, to gift their daughters at the time of marriage. Women in the State feel proud to wear handloom products, especially mekhela chador, during special occasions similar as marriages and carnivals. Hence, the products are in great demand among people abiding in Assam as well as outside the state. still, handloom weaving has not taken off as a thriving source of livelihood for colourful reasons. But using simple technology and conforming to request requirements, Mising women have made the prospects of handloom weaving looking bright (Preeti, 2023) . It is not saturated to one or two communities in the State but weaving is as stretched as the State is with different handloom, designs and handicraft of the region. Different community and tribe in the state has their own handloom and most of them have hand weaving machines at their home to weave as per their convenience.

Aagor, a Bodo word that means "motifs", not only has a connection to the lineage in its name but also to its craftswomen and administration. Started as simply a livelihood design, Aagor provides work presently to about 70 village- grounded women needlewomen and runs a weaving centre for over to 30 destitute women to work full- time on weaving as an employment occasion. Aagor weaves offered an inclusively-independent organisational base for women to make their own livelihood and work together for an enterprise that secures their collaborative material and profitable interests. After numerous similar endeavours to commercialise the brand, numerous dominant request players like Fabindia recognised the positive gift demonstrated by the women of Aagor. In 2016, Lakme Fashion Week, regarded as the tabernacle of fashion in India, showcased Aagor Weaves work simply and repeated its exhibition in 2019 (Deepanshu Mohan, 2023).

The State is predominantly blessed with rich silk cultivation zone in the entire country, has unique designs and patterns in different districts of the State. Women in the State are mostly self employed with nominal income from weaving to meet their daily expenses. The government of Assam and Central government are working towards bringing all such unorganised weavers into an umbrella to support MSMEs industries in the State. The women are not only economically independent but also helping the preserving of the Assam's cultural heritage by transferring the weaving talent to their next generation. Every woman in the State feels proud in wearing their handloom and this generational legacy is something which is helping them to preserve culture.

FINDINGS

The women in the State are economically independent and many of them are decision makers which empowers them to take their stand. They not only earn for themselves but are also contributing to the State's GDP. The discussion above shows that there in weaving industry do empower the women in the State. Their talent is not limited to the State but its having its recognition at global level as well, allowing more women to participate in the industry and make their contribution.

Our Culture is our Identity, the weaving sector in the State is playing a significant role in preserving the cultural identities of the State through weaving. Wearing the handloom products of the State is not only makes them feel proud, also it is honoured by the society for keeping their culture alive even after 100s of years.

Muga Silk is the most famous silk of the State and was given GI tag in 2009, is the biggest weaved silk of the state. Sualkuchi is the hub of production of the Muga Silk in the state. The Central Silk Board is directly involved in providing training to the new generation to weave silk (Board, 2023).

Assam has the highest number of women handloom weavers in the country with the count of 11,79,507 weavers. The State has 58,114 registered women artisans with Office of the Development Commission Handicraft.

The Women of the State are known for knowing the needle work since early days. They were also complete in the art of mixed raw cotton; cotton mixed with silk. Endi or eri was woven with cotton. Infrequently cotton was combined with stroke silk, but frequently with muga; churi and riha of similar accoutrements were generally manufactured (Arts, 2019).

SUGGESTIONS

- The research shows that the State is rich in cultural heritage in terms of weaving, it needs more government intervention for smooth production and marketing of the traditional handloom and handicraft products.
- Modern technology will be another boost to the traditional weavers, where they can save their time and efforts.
- The fabricated designs sell in the name of traditional weaving should be checked regularly, which is making the traditional product handicapped in terms of cost and revenue and market expansion.

- Channels to connect with unorganised weaver is highly required, as they are neglected and not getting the required attention.
- Ease of financial supports to weavers is highly recommended as they can produce limited products due to financial constraints. Government subsidies in different ways to these weavers are also recommended to promote their talent.
- Training with digital technology is also required by the artisans and the weavers to make the world aware of their talent.

CONCLUSION

The women in Assam are exceptionally talented when it comes to weaving, handicraft, handloom activities, art and craft. They are exercising the weaving practice from early times and contribute significantly to their daily needs and other economical requirement. The tradition of weaving at home keeps on passing from generation to generation, which is helping the State to preserve their culture. Women in the State are economically independent and provides employment to the fellow women as well. They play a vital role in conserving the original weaving, art, craft of the State, also taking ahead the cultural heritage of the State by fostering creativity and driving profitable growth for their household and State at a large.

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