

Socio-Economic Conditions and the Problems Faced by The Women Weavers of Sualkuchi Silk Industry of Assam

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Abstract

The production of various silk fabrics could be seen all over Assam but this activity is mainly concentrated in Sualkuchi which is a prominent silk weaving centre. This handloom weaving tradition has a very important effect on the socio-economic lives of the people of Sualkuchi area. But the present condition of the Sualkuchi Silk Industry is gradually deteriorating due to various factors so it is necessary to understand the problems of this industry for which it is required to study the phenomenon in different settings. The people of Sualkuchi demand a change in the present situation of the silk village of Sualkuchi. For these, the present study has tried to understand the socio-economic conditions and the role of women weavers of silk industry of Assam with particular reference to Sualkuchi area. In the study area there are numbers of women weavers but due to paucity of time the researcher have selected 50 women weavers belonging to 3 blocks to conduct the study. The secondary data has been collected from various journals, articles, websites, books, etc. The study has found that the present scenario of Sualkuchi Silk Industry is not very favorable as the demand for the product is decreasing due to the availability of alternative options with a wide variety of choices. Moreover, the study has found that the raw materials required to produce Sualkuchi Silk products are scarce, and this must be imported from other areas at a higher price. In addition to this Sualkuchi silk industry weavers still adopt the traditional method i.e. manual technology to produce finished goods which consume more time as compared to machine product.

Keywords: Handloom, Weavers, Silk industry, Sualkuchi, Assam.

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Introduction

‘Sualkuchi’ is the main centre of Kamrup district of Assam where large amount of silk are produced. Sualkuchi has the largest number of cottage industry engaged in handloom among the whole state of Assam. The pride village Sualkuchi is situated under Kamrup rural district of Assam and the village is known as the ‘Manchester of Assam’. Mekhela chadors and gamosas are made from this indigenous material and are in high demand throughout the world. These products are used not only for domestic consumption but are also exported to other countries.

In order to provide financial assistance in an integrated manner to the handloom weavers and to strengthen the design segment of the fabric, the government of India has taken new initiatives in addition to ongoing programme by launching new schemes, namely Deen Dayal Hathkargha Protsahan Yojana and has set up a national centre for Textile Design. Government has also set up the National Handloom Development Corporation in order to provide a boost to the implementation of the various welfare schemes for the development of the weavers.

The production of various silk fabrics could be seen all over Assam but this activity is mainly concentrated in Sualkuchi which is a prominent silk weaving centre. This handloom weaving tradition has a very important effect on the socio-economic lives of the people of Sualkuchi area. It is said that the weaving industry has successfully sustained

its worth by transfer of skills from one generation to the other. The process of silk manufacturing, involves four major stages that of rearing the cocoons, twisting and reeling the thread and weaving. Since silk processing and manufacturing, is a household industry, in the study area it would be interesting to assess the role played by women in it. But, the condition of the Sualkuchi Silk industry is gradually deteriorating due to various factors so it is necessary to understand the problems of this industry for which it is required to study the phenomenon in different settings. The present research work is an attempt to study the silk industry of Sualkuchi in the Kamrup district of Assam situated about 30 kms from Guwahati city. The objective of the study is to understand the socio-economic conditions and the role of women weavers in silk weaving industry of Sualkuchi area of Assam and to find out the problems faced by the weavers involved in this sector.

Significance of the Study

The production of various silk fabrics could be seen all over Assam but this activity is mainly concentrated in Sualkuchi which is a prominent silk weaving centre. The condition of the Sualkuchi Silk Industry is gradually deteriorating due to various factors so it is necessary to understand the problems of this industry for which it is required to study this industry phenomenon. The problems need to be looked into for smooth functioning of this sector. The people of Sualkuchi demand a change in the present situation of the silk village of Sualkuchi. For these, the present study has tried to understand the socio-economic conditions and the role of women weavers of silk industry of Assam with particular reference to Sualkuchi area and have also tried to focus on the problems faced by the weavers. The present study might help in bringing the ongoing problems of the weaving community to light and might help in formulating policies and programmes for the development of this industry.

