

Is the Traditional Handloom Industry in Assam in Trouble? Evidence from the Weavers in Barpeta District

Rituparna Kalita

Abstract: *The handloom industry, one of the largest traditional unorganised economic activities after agriculture, occupies an integral part of the rural livelihood. Growth and sustainability of this industry is based on the transfer of skill from one generation to the next as well as their ability to adapt to market requirements. As per the Third Handloom Census of India (2009-2010), about 2.38 million handloom units provided employment to 4.33 million persons of which, 3.63 million workers are in rural areas and .698 million workers in urban areas, respectively. In Assam, by providing livelihood to millions of weavers and craftsmen in rural areas, a vital role has been being played by this industry in the economic development of the rural masses. However, over the last couple of years, it has been noticed that the situation has changed and this age-old tradition of handloom weaving as an activity is in deep crisis. Considering such a critical juncture faced by both the industry and the weavers alike, this paper aims at exploring the present situation of the handloom industry in Assam. An attempt of in-depth primary study of 200 weavers in Barpeta district has been performed and descriptive statistics has been used to analyse the primary data. Results show that the continuation of this tradition in future is under question in the district. A very less percentage of weavers' children are interested in continuing their hereditary occupation of weaving in future.*

Key-words: *Conditions, Economy, Handloom industry, Trouble, Weavers, Weaving*

I. INTRODUCTION

The handloom industry is one of the largest unorganised and informal economic activities after agriculture and occupies an integral part of the rural livelihood (Ministry of Textiles, 2015). This industry is an ancient, decentralised and skill-oriented industry spread throughout India. It occupies a pivotal place within the socio-economic fabric of society with the hand-woven textiles having a long glorious tradition and symbolic of Indian culture. Through weaving, the weavers of this industry are preserving and at the same time keeping alive the traditional crafts of different states. Growth and sustainability of this industry, however, is based on the transfer of skill from one generation to the next.

Handloom industry, though small scale in nature, is also a source of livelihood and employment to a large number of families especially in the rural areas of India. As per the Handloom Census of India 2009-2010, about 23.77 lakh handloom units provided employment to 43.31 lakh persons of which, 36.33 lakh workers are in rural areas and 6.98 lakh workers in urban areas, respectively.

This industry is a way of earning livelihood for the lower economic strata of the people in the society of rural Assam. Assam holds a unique position in the handloom map in our country with the highest number of looms i.e. 46.8 per cent of the total and highest number of weavers i.e. 48 per cent of the total. However, different literature has highlighted that the traditional handloom industry has periodically been enveloped in crisis particularly during the past couple of decades (Devi, 1983; Basha, 1991; Narasaiah & Krishna, 1999; Reddy, 2006; Ansari, 2014; Aggarwal et al., 2015; Boruah & Kaur, 2015; Bankers Institute of Rural Development, 2016; Rao & Kumar, 2018). The handloom industry is witnessing a fall in the number of weavers in Assam from First Handloom Census of 1987-88 to Second Handloom Census of 1995-96, although from the Second Handloom Census 1995-96 to 2009-10 (Third Handloom Census) an addition of 2.05 lakh weavers has been reported in the state. Additionally, the number of looms in Assam also records a decreasing trend from the second handloom census of 1995-96 to the third handloom census of 2009-10. It has also been reported in literature that handloom weaving is gradually disappearing as one of the main props of our culture (Saikia, 2004). The continuity of this traditional industry is in question in the modern century along with the livelihood of the weavers who are the crux of this traditional industry.

II. OBJECTIVE

Keeping in view the present scenario of the traditional handloom industry, an attempt has been made to explore the present condition of the weavers in the handloom industry in Barpeta district. The paper highlights some selected socio-economic conditions to examine the status of the industry.

III. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

In order to achieve the aforesaid objective, the study mainly depends on the primary sources of data. Barpeta district stands second in terms of the number of weavers in Assam next to Kamrup (Metro and Rural) district. The primary data have been collected through structured questionnaire and personal interview method with

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200 respondent weavers from two (2) villages of Barpeta district (Barbang and Keotkuchi) during March-May, 2019.

The villages have been selected purposively on the basis of the presence of highest proportion of weavers. The respondents have been selected with simple random sampling method without replacement. To analyse the data, descriptive statistics has been used such as tabular methods and graphical methods.

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Present Condition of the Weavers

The present study considers certain parameters to investigate the present condition of the sampled handloom weavers. The parameters involved for judging the condition of the weavers include socio-economic-demographic characteristics as well as aspects related to continuity of the handloom industry in future. The parameters are presented in the following.

Table I depicts certain parameters which are gender, age group, social group, religious group, level of education, type of ration card and type of dwelling respectively. Descriptive analysis of the sample shows that all the handloom weavers are female handloom weavers which shows the predominance of women in handloom weaving. About 45 per cent of the handloom weavers are found to be in the age cohort of 35-44 years and 18 per cent of the weavers are above 50 years of age which is significant. Dire poverty along with domestic need is forcing people to work even at age 50 years and above, which is revealed during the course of the interview. Weaving is still an important venture for the women weavers belonging to these age groups of 40 years and above, while on the other hand, the percentage of weavers in the age group of ≤ 29 years is second lowest from amongst all age groups at 5 per cent only. A plausible explanation for the lower proportion of weavers in the lower age groups is the migration of people from weaving to other activities; comparatively younger generations are not interested in weaving anymore because of low remuneration.

Further it is found that majority of the handloom weavers are from general category at 76 per cent and surprisingly all the respondent weavers belong to Hindu religion. This is because of the fact that in Barpeta district only those women belonging to Hindu religion weave as per the interview. A majority 55 per cent of the weavers are found to be educated only up to primary or middle level with merely 2 per cent being graduates and above graduates. Interestingly, 18 per cent have reported to have no formal education, 8 per cent of whom are illiterates. Most of the respondent weavers possess BPL card in their households followed by 17 per cent possessing Mukhya Mantrir Anna Suraksha Yojana card (MMASY) and 11 per cent have revealed to not hold any ration card in their households. This signifies the poor overall socio-economic status of them. An exploration of the type of dwelling of the handloom weavers reveals that only 16 per cent of them live in *pucca* houses

and majority 84 per cent of them live either in *kuccha* houses or *semi-pucca* houses.

We can see that most of the weavers' households are economically weak as it is revealed that 32 per cent of them earn ₹8001 to ₹10000 per month followed by 18 per cent earning ₹6001 to ₹8000 per month (see Table II). 14 per cent of them earn even less than ₹6000 per month from all sources. It is also noticeable that income from weaving activity is very meagre in this present era as 17 per cent of them earn ₹1000 or less than ₹1000 per month from weaving while 59 per cent are able to earn ₹1001 to ₹2000 per month. The poor economic condition of them is also revealed from the possession of land holdings by only 40 per cent of the total respondent weavers' households. Again, among those who possess land, 62.50 per cent own land holding up to 0.5 hectare and only 7.50 per cent have reported to possess land holdings of more than 2 hectares.

Again, an attempt has been made to look at the occupational preference of the children of the weavers. In Table III and Fig. 1, the occupational preference of the children of the weavers is presented. Occupational interest of children of the respondents is measured in terms of four aspects: weaving, business, agriculture and Government service. Those who are under the category Not Applicable represents those who do not have children. The table indicates that out of all the weavers 57 per cent of the weavers prefer business as an occupation for their children and only 7 per cent prefer to involve their children in the hereditary occupation of weaving.

