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WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH HANDLOOM : A STUDY OF SUALKUCHI BLOCK

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Abstract :

Handloom industry creating employment opportunities in the stages of cultivation, rearing and weaving. Its contribution to the socio –economic life of the people specially the women is very significant. But in the recent past it is seen that due to globalization, changing market needs, this sector is in turmoil, facing adverse impact from government policies and discriminatory competitions , piracy in the quality of the products .In this circumstances it becomes important to address the problems and needs of the vulnerable sections of the weavers of the handloom industry of Sualkuchi

INTRODUCTION

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 Scheme, namely Deen Dayal Hathkargha Protsahan Yojana and set up a National Centre for Textile Design recently. Focus has also been given on the Enforcement of Handloom (Reservation of Articles for Production) Act ,1985 that aims to protect millions of handlooms weavers from the encroachment made on their livelihood by the poor loom operators and textiles mill sector , by reserving certain categories of textile articles for exclusive production by handlooms . Government has also set up the National Handloom Development Corporation in order to provide boost to the implementation of the various welfare schemes for the development of the weavers. Some of the very important schemes includes Health Package Scheme for proving financial assistance for treatment of diseases like asthma, tuberculosis , maternity benefits to women weavers etc, Thrift Fund Schemes to meet expenses towards children's education , marriages, and religious ceremonies , New Insurance Scheme for providing coverage against loss or damage to dwelling due to flood , fire , and so on .The Government has also set up Export Promotion Council as the nodal agency for export promotion efforts related to the cotton handloom textiles .Further Handloom weavers Comprehensive Welfare scheme is providing Life, accidental and disability insurance coverage to handloom weavers as well as workers under the components Pradhan Mantri Jivan Jyoti Bima Yojana , Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana and