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**Economic Condition of Bodo Women Weavers of Sualkuchi Silk Industry in
Assam****Dr. Amarendra Kalita***

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Abstract

Assam is known for silk products and the silk industry of the state is concentrated in Sualkuchi area under Kamrup District. The pat and muga fabrics along with fabrics of tasar produced in Sualkuchi have a good market. The significant point is that the silk industry is based on labour and it employs thousands of weavers and helpers. It is known that there are about 20,000 weavers in Sualkuchi silk industry and among them 28% are bodo women. The poorness of the bodos and their low education compell the bodo women to come to the industry. It is found that the economic condition of the women weaver is not good. In this paper an attempt has been made to analyse the work environment and economic status of the tribal women weavers in general and bodo women weavers in particular who are engaged in the silk industry of Assam. The paper is based on a field study conducted in Sualkuchi area in the year 2016.

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[AFS]**Key words-** Bodo, Manual, Silk, Status, Weaver**Introduction**

As explained in the Webster's dictionary 'Silk' is a lustrous tough elastic hygroscopic fiber that is produced by silk worms by secreting fluids in the form of two filaments consisting of fibroin cemented into single strand by sericin. It is solidified in the air and is capable of being reeled in a single strand from the cocoons. This reeled strand is made bigger by twisting other strands as required and used for weaving. It is believed that silk was discovered first in china. According to western historians, mulberry

culture, in which silk worm is reared by feeding the leaves of mulberry trees have spread to India from China through Tibet by about 140 B.C. India has had a glorious past in silk production. There are four types of silk viz. **Pat, Muga, Eri and Tasar.** Mysore, Coimbatore, Kashmir and certain districts of west Bengal (Malda, Murchidabad and Birbhum) are the main sources of mulberry silk. Muga is produced in Assam and Eri in Assam, west Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, and Kerela. Tasar is produced

in Madhya Pradesh, Assam, Bihar and some districts of west Bengal.

Among the states of India Assam is the monopolist in silk production. Here four types of silk **Pat, Muga, Eri and Tasar** are produced and used in the industry. Pat silk is more valuable and it occupies major share in the industry. Silk industry contributes a lot to the state's economy. The 'pat' and 'muga' cloths of Assam are not only famous in India but also exported to many places of the world.

Sualkuchi is a small census town consisting of two revenue villages namely Sualkuchi and Bamun Sualkuchi under Kamrup district of Assam. It is situated in the north bank of the Brahmaputra river and 32 km away from the capital city Guwahati. The local people calls Sualkuchi as 'Manchester' of Assam. Actually the silk industry of Assam is concentrated in Sualkuchi. The artisans of Sualkuchi mainly produce pat and muga fabrics along with fabrics of tasar. These are used mainly for making 'mekhela chadar' and 'sari' for women. Now a day it is also used for some other purposes. Pat muga and tasar product are very popular in Assam and it has a good market.

Sualkuchi was originally a 'craft village' having several cottage industries like handloom industry of tantis, oil pressing in

the traditional ghanees, gold smithy, pottery, silk rearing and reeling. Other industries have now declined and all the families have taken up weaving as the main source of income.

The significant point is that the weaving industries are based on labour and it employs thousands of weavers and helpers. One weaver is appointed against one loom. Although silk industry is very famous proper survey has not been conducted by the government departments. From the survey of Bashya Prabin (2002) it is known that in Sualkuchi there are 9738 pat looms, 2645 muga looms and 1384 tasar looms. All total 2968 households are engaged in the industry and 16717 looms are operating. Both male and female are found appointed as weavers. From the same report it is found that 19168 numbers of weavers and 7770 helpers are working in the weaving centers. Among them 13827 weavers (72%) and 2148 helpers (28%) are hired. Per loom gives employment to 1.76 person. Interestingly 55% of the total weavers are women. The report says there is 5343 number of bodo women in Sualkuchi which constitute 28% of the total weavers.

Bodo is an dominant tribal group in Assam. Bodo women in Assam are traditionally industrious. In the bodo societies women

have to perform different duties from household works to works in agricultural fields. Fishing by bodo women is a common picture found in Assam. Compared to the non tribal women, tribal women particularly bodo women wear colourful dresses. Bodo women have good knowledge of handloom. They prepare their dresses in beautiful way. This very fact probably attracted the loom owners to appoint tribal women in general and bodo women in particular as weavers in