The objectives of the study are to analyse the socio-economic condition of women weavers in the study area and to examine the challenges faced by women weavers of the study area.

Research Methodology

The present study is descriptive in nature. It studies the socio-economic condition of women weavers and their problems with special reference to women weavers of Sualkuchi area, Kamrup district. Convenient sampling technique is used for the purpose of study and to achieve the objective of the research, the data is collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data has been collected through questionnaire and personal interview from a total of 50 women weavers of the study area. In the study area there are numbers of women weavers but due to paucity of time the researcher has selected 50 women weavers belonging to 3 blocks to conduct the study. The secondary data has been collected from various journals, articles, websites, books, etc. The data obtained from various sources are analyzed and represented in tabular form.

Results and Discussion

Age of the Respondents

The researcher has selected 50 women weavers to conduct the study. From the study it has been found that 24% of the respondents belong to the age group below 25 years, 50% of the respondents belong to the age group 25-40 years, 16% of the respondents belong to the age group 40-55 years, 10% of the respondents are above 55 years of age. Here it can be interpreted that majority of the respondents age structure is between 25- 40 years.

Educational Qualification

On finding the educational qualification of respondents, 14% of the women weavers were found to be under matriculation, 28% of the respondents have done their HSLC, 32% of the women weavers have passed HS examination. There were 20% respondents who have completed the under graduate programme and 6% of the respondents have completed

post-graduation. Majority of the respondents who have completed the post-graduation programme are engaged in weaving activity as part time job.

Marital Status

The study has shown that majority i.e., 70% of the respondents are married, 20% of the respondents are single. The unmarried respondents basically belong to the age group below 25 years of age. 6% of the respondents were found to be widow (whose husband has died) and there were 4% respondents who were separated.

Principle Occupation

From the findings of the study, it was revealed that 80% of the respondents of the study area have weaving as their principal occupation, 10% of the women weavers have occupation other than weaving as their primary occupation and 10% of the respondents were service holders who take weaving activity as their part time job.

Family Members of the Respondents

Regarding the total number of family members, the study has found that 74% of the respondents have 2-4 members in their family, followed by 16% of the respondents having 4-6 members in their family and there were 6% respondents who have only 2 family members.

Availability of Raw Materials

Regarding the availability of raw materials in the local market, 80% of the women weavers responded in negative and only 20% of the respondents responded in affirmative. The study brought to light that there is scarcity of raw materials in the local market at the times of need as the giant manufacturers make bulk purchases making raw materials scarce for the local weavers.

Number of years involved in this sector

The study has revealed that out of the total studied 50 respondents, 38% of them were involved in this sector for less than 2 years, 26% of them were involved in this sector for 2-5 years, 22% of them were engaged in this sector for 5-10 years and 14% of the women weavers were involved in this sector for more than 10 years. Thus, it can be seen that there are less number of experienced people (in terms of years) were involved in this sector. And most of the people have left the weaving activity due to scarcity of raw materials, less demand for the product, not getting the proper price for the products.

Number of Working Days

The study has found majority i.e. 72% of the workers work 7 days in a week, followed by 18% workers working 6 days a week and 10% of the workers working 5 days a week

Capital Invested in the Weaving business

The findings of the study reveal that majority i.e. 34% of the weavers have invested capital from Rs 4,00,000 – 5,00,000 in their weaving unit, followed by 30% of the weavers investing between Rs 3,00,000– 4,00,000, Rs 2,00,000- 3,00,000 being invested by 32% of the weavers. And 4% of the units invested only Rs 1,00,000 – 2,00,000. Investment in the weaving activity is done based on the financial capability of the women weavers.

