Research in Progress: The Silk Loom Community in Assam: Identity and Means of Livelihood amongst the Workers
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The Silk Loom Community in Assam: Identity and Means of Livelihood amongst the Workers

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Abstract

Weaving is an ancient art practice in the state of Assam and is one of the most important aspects of Assamese culture. Assam has the largest number of weavers in the country and weaving is the only source of livelihood for these people. Though Assam silk is renowned worldwide for its uniqueness, in the present market scenario, the demand has decreased due to various reasons. This paper tries to explore the various socio-economic issues and problems faced by the silkworm sector and the community attached to this sector in Assam.

Key words: Eri, Muga, Paat, Globalisation, Identity, Silk loom, Silkworms, Weavers

‘Assamese women weave fairy tales in their clothes’
- Mahatma Gandhi

Introduction

The art of sericulture and silk weaving has a long history in the world. As far as evidence goes, silk culture seems to have originated in China. The Chinese historians trace back the use of the product of the silk worm to the period of the myths. From China as a centre, the sector is said to have radiated to other parts of the world including India via Tibet by about 140 B.C. through the famous Silk route/Silk Road. This was the name given to the numerous mountain passes and ways, known as ‘Duars’ which exist between Assam and Tibet through Bhutan.

Across this route, a considerable amount of trade was carried on from early times. While the exports from Assam consisted of lac, muga silk, endi (eri) clothes among other articles, the Assamese used to receive woolen clothes, gold dust, rock salt, Chinese silk and Tibetan smoking pipes (Baruah, 1969; Bhuyan, 1985a). The other view is that mulberry and silk culture had originated in the lower slopes of the Himalayas and as such, they might have originated either in China or India or in both the countries at the same time (Baishya, 2003).

Weaving is an ancient art practice in Assam and is one of the most important aspects of Assamese culture. It has occupied an important place in the tradition
and civilisation in Assam since the ancient time. The womenfolk along with their domestic chore essentially run this sector. According to tradition, the skill to weave was the primary qualification of a young girl for her eligibility for marriage. Weaving is the only source of livelihood for many people in the state, and many families depend on the income from weaving. The completion of the full product is time consuming and costly as the raw materials used for the production is expensive and its cultivation is limited to Assam only. The weavers who go for rearing and spinning have to go through tremendous physical labour to meet the demands of markets as the products are handmade. Though, weaving is an essentially female craft, in villages such as Sualkuchi, both men and women practice weaving.

Silk loom is the most important cottage sector of Assam and Assam is well known worldwide for one of a kind Silk loom works with Paat, Muga and Eri silk. Varadarajan (1988) in her article, *Silk in the North Eastern and Eastern India: The indigenous tradition* defines the different categories of silk worms and determines their regional diffusion in India within some chronological framework. Under the Ahom patronage, the silk clothes received a great deal of encouragement.

Sualkuchi, also known as the Silk village of Assam, is located in the northern banks of Brahmaputra. The white Paat, the golden Muga, and the warm Eri are grown and cultivated here. The date of introduction of silk manufacture in Assam or the tradition of silk weaving in Sualkuchi cannot definitely be ascertained. However, historical records point to the fact that the Katonis or the rearers of the Pat silk entered Assam in the 12 century A.D. It appears then that this craft flourished under the Pala kings of Kamrupa kingdom (Baruah, 1914).

In the mid 17th century, the village took the shape as a weaving village when Ahom occupied Sualkuchi. With the coming of the Ahoms, we get a clearer picture of the importance of silk manufacturing among the Assamese rural folk and the role of women in it. Under the Ahom rule, manufacturing of silk cloth was extended to all sections including those of the upper castes in the valley. Queen Sarveswari, the wife of Siva Singha (1714-44) is said to have greatly encouraged weaving by the ladies, and also imported designs and patterns from other parts of India (Bhuyan, 1985b). The Ahom Kings established a Department of Weaving and maintained skilled weavers to supply the royal wardrobe with clothes. The weavers received rent-free lands and other favours in return for their services (Baruah, 1969). Elaborate arrangements were made for keeping sufficient quantity of clothes of different varieties in the royal store for presentation to foreign courts and dignitaries (Gait, 1933).
The encouragement given to spinning and weaving by the Ahom kings resulted in the concentration of silk production centers. In Medieval biographies of Vaishnavite preachers, one comes across certain areas or villages known for producing silk. Burha Ata, one of the foremost disciples of the neo-vasihnava saint Madhavdeva hailed from Tantikuchi where silk clothes were produced. Ananta Kandali, one of the contemporaries of Sankardeva, in his autobiographical reference to his ancestry, gives an interesting description of the locality in which silk was produced in abundance. He refers to Hajo which probably included Sualkuchi as well (Phukan, 1994).

