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WOMEN IN THE HANDLOOM SECTOR: EXAMINING EMPOWERMENT IN ASSAMESE SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Assam's handloom industry is not only an economic sector but also an active cultural institution, a creative agency and a space for women's creativity. The present paper explores the connection between women and the traditional handloom sectors in Assamese society by using the qualitative approach using field-based research. This study is an attempt to shift away from the dominant framework emphasising women's constraints in this sector and to highlight their active involvement, creative agency and empowerment that handloom weaving brings to them in the social scenario of the rural areas of Assam. The paper discusses the role of handloom as a livelihood, as a source of economic independence, as a means of cultural continuity and as a source of self-worth. In addition to the interviews, case studies and literature review of North-East India, the paper asserts that the involvement of women in handloom is a meaningful integration of tradition and agency. The results have shown that although gendered structures influence the dimensions of women's involvement, women weavers are continually engaged in meaningful participation within and through these structures. Additionally, the study places handloom weaving as a new space of social mobility and cultural continuity. The objective of this paper is to analyse women's empowerment through the handloom sector by analysing their economic participation, livelihood opportunities, and contribution to the preservation of cultural identity in Assamese society.

Keywords: *Women Empowerment, Handloom, Assamese Society, Livelihood, Cultural Identity,*

I. Introduction

Assam is one of the oldest handloom traditions in the world and is also known as a rich tradition of textiles in India. Handwoven textiles are closely related to the social and cultural life of the people of Assam. They are also used in ceremonies; festivals like *Bihu*; and as symbols of respect through the *Gamusa*. The Assamese woman, who has been skilled, creative and dedicated to handlooms, stands at the heart of this tradition, keeping it alive through the ages in spite of changing social, economic and technological environments.

The existing studies of women in the handloom industry have tended to focus on factors limiting their productivity; low wages, invisibility of labour, the patriarchal control of the industry, and competition by machine-made textiles. Although these challenges are significant, focusing solely on constraints may undervalue the resilience, ingenuity, and cultural commitment displayed by women weavers in sustaining the handloom tradition. The present paper aims at holding two dimensions: recognising the structural realities that affect women's involvement with handloom while emphasising the positive and empowering aspects of women's roles.

The study follows a qualitative research approach and is carried out in Bachagaon village in the Golaghat district of Assam. In total, 90 handloom women weavers were selected as the respondents for the study. Fieldwork methods were applied to gather data with semi-structured interviews, case studies, and participant observation. The respondents were chosen by purposive sampling to get the experiences of those women who are actively engaged in handloom production and economic activities. Secondary data was gathered from books, journal articles, government reports and relevant literature related to women, handlooms and empowerment in North-East India. The collected data was analysed descriptively to gain an understanding of the role of handloom in women's livelihood, economic participation, cultural identity and social mobility.

II. Historical dimensions of Handloom and Women in Assam

Assamese women and the handloom have been closely connected from ancient times. Spinning and weaving were an important part of life in the households of the subcontinent over five thousand years ago, as revealed by the archaeological finds from Harappa and Mohenjo-daro (Rao, 2006). The *Ramayana* and the *Arthashastra* mention sericulture and silk production in the region which was then called *Kamrupa* in Assam (Baishya, 2009). The Ahom dynasty (1228–1828) in particular encouraged the development of the handloom industry, and under their patronage, Assam's textiles, *Muga*, *Eri* and *Pat silk*, were famous throughout the region. Tavernier (1663) remarked that Assam silk is vibrant, and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Muga silk was an important trade product of the East India Company (EIC) (Gait, 1982).