Source of Finance

The respondents of the study area used to receive their finances from the relatives, from banks, own capital and other sources. The findings of the study reveal that majority i.e. 42% of the respondents have received their finances from banks, followed by 32% of the respondents receiving finance from relatives and friends, 12% respondents finance source is their own capital and 14% of the respondents have other sources of finance such as private institutions, different groups etc.

Monthly Income of the Weavers

The study has found that majority of the respondents i.e. 32% of the workers earn 15,000-20,000 in a month, from weaving activity, followed by 24% workers earning 20,000-25,000 in a month, followed by 20% of the workers earning 25,000- 30,000 in a month, 16% of the workers earning 10,000-15,000 in a month and 8% of the workers earning 5,000- 10,000 in a month from their weaving activity.

Products that are made in Sualkuchi

The handloom industry of Sualkuchi creates cotton textiles, silk textiles and khadi cloth. These traditional textiles hold high social and moral value in and outside the state. However, Sualkuchi is best known for its silk textiles, both mulberry and muga silk. Muga silk is used in products like saree's, mekhela chadors. Muga silk is a protected Geographical Indication (GI) to Assam. Another silk that is made in Sualkuchi is Eri silk. Eri silk is somewhat woolly in texture, Eri silk has thermal qualities which makes it perfect for both winter and summer use. Pat silk is also produced in Sualkuchi. The silk comes in natural white or off white in colour, Assamese mekhela-chadors are often made with pat silk. Apart from these gamosa, seleng are also made.

Monthly Production of different Silk

From the study it has been found that majority i.e. 60% of the women weavers produce pat silk, followed by 20% of the weavers produce Eri silk and 20% of the weavers produce Muga silk.

Major Problems Faced by the Women Weavers

Table1: Showing major problem faced by Woman Weavers

Problem Faced by Woman Entrepreneurs	Frequency	Percentage
Lack of Awareness of Schemes	4	8%
Loan from Bank	14	28%
Lack of proper skill of weavers	10	20%
Lack of marketing for product	6	12%
Lack Demand for product	3	6%
Lack of Technology	13	26%
Total	50	100%

Source: Primary Data, 2024

The study has found majority i.e. 28% of the workers have faced problem while receiving loan from bank, followed by 26% of the workers who faced problem due to lack of technology and proper working machines, 20% of the workers have faced problem due to lack of their proper skills of weaving, 12% of the workers faced problem due to lack of marketing of the product, 8% of the workers faced problem as they do not have adequate knowledge on the available schemes and 6% of the workers faced problem due to lack of demand for product in the study area, and this lack of demand for the product is basically due to the alternative option availability.

The weavers also complained on no proper workshed for the weavers to keep looms and fabrics safe from rain and Sun damage. Plus, the weaving process of making designs in the traditional style is very intricate and time consuming.

Whether covid have affected the demand

The demand for silk has been affected very badly by the pandemic. Finished silk products were stocked at home as many orders were cancelled and no new orders placed by the buyers. The instant rise of silk yarn prices during lockdown created a problem in shortage of fund for the manufacturer as they have to purchase raw silk yarns at higher prices and no new bulk orders of silk products was there as many occasions and ceremonies were postponed and strict restrictions on social gatherings was imposed. The weavers were out of work, they were weaving up till the manufacturers had silk yarn in stock. Many handlooms were closed down due to unavailability and high price of raw silk yarns. The weavers had to search for other jobs for their daily meals. Due to time restrictions in the opening of the silk shops or outlets offline business faced many problems and the online orders faced delay in delivery due to certain places locked down.

Any Govt. support received by the women entrepreneurs of the study are?