Medieval records including the Guru Charit Katha, a hagiography of the neo-vasihnava saints, consists of mentions about women’s engagement with spinning and weaving. The family loom was so essential that if any family somehow did not have its own loom it used to borrow one from others on the share-clothing basis or by selling or mortgaging gold or valuable ornaments. It is recorded that in times of need some families could supply as many clothes as the situation demanded. The domestic cloth requirement was entirely met by women. Almost every woman referred to in the work is mentioned in connection with weaving and spinning, indicating clearly that it was they who had the responsibility of supplying the household with necessary clothing (Gogoi, 2003).

Despite this, contemporary sources hardly contain any record of women taking part in the socio-economic production, despite the existence of volumes of records being kept and preserved by the Ahom state (the Buranjis), and biographical and genealogical records of medieval Assam. Once the skill became identified with women, it simply became part of her daily routine and ceased to be even valued economically or acknowledged as labour, even though it was the women’s skill that helped to sustain the sector throughout the Ahom period. Female weavers were awarded only a peripheral status. It was this structure based on the exploitation of women’s labour which laid the foundation for future hierarchical divisions in the sector. The British colonial regime which extended to Assam in the early 19th century had given much emphasis on the silk sector.

The traditional Silk loom fabrics of Assam unfold the creative genius of the local weavers. Silk culture is a traditional cottage sector rooted in the life and culture of Assam. Endi and Muga silks are considered to be of indigenous origin and found only in Assam and the foothills of Meghalaya. Most of the cocoons are purchased ultimately by the traders of Sualkuchi, where commercial reeling and weaving are done almost as a monopoly (Chakravorty, Dutta & Ghose, 2010).
However, in the recent times, the demand of silk has declined due to various reasons. The traditional loom sector is facing a number of problems due to scarcity and increased rate of raw materials and mechanised techniques which has adversely affected the livelihood of the weavers. Roy (1989, 2002) has stated that the silk loom weaving occupies a key place in debates about Indian industrialisation. The latter is identified with the rise of mechanised factories where artisans have a marginal role. Decline and transformation in the artisanship was a worldwide phenomenon in the 19th and the early 20th centuries. Harnetty (1991) stated that in the 20th century, the fate of the Indian silk loom weaver has been at the centre of the controversy over the concept of the ‘de-industrialisation’ in India. Two general points can be made about the relationship between the technological change and the experience of the artisans. First, technological change in silk looms cannot be seen as a simple response to competition from power-looms based in the mills since the new tolls and processes came nowhere near to bridging the productivity gap between these alternatives. Secondly, noteworthy as these changes were, mills and power looms remained limited in scale and confined to certain places, products and groups of weavers. Technological change enhanced disparity within traditional mills and silk loom while raising its average productive capacity. Technological change refers to gradual changes embodied in the tools and processes used to compliment the traditional craftsmanship component. Silk looms survived because the market for clothes expanded in 19th century in the country.

This paper, besides examining the various socio-economic problems before the silk industry in Assam, also tries to understand its present status in the global market. It also delves into the challenges faced by the community engaged with silk industry. For the purpose of this study, research was conducted in Sualkuchi and a nearby village Bangshar under greater Sualkuchi block. The techniques of data collection included observation and interview schedule. Various people were interviewed including weavers and their family, owner of the looms, market owners.

The Silkworm Community in Assam: it’s Identity in the Global Market and Livelihood amongst the Workers

Near about eighty per cent of the community of Bangshar and Sualkuchi is engaged in weaving and the rest are engaged in business cum weaving. There are also women entrepreneurs in the area who are actively engaged in their business. Most of the weavers who are engaged in business do not get much time to be directly involved in the production of silk. They are mostly into collecting raw materials or supervising workers and work for 10-11 hours a day. The main problem they face is the lack of capital due to which they cannot buy enough raw
materials needed to meet the demand for a required number of orders, as the raw materials are costly.

Working in the traditional loom, a Sualkuchi weaver can expect a partly income of 4000-7000 rupees a month approximately, which is not at all sufficient for their living expenses. A weaver gets 400 rupees for per piece of chador, 150 rupees for per piece mekhela and 700 rupees for per piece silk saree they make. It takes around full three to five days to make a chador, one to five days to make a mekhela and one week to make a silk saree. Weavers are given monetary advance and are normally booked for a year. The wages of the weavers have increased at a slow rate over the 10 years. Not covered by any organised trade union, they do not have any platform to raise their problems and issues against the labour exploitation they experience. Majority of the weavers mentioned that besides them, there are two to three other earning members who are engaged in livelihood other than weaving; whereas some weavers also mentioned that he/she is the sole bread earner of the family and is engaged only in silk production. Other support stuff gets around 1500-2000 rupees monthly. Women and men, however, get the same wage for their work.

In recent years, due to economic fluctuation in the country’s economy, there has been a negative impact on the weaving community and their source of income. The prices of the raw materials have increased due to which the price of the final product has also increased. Further, besides being a high maintenance product, manufacturing of silk product is time consuming. Thus, their buyers in the market have decreased as they opt for cheaper, machine made and easy to maintain silk products. Because of this, the whole weavers’ community has undergone a phase of economic hardship. It is evident that their economic condition is not good. They borrow money or take loans to meet family expenses from various sources such as private society, gramin bank, NGOs, etc. The weavers have their own cooperative society called Sipini Santha (weavers’ society) from where they can borrow money with a fixed rate of interest. It was found that the economic conditions were good when the weavers joined the profession and they are still hoping for improved conditions. While some of the weavers chose this profession as they did not have any other skills, others continued since they do not and did not have any other options. Moreover, it was found that the weavers were emotionally attached to their profession.