Weaving had a social significance too in Assamese society. Gait (1982) noted that the women's artisanal work of *'boa-kota'* (spinning and weaving) was always a primary question when considering a woman as a possible bride for generations. This was not just an expectation within the home but an indicator of the Assamese woman's identity, as important as a formal qualification. All women, from queen to commoner, were expected to get to work with the loom. During the reign of King Pratap Singha, the norms of weaving were actively enforced so much so that the headmen of the village were responsible for checking the output of each house, a notable example of state intervention in the productive skills of the women. (Baishya 2009)

Importantly, Assam's handloom was not limited to a caste of weavers, as it was in many other regions of India. According to Gogoi (1986), all women of the community, *Ahom, Chutia, Kachari,* etc., participated in the loom. This lack of caste exclusivity made handloom weaving a common identity for women, instead of being a caste-based occupation. According to Barua (2003), the term *'Tantuvaya',* or professional weaver, was not a caste designation but a recognition of women who practised weaving, an activity that was widespread across Assamese households.

III. Handloom as a Source of Cultural and Social Identity

There is a strong cultural aspect of the weaving which is a part of the cultural understanding of the relationship between the women and the handloom sector in Assam. Handwoven textiles created by the Assamese women are more than just products; they represent cultural values, artistic knowledge and a sense of community identity. The *Mekhela-Chadar* for Assamese women, the *Gamusa* given as a token of respect and the handwoven items made for Bihu celebrations are all significant relationships between the weaver and the community, relating cultural practice to social meaning.

In the study area respondents always showed pride and identification with the weaving profession. The art of weave is taught through close intergenerational relationships from mother to daughter, from old woman to young girl, and from female neighbour to newly married woman: a social connection as well as a vocational one. As a girl learns to weave from her mother, she is not just learning a skill; she's entering an intergenerational community of creative women. The transfer of knowledge through women's relationships is social capital in and of itself, which reinforces women's networks and identities.

Devi (2013) noticed that the women weavers of Northeast India have multifaceted roles as both producers and traders of handloom products, where they at the same time preserve their cultural tradition by producing traditional attire. The researcher illustrates a case study of a school teacher who weaves at night because during the daytime she does household chores and engages in her profession. She explains that wearing hand-woven clothes is an expression of Assamese cultural identity and that she would never go to the market to buy machine-made clothes for ritual occasions. Her handlooms are both a way of earning a living and a way of expressing her culture and pride.

Handloom is not just used for making cloth; its significance is also felt during social gatherings. In the Adi community of Arunachal Pradesh, Singh, Singh and Adi Women Community (2008) noted that weaving is deeply rooted in the culture, belief and spiritual practice from the initial to the final stage of weaving. The hand-woven clothes made for a daughter's marriage trousseau in Assam are the outcome of years of weaving of a mother's gift to her daughter, which symbolises skill and affection. The custom of giving hand-woven produce in the researcher's study area was

still practised, and the practice reflected the individual woman's weaving work in the ritual life of the community.

There is a cultural context to handloom, and it should not be romanticised away from material reality, but neither should it be reduced to false consciousness or mere tradition. Weaving is what makes it so resilient; that's why it's so deep in culture. Assamese handloom is surviving during a globalised and machine era because the handloom is not a product; it is a practice, one with meaning, identity and relational significance which cannot be created by machines.

IV. Women's Economic Participation and Livelihood

In Assam, handloom is the second largest occupation for women, after agriculture. Women's weaving income is also an important means of earning a livelihood for many rural households as well as providing schooling for their children and household necessities. However, as often pointed out in the literature (Desai and Thakkar, 2011; Borthakur, 2017), this contribution often remains unrecognized in official statistical records and the family's income in households where women's earnings are aggregated and not categorized according to the source.

The study found that the primary reason for women's involvement in the handloom sector was the pursuit of economic independence. For many respondents, handloom weaving was not merely a source of income but a means of contributing to household finances, reducing economic dependence on others, and achieving a degree of financial autonomy. It is a major study finding. It argues that women are not simply reacting to the necessity of the situation but are making an active choice to handloom as a means of self-determination.

In the context of cottage industry, Habib et al. (2019) reported that participation in the cottage industry can lead to women's freedom from economic subordination, economic self-reliance, and increased participation in family decision-making. This study by them in Jammu and Kashmir is very relevant for Assam, as they discovered that women involved in traditional home-based production gained self-confidence and a prestigious status within the family. Similar trends were observed among the respondents in Bachagaon in terms of involvement in decisions, mobility, and feeling a sense of dignity.