The Mudra loan scheme is a govt. initiative in India aimed at promoting entrepreneurship and providing financial support to micro and small enterprises. The scheme has a special focus on women entrepreneurs, as it aims to empower and promote women's entrepreneurship in the country. Mudra loans for women are also available on

easy terms and conditions, with no collateral required for loans up to Rs10 lakhs. The scheme also offers lower interest rates to women entrepreneurs, making it a lucrative option for those looking to start or expand their businesses. Under the Mudra Yojana, The Mahila Udyami Yojana is another scheme for women entrepreneurs. But most of the women weavers of Sualkuchi area were unable to get the benefits of this scheme and in many cases, it was seen that the weavers were unaware of the schemes. The weavers of the Kamrup cluster are demanding various welfare schemes from the govt. of India as well as from the govt. of Assam. Some of the benefits which the weavers of Sualkuchi are demanding include free medical aid, weavers' loans, and home loans. Soft loans are also on the list of demands of the weavers of Sualkuchi silk industry.

Have any Govt. training received by women weavers of the study area?

Training which was provided to the women weavers of the study area by the various training institutions was not sufficient for them because of the very short duration of the course. So, the training should be provided in a sufficient way so that the weavers become proficient in the skill of weaving.

Current scenario of export market

Sualkuchi silk industry's silk and silk products are highly demanded throughout the world. Some of the issues affecting silk exports are decreased demand from major consumables due to availability of alternatives, rising prices of raw materials- silk yarn/fabrics, increased competition from blended silk products (silk blends with synthetic and polyester fabrics), silk not being major focus of current fashion trends etc. The quality of the silk products of Assam requires improvement for making fashion garments for export. Our state has a huge demand for silk yarn and products, against which our state is unable to produce that much silk yarn/products. Unfortunately, Assam silk producers, weavers and traders have failed to exploit the market potential. There is a gap between demand and supply. There is an urgent need for direct sales from the production unit to the buyer need to be facilitated through online platforms.

Demand of the product in local market

Assam silk has a very good demand in both inside and outside the state. It is a general feeling that Assam silk is costlier than the silk imported from outside Assam, particularly from Banaras. However, a close look reveals that if it is natural silk, there is not much difference in cost of Assam silk and the silk imported from outside Assam, but when natural silk is blended with cheap imported Chinese silk or artificial silk yarns, the cost of such fabric becomes significantly low compared to pure natural silk fabric. Therefore, the demand for the alternative silk yarn products has taken place in our local market for its low price, decreasing the demand for our own products in the local market.

Whether other silk affected the demand like Banarasi silk, Tusarsilk etc.

Assam silk is costlier than the silk imported from outside Assam particularly from Banaras. Alternatively silk like Banarasi silk, Tusar silk is comparatively less in price than the Assam silk; so that the customers are willing to buy other silk products and customers are likely to go for less expensive one which has affected the demand for Assam Silk.

Limitation of the Study

Required information for the study has been selected from 50 female weavers of Sualkuchi. Therefore, the outcome of the study is limited to the specific area and it may not be same for the weavers of other parts of the state or country. Secondly, the respondents were unlikely or unable to answer all the related questions of the questionnaire. In addition to these, there may be biasness of respondents in their responses.

Conclusion

The present scenario of Sualkuchi Silk Industry is not very favorable as the demand for the product is decreasing due to the availability of alternative options with a wide variety

of choices. Moreover, the study has found that the raw materials required to produce Sualkuchi Silk products are scarce, and this must be imported from other areas at a higher price. In addition to this Sualkuchi silk industry weavers still adopt the traditional method i.e. manual technology to produce finished goods which consume more time as compared to machine product. The manual products are also sold at a higher price than the machine products, which has become one of the major reasons for the decrease in their demand. To increase the demand for the products raw material should be available in adequate quantity and modern technologies should be adopted so that the products can be produced at a less expense, making it convenient for the customers to purchase the products. Apart from these steps should be taken by the government to provide the weavers with financial aid for the upliftment of the standard of living of the weavers as well as for the growth of the sector. Training should be provided to the weavers from time to time to make them proficient with the upgraded technologies and styles so that their designs do not become obsolete, and they can satisfy the consumers.

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