Review of literature

Some studies are available on various issues relating to Silk Industry of Assam which is also known as Manchester of Assam. The Silk industry is based mainly on weavers and large majority of the women weavers belong to Bodo community. But, sufficient *Khaklari, Parmita(2018)* found, in case of Sualkuchi, despite their skill in silk processing and weaving, very few(7%) women are entrepreneurs or master weavers themselves. 85% were paid workers from within and outside Sualkuchi and 8% work under Cooperative societies. The respondents who were master weavers revealed that both sons and daughters knew weaving; the sons preferred working outside the home, looking after marketing of the products. Daughters continue to work in looms if hired workers are on leave or when

their industries. The poorness of the bodos and their low education has also compelled the bodo women to come to the industry. **The objectives fixed for study in this paper are** (i) to study the economic status of bodo women weavers working in silk industry of Sualkuchi village under Kamrup District of Assam and (ii) to investigate the problems of bodo women weavers in particular and silk industry in general.

studies have not been done to study the status of the Bodo women weavers and their future prospects. Only few studies and reports are found which have addressed these issues to some extent only.

there is increase in demand during festive seasons. The study found, 65% of the weavers are migrants from nearby districts. Lack of employment opportunity at their place of origin compelled them to migrate to Sualkuchi. Half of women weavers belong to the age group of 20-32years and 68% of the weavers are unmarried and 32% are married. When interviewed it was found that almost 61% of the women weavers have passed primary level education, 34% secondary level and only 5% has attended college education. Most of them deprived of

school education due to poor economic condition.

Baisya Mitali (2016) in her study found more than 98% of the women weavers of Sualkuchi silk industry are migrants from nearby districts who come as a result of lack of employment opportunity at their place of origin. In her study, 57% of the weavers were found passed primary level education, 24% secondary level and only 5% has attended college education. Among the sample weavers 12% were found illiterate. Result showed the weavers worked for 8-10 hours a day with a break of 2 hours and even sometimes they had work more than that particularly before festivals. As per result, 70% of weavers earned annually in between 20000-30000 where as 10% weavers earned more than 30000 and above. The accommodations provided to the weavers by the owner were found of poor unhygienic condition. Another finding was that more than 90% of the weavers faced problem of payment, accommodation facilities and work load. The study established that the industry was not modernized. Lack of Govt. facility was another finding of the study.

Baruah Samannoy(2016) in his study concluded that in spite of having a tradition of silk production and many govt. schemes,

in the market of Assam silk, the supply is significantly less compared to demand which is the root cause of the problems of Assam silk market. Market related problems like threat of cheap imported yarns, traders selling garments made out of low priced blended yarns in the name of pure Assam silk etc. are depriving and demoralizing people who are honest and engaged in production, weaving and trading of Assam silk. Organizing the unorganized industry with a properly worked out business model can bring permanent growth of the industry. Goswami, Kishor(2015) in his study concluded that globalisation played a crucial role in the silk industry of the country as a whole and North East in particular. He found the process may result in positive economic gain from rapid growth of export in terms of generation of employment opportunities, more earning capacity for rural women, etc. However, negative sociological features specifically in relation to gender disparity, child labour, poor working conditions, etc. were also increasing. Northeast India is not different from these positive and negative aspects. Location specific problems such as non-availability of good yarn, poor infrastructure, inadequate healthcare, training, and credit facilities, natural

calamities such as flood, etc., are a few other important problems the state is reeling after. Government machinery should come out heavily to solve the problems related to credit, healthcare, flood, etc. To cope up with the international competition, adequate training facilities should be arranged locally to infuse innovativeness in the industry.

Methodology

The paper is based on a field study conducted by this author in Sualkuchi area in the month of January, 2017. All total 140 samples were interviewed and data found were analysed. A carefully prepared schedule of questions was canvassed in

Results and Discussion

The work: weaving

The weavers come mainly from the lower Assam districts. The work is purely temporary, seasonal and of contractual nature. Although making pat or muga cloth takes various steps the women weavers are appointed only for weaving work. One weaver works for minimum 10 hours a day. They are paid piece wage. For making a 'pat sadar' one weaver is paid about 700 rupees and it takes average 6 to 7 days. So it is estimated that one weaver can earn maximum 100 rupees per day. The interesting feature of weaver's appointment is that the owner has to pay Rs. 8000 to

Bharali, Ratna Talukdar (2012) presented a vivid picture of the women weaver in which the socio economic condition of the women weavers working in this silk industry was reflected. In her report, the problems faced by the weavers were presented beautifully.

which investigation was made to know the demographic profile of the tribal women weavers, their housing pattern, work status, common problems, future plans, social awareness and awareness about rights.

Rs.10, 000 in advance to one weaver when appointed. The weavers earn average 700 rupees per week. The payments are made in week time.