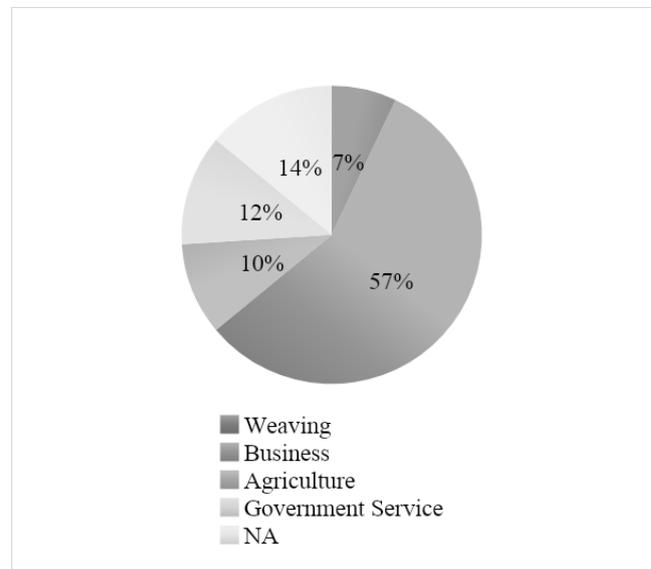


Fig. 1. Occupational preference of the Children of the Respondents

Table I: Socio-demographic Parameters of the Respondents (N=200)

	Frequency	%		Frequency	%
Gender			Level of Education		
Female	200	100.00	Illiterate	16	8.00
Age Group			Literate without formal schooling	20	10.00
≤29	10	5.00	Below Primary	18	9.00
30-34	36	18.00	Primary	40	20.00
35-39	50	25.00	Middle	70	35.00
40-44	40	20.00	High School/Secondary	20	10.00
45-49	28	14.00	Higher Secondary	12	6.00
50-54	16	8.00	Graduate & above	4	2.00
55-59	14	7.00	Type of Ration Card		
60 and above	6	3.00	Antyodaya (AAY)	4	2.00
Social Group			MMASY	34	17.00
General	152	76.00	BPL	114	57.00
OBC	28	14.00	APL	26	13.00
SC	20	10.00	No Card	22	11.00
Religious Group			Type of Dwelling		
Hindu	200	100.00	Kuccha	30	15.00
			Semi- Pucca	138	69.00
			Pucca	32	16.00

Source: Field Survey

Table II: Economic Parameters of the respondents (N=200)

	N	%		N	%		N	%
Monthly Family Income			Income from Weaving activity			Possession of land holding		
Up to 6000	28	14.00	≤1000	34	17.00	Yes	80	40.00
6001-8000	36	18.00	1001-1500	40	20.00	No	120	60.00
8001-10000	64	32.00	1501-2000	78	39.00	Area of land holding		
10001-12000	24	12.00	2001-2500	26	13.00	Up to 0.5 hectare	50	62.50
12001-14000	16	8.00	2501-3000	16	8.00	1-2 hectare	24	30.00
14001-16000	16	8.00	>3001	6	3.00	>2 hectare	6	7.50
16001-18000	6	3.00						
18001 and above	10	5.00						

Source: Field Survey, N= Frequency

Table III: Occupational preference of the Children of the Respondents (N=200)

	Frequency	%
Occupational preference of children of the weavers' household		
Weaving	14	7.00
Business	114	57.00
Agriculture	20	10.00
Government Service	24	12.00
NA	28	14.00

Source: Field Survey

The percentage of weavers reporting preference of government service for their children is also more than that of weaving. It indicates that the weavers have less interest to put their children into their hereditary occupation and they have a strong feeling that business or government service will provide better livelihood to their children. This indicates the dwindling preference for weaving in this current epoch among the weavers in Barpeta district. The survival of the handloom industry is thus obviously affected which reflects that the handloom industry in Assam is not out of trouble.

V. CONCLUSION

The handloom weavers are the lifeline of the handloom industry, they are keeping it alive in this modern century. However, from the above analysis, we have found that the weavers are losing interest from the handloom industry and very low proportion of weavers' children are interested in taking up weaving activity in future in Barpeta district. Same is reflected about that of the weavers combined with their poor economic conditions during the course of the interview. As this activity is descended down from generation to generation, therefore, the newer generation losing interest in this activity arises serious question about its continuity. Hence, the government, the concerned department as well as promotional and development organisations and professionals should make proper plans and research to preserve and protect this largest rural industry of Assam.

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