The fact that most of the respondents in the selected study area sold their products to customers is interesting because over half of the respondents had their own sales transactions, either by accepting customers at home or by taking orders in advance or selling through SHGs. This direct market engagement is an economic agency that goes beyond the loom. The participants who negotiate prices, arrange advance payments of raw materials, and maintain customer relationships are building entrepreneurial skills that will reinforce their social confidence and position in society.

The function of SHGs in increasing the economic empowerment of women should be specially noted. Researchers found that the majority of the respondents were participating in self-help groups. SHGs have enabled women weavers to access credit and collectively market their products, and they have been given an opportunity to participate in exhibitions and trade fairs with a sense of support and shared learning. Goswami and Bhattacharjee (2019) discovered a positive association between women's participation in sericulture-related cottage industries through SHGs and empowerment in social, economic, and mobility contexts. In particular, the SHG has proven very successful in supporting women in moving from simply weaving for their own homes to a viable enterprise that generates income.

V. Handloom as a Pathway to Mobility, Participation, and Voice

The term “empowerment” has been interconnected with feminist sociology and is a contested term. According to Sen (1999), it is the extension of real freedom, which is not only rights but also capabilities. Kabeer (1995) defines empowerment as a woman's ability to make strategic life choices. According to Bhasin (2016), empowerment should be about the restructuring of the structures and ideologies that have subjected women to subordinate roles so that they can get their dignity, respect, and voice. So, the question arose, how does handloom weaving relate to these aspects of empowerment in Assamese society.

First, with regard to economic empowerment, the evidence shows that handloom enables the women to have an income source. The income from the handlooms was spent on the basic

necessities of life, as well as on the education spending choices of the children, which constituted autonomous choices and an investment in the family's future according to the respondents.

Second, handloom engagement has been related to increased mobility and involvement in public life. The researcher discovered that the overwhelming majority of respondents were able to move freely around their homes, to markets, banks, and other public areas. This mobility is itself a means of empowerment, the ability to move, to transact, to be present in public space. Also, respondents were very active in socio-cultural activities. Women deeply involved in the life of a community are more likely to have information, social networks, and a community voice to support further change.

Third, handloom skills can be passed on to create a kind of social empowerment. By teaching their daughters and female neighbours how to weave, women occupy positions of knowledge and authority that are often absent in other spheres of rural life. This intergenerational transmission is not only about the transmission of a technique but also about pedagogical authority, affirming the value of women's knowledge, and building community of competence.

It is important to highlight a respondent’s case here. She stands as a very good example of empowerment through handlooms. She was an educated woman who started a handloom business working with women of her community and made the traditional craft a source of livelihood for her, making it win awards in the state and outside of Assam. Her case exemplifies that the structural barriers, which she was able to overcome with education and economic resources, can be a way to achieve the economic and social empowerment that is possible with handloom weaving. Her case is not alone in being unrepresentative; it speaks to the potential that ensues when women's weaving skills are combined with market access, organizational capacity, and recognition.

VI. Self-Help Groups, Collective Participation and Emerging Markets

Self-Help Groups have emerged as an instrument for women's collective economic empowerment, bringing a change in the scenario of handloom production in rural Assam. SHG-affiliated women have benefitted from credit, formalised collective marketing, skill building, and

increased market networks. Saikia & Baishya (2010) noted that organised weaving and selling the *Eri* and *Mekhela-Chadar* produced by women in the SHGs of Palasbari and Chaygaon, helped improve their economic condition substantially. Goswami and Bhattacharjee (2019) have revealed that there was a positive relationship between SHG participation and various aspects of empowerment among rural women of Assam.

Respondents engaged in SHGs in Bachagaon highlight the extent of collective organisation in women's economic life. SHGs have helped women obtain loans for raw materials, to attend exhibitions and trade fairs in the nearby areas of Kaziranga and to collectively sell their crafts in a better manner. Being situated near a highly popular tourist site, Kaziranga National Park, they were more endowed to avail themselves of the market for handlooms.