Most of the women take loan in advance and therefore end up working as bonded labourers in order to pay them off. They get only Rs. 300 to Rs.400 a week and remaining portion is adjusted to the advances. As observed the weavers takes advances two three times in a year. As a result they remain indebted to the owners and can not leave the work. The weavers are not paid any other bonuses and facilities. Almost all of them stay at rented houses in colonies. One family or 2/3 weavers pays

Rs. 300 to Rs.400 for a single kacha room which does not have any modern facilities. 100% of the samples are found to be using kerosene as fuel. The married weavers stay with husbands and children. These women weavers are not covered by any trade union or platform to raise their demands against exploitation.

The silk industry has been affected by recent economic fluctuations. The industry has including problems. Although Sualkuchi is known as Manchester of Assam, it depends on outside market for raw materials. Its weavers traditionally weave pat(mulberry) and muga silk. The pat silk comes from Bangalore and loom owners are forced to

Family background

It is found that although bodo women from all over the state come to Sualkuchi and work as weaver in the industry, majority of them come from Bagma and Udalguri districts. Usually the women, who come to Sualkuchi, try to return back after few years to start life with own earnings. Actually they get very small amount as wage and therefore cannot earn much. 98 % of the samples reported that poorness of their families have compelled them to become weavers in this industry. Only 2% have reported other causes for joining this work. 20% of the weavers have come from the families who

pay whatever price the businessmen there quote. Although the golden muga silk thread are procured locally, it becomes expensive as supply is limited compared to its demand. The mulberry silk cost over Rs. 1800-2200 per kg, muga silk can range anywhere between 14,000 and 27,000 per kg.

As the price of silk yarn has increased, profit margin of the loom owners is decreasing. Therefore, the status of loom owners is not found better. The owners reported that as their profit margin is decreasing, they cannot pay more to the weavers. Instead they feel they are providing social security to the migrant women coming to Sualkuchi in search of work.

do not have any agricultural land. Remaining 80% weaver's families have small plots of land. Only 5% of the weavers have pucca house, 17% have electricity and only 9% have TV in their houses. That the weavers want to get connected with modern life reflected in the number of radio and mobile phone. 55% of the weavers have radio sets and 27% have mobile phone. Illiteracy of the parents and large size of family is common to all the sample weavers. The average family size is found 5.34. Another important feature is that in 57% cases daughters outnumber son. This

implies that in a family, if the number of daughter is more they are forced to go to this work. 100% of the samples reported that

Educational level

Education has manifold effects on women:

(1) Education improves work opportunities for women and this raises the opportunity cost of having children. (2) Educated women want their children to be educated. This very fact raises the cost of having children. (3) Education makes women more This greater freedom of women increases their capabilities and encourages and enables them to make their own conscious and deliberate choices and take rational and judicious decisions. In the survey it is found that the educational level of the weavers is very low. As seen in the Table-1, among the sample farmers only 6% have collegiate education and only 20% have high school

Social awareness

Social awareness raises the level of a particular group of people. Because of the low level of education, women are found unaware of their rights and in many cases women are exploited. The women weavers are engaged in the silk industry for on an average 9 years. The experience ranges from 1 year to 20 years. Questions were put to know the level of social awareness of the weavers.

they have come to Sualkuchi through their friends and relatives.

informed and receptive to birth control methods. (4) Education and employment lead to late marriage and delay the time available to rear children and (5) Education improves the socio economic status, bargaining power and independence of women.

level education and remaining 14% have primary education and 60% are illiterate.

Enquiry was made to know whether the women are interested in attaining education through open system. Result gives a disappointing picture. Only 11% of the wavers have expressed their willingness for such education.

The constitution of the country has granted equal right to both boys and girls. Both can inherit the property of their parents. But in most cases the girls are unaware of the rights. In the tribal societies also male dominates the females. The education raises the level of awareness. In the field study it is found that although the level of education of the weavers is low they are aware of the equal rights. Table-2 shows that 91%

weavers want equal right in the society. Of course to the enquiry whether only son should inherit the property 31% of the weavers gave positive answer. Another interesting finding is that 51% of the sample weavers support love marriage and 60% supports small family norms. 63% of the weavers have reported that there should be reservation for women.

From these results it can be concluded that the weavers have learnt many things from their attachment to the modern civil society

Level of satisfaction

The tribal women are coming to this industry because of the poorness of their families. The illiterate parents have considered their daughters as earning members. 34% of the sample weavers are found to have 10 to 15 years experiences and 49% have 5 to 10 years experiences. This reflects that those who join this work remains for long period. One very disheartening point is that out of 140 samples weavers 75% have remained unmarried. When enquired it was found that the boys hesitate to marry the girls who works in this industry. This very fact indicates that some exploitation were there on the weavers. At the time of interview 95% weavers have reported that there is no misbehaviour and physical torture on them but it is difficult to believe. Previously the weavers stayed in the owner's houses. There are instances that the owners or the relatives of

Findings

that they are living in. Contrary to these results the weavers have expressed some traditional sentiments also. Among the sample weavers only 40% supports widow remarriage and only 3% supports divorce and separation because of conflicts between husband and wife. The result indicates that with the attainment of education the weavers will be more conscious about their rights. It will empower the women which will bring social consciousness.

owners have married tribal weavers. Some women have got married to local youth of poor family background.