It is clear that the silk sector of Sualkuchi is facing a number of serious problems which needs immediate attention. Every weaver, owner and the rest of the workers have their own story and problem to share. Some of the problems and issues of the weavers that can be identified are:
The biggest issue faced by the workers is the low wage. They need to take up loans to meet up the daily expenses of their family and while taking loans. Sometimes they cannot repay in time due to which their debts mount. Even though the government has increased the wages of the workers, the revised amount that they get is Rs.137 per day which is way too low to sustain their lives.

Operating a silk loom is very hard and exhaustive task. It needs good physical strength for which they need to consume nutritious food. But due to their low wage, majority of the workers cannot afford nutritious food. Most of them suffer from weakness, body pain, and headaches.

Workers are generally dissatisfied with the unhealthy work environment. In festive seasons they have to work for twelve hours or more daily to meet the demands.

Another issue is the relationship between worker and owner. Some of the workers have complained about not being paid fare wages. The entrepreneurs and the shop owners sell the products to the customer at a much higher price than what they pay to the weavers.

The work opportunities for the workers are not the same throughout the year which affects their economic condition. There is no guarantee that they will get work for the whole year.

There is no trade union due to which the weavers do not get a platform to put forward their problems and raise their voices against the injustice done to them in the work place.

There is very limited government support to the silk production, due to which even the quality of the Paat, Muga and silk are not of global standard. Presently, it can be seen that only a few renowned designers have taken up the silk sector to the global market with a lot of efforts.

Women workers have their own gender specific problems. The lack of proper living place for silk producers has been identified as the problem for the community. From the study, it can be seen that if the workers are placed in a single area, it would be easier for the workers to deliver the services.
Nowadays, people want less expensive dress with better design. Traditional loom needs more labour power and is time consuming due to which the final product is costly and it requires high maintenance. Because of this, people opt for machine made cheaper products which can be used in any condition, due to which the value of the traditional loom product has lost its value.

Nowadays, cheaper materials in the name of silk are being imported from other cities to produce the same kind of designs and these have taken over the market place. Until one can identify the differences between the original and the fake material, people are often being cheated by businessmen and shop owners who earn much money by it. Due to this many people have lost faith in the traditional loom believing that all the products are made of duplicate materials.

Another important factor that affected the traditional Silk loom sector is the changing climate of Assam over the years. Silkworm is highly sensitive to climatic conditions since they are grown outdoors. Unpredictable rainfall patterns, a rise in temperature and persistent floods have endangered Muga cocoon production across the state.

Demonetisation had a major effect on the setback of traditional Silk loom sector in the past one year. Most of the businesses were run with liquid cash flowing from hand to hand. But due to a shortage of money, the works of the weavers were put to a halt, payments were due, works remain pending, workers faced grave economic crisis and struggled to sustain.

Conclusion

There has been a tremendous change in the socio-economic scenario of the silk loom sector as a whole. The sector that had once attained global recognition and accreditation because of its uniqueness, beauty, artistic work has now lost its identity, charm and has failed to meet the requirement in the global market due to various factors.

Efforts from the state as well as the central government along with the owners of the silk loom industries are necessary to save this heritage sector. The increase in wage is considered to be the most important matter as low wage has been identified as the major problem of the weavers to maintain their livelihood. The government can subsidise the sector by providing credit, building necessary social, economic and financial infrastructure, arranging marketing campaigns worldwide. There should be the provision for loans with low interest rate for the
workers. Promotion of marketing of indigenous Assam silk products in the local as well as in the global market is necessary to give the sector a boost.

Protection of the weavers and the sector should be identified as one of the major agenda. They must get the benefit of various acts of the government for protecting the interest of workers.

Sualkuchi has to depend for raw materials from outstation markets which are costly. Therefore, the government should monitor the price by putting a standard level for all the goods and materials so that it will be accessible to the owners and weavers at an affordable budget. There is also an urgent need to put a ban on the selling of cheap materials imported from other places in the name of original silk products, because these low quality machine-made materials have brought defamation to the traditional silk loom sector. This has led to loss of work for many weavers.

It is also very important to improve the relationship between the owners and the workers in this sector. Proper health and education facilities should be there for the workers and their children. Establishing cooperative societies for the workers, providing salary on time, training, funding, supply of raw materials, creating more employment opportunities and ensuring regular work in the sector, ensuring better work environment are viewed as important factors for the overall development of the sector and livelihood of the workers.

Notes:

i It is the ethnic costume of Assamese women and is draped like a saree waist upward by the women of Assam.

ii It is the bottom part worn downwards from the waist by the Assamese women along with the chador.
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