Another case shows that the respondents sold hand-woven goods to visitors from all over India and around the world at various local exhibitions and events, such as the *Shankar Mahotsav*, *Kaziranga Mahotsav*, and the *Hasti Mela*, as a member of an SHG. The challenge she highlights is that the English or Hindi communication skills are limited among foreign tourists, which highlights the need for supplementary support in English, Hindi or other languages and market access. This is an area where policy measures could be really useful.

Another case study highlights the potential outcomes when education, entrepreneurship, and handloom skills come together. She transformed the local women’s weaving activities into an organised enterprise, established her own retail outlet with their support, and marketed products to tourists, thereby earning recognition as an entrepreneur both within Assam and beyond. It is not an isolated success but an exemplary case of success of the potential of organised and supported handloom entrepreneurship among women. A similar study by Khakhlary and Nath (2017) reported that self-employment among the weavers of the Kamrup district helped to improve the lives of the female and male weavers (women were found to be in the majority).

Low income, unstable income, high raw material prices, and little access to modern technology and markets are some of the problems faced by weavers. The sector is also faced with competition from power looms and machine-made products, which are available at low cost and

on a larger scale. But there are a number of government initiatives to assist handloom weavers. Further, the women weavers are often burdened with dual roles, productive and domestic, which reduces their economic return and autonomy. These problems point towards the structural inequalities that remain to limit the sustainability and growth of the handloom industry. Some of the same challenges were reported in the literature in the context of the traditional handloom sector (Vinodini, 2022; Deshmukh, 2025).

Giddens' (1984) structuration theory provides a rich understanding of how women weavers are not only shaped by social structures but also play a role in reproducing and transforming them through their everyday actions. In the context of Assamese handloom, women weavers rely on the traditional framework of handloom as a women's craft and gradually change the traditional concept of handloom into an instrument of economic empowerment, social mobility and cultural empowerment as they make a daily effort in the management of the sale of their products, association with SHGs, access to markets and transfer of the weaving skills. This interaction of structure and agency, as theorised by Giddens (1984), clearly accounts for the fact that the traditional feminine way of life has become a means of empowerment in the hands of contemporary Assamese women.

VII. Policy Implications

The present study suggests a number of specific policy recommendations to advance women's empowerment through handlooms without compromising the cultural value of the tradition.

The first important step is to recognise the women weavers as skilled workers and as economic agents. Formal weaving training programmes can help women weavers to gain professional status that their skills deserve.

It is very important to have programmes that link women weavers to regional, national and international markets. That's the exhibitions and trade fairs, but also digital marketing training, access to an e-commerce platform and assistance with product photography and online presence.

As noted by Mishra et al. (2021), market competition and shifting consumer preferences are a problem for women weavers from Northeast India. Upgrading training in modern design innovation, colour trends and product diversification will help women weavers to compete and retain the authentic handloom character. Importantly, this training should be offered in a flexible schedule, locally, and in a community-based format, to respect women's multiple responsibilities.

VIII. Conclusion

In Assamese society, the bond between women and handloom is a remarkable account of creativity, cultural endurance and women empowerment. It is manifested in the threads of weaving, in the sounds of the loom and the shine of *Muga* silk. It is handed down from grandmother to mother, from mother to daughter, and by learning and practice across generations. At the same time, it is a sociological narrative of complexity, where creative work and structural constraints come together and where cultural preservation and economic survival, as well as tradition and change, exist side by side. They are creative, skilful, economically active women who have a remarkable ability to manage around the structural realities and whose contribution and actions deserve recognition, support and respect.

The handloom industry is not an economic or cultural artefact of history; it is a viable economic and cultural entity, which can be a strong tool for women's empowerment today and tomorrow. The researcher's field investigations and available literature on the role of women in the handloom sector both point to the same conclusion: that a combination of proper market linkage, credit, training, and recognition can be a potential means of providing women with economic independence, social confidence, and cultural dignity in the handloom sector. For Assamese women, the loom is not merely a tool for producing cloth; it functions as a medium of economic, cultural, social, and personal expression. The task is to understand this multidimensional agency in its full complexity and to contribute to the conditions that enable it to flourish.

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