Majority of the weavers have reported that they are satisfied with the present job. Of course 17% of the sample farmers have reported their dissatisfaction. Low salary, low respects, lack of security, hard labour have been cited as the reasons for such dissatisfactions. 31% of the sample weavers want to change the present occupation. Among those 15% want to start own business. In an enquiry it is found that 51% of the weavers have future plans to change. From the mix responses of the weavers it is observed that almost all the weavers are working in the industry under compulsion. Not a single weaver has reported of getting any assistance from government for doing own business. So it can be said that if any alternative is opened majority of the weavers will leave the present job.

All total 140 samples were interviewed and data found were analysed. From the analysis it is found that:

- (1) The work status of the bodo women weavers in silk industry of Assam is pathetic. The weavers get only daily wage without any other facilities.
- (2) A large majority of the weavers have remained unmarried.
- (3) Although they are at all not satisfied still they are working in the industry because of absence of alternatives before them.
- (4) The supply of weavers in the recent past has declined. Many families have stopped the business of weaving because of shortage of weavers.
- (5) Lack of education and poorness is found as the most influencing factor to attract the bodo women to this profession. So it is expected that in near future if education in general and female education in particular is extended to all the areas the bodo women will not be interested in such a job in which

Conclusion

From the analysis it can be concluded the work status of the bodo women weavers in silk industry of Assam is pathetic. The fact that a large majority of the weavers have remained unmarried indicates that the weavers are socially neglected. Although

the monthly income is very low and there is no future security.

(6) Still, the majority of the weavers have reported that they are satisfied with the present job. Of course 17% of the sample farmers have reported their dissatisfaction.

(7) The weavers have learnt many things from their attachment to the modern civil society that they are living in. Contrary to these results the weavers have expressed some traditional sentiments also. Among the sample weavers only 40% supports widow remarriage and only 3% supports divorce and separation because of conflicts between husband and wife.

(8) The result indicates that with the attainment of education the weavers will be more conscious about their rights. It will empower the women which will bring social consciousness.

(9) The innovation of machine has reduced the workload of the weavers. It is expected that in recent years modernization of technique is bound to take place.

they are at all not satisfied still they are working in the industry because of absence of alternatives before them. As reported by majority of the firm owners compared to the demand of weavers' service in the industry supply in the recent past has declined. Many

families have stopped the business and some others have decided to stop and searching for alternative. After the formation of BTAD in the bodo dominated areas in Assam the general awareness of its people is increasing. If the state government and the BTAD authority takes some welfare measures for women as expected to be, in near future the scarcity of weavers in silk industry will be more acute. Lack of education and poorness is found as the most

Recommendations

- (1) The Bodo women weavers need to be protected by some laws so that they get minimum wages and in no case are exploited.
- (2) There should be some provision of training so that the productivity level of the weavers increase and it helps the industry.
- (3) The government agencies need to offer some financial assistance so that the interested women can open own small projects if they want.

influencing factor to attract the bodo women to this profession. So it is expected that in near future if education in general and female education in particular is extended to all the areas the bodo women will not be interested in such a job in which the monthly income is very low and there is no future security. Further study on various issues will result in improvement of this section of people in particular and the silk industry as a whole.

- (4) The owners should be compelled to make the living condition of the weavers better off.
- (5) The IIT Guwahati and other Govt. Institutes can do research to modernize the method of production so that the productivity of the weavers increase and they can live a better life.

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Table-1: Educational levels of the weavers

| Education | No of sample | In percentage |
|-----------------|--------------|---------------|
| Illiterate | 84 | 60 |
| Primary | 20 | 14 |
| Up to class X | 28 | 20 |
| Up to class XII | 8 | 6 |
| Total | 140 | 100 |

Table-2: Social awareness levels

| Support to | No of sample | In percentage |
|------------------------|--------------|---------------|
| Equal right | 128 | 91 |
| small family | 84 | 60 |
| Love marriage | 72 | 51 |
| Women's Reservation | 88 | 63 |
| Widow remarriage | 56 | 40 |
| Divorce and separation | 4 | 3 |
| Dowry | 112 | 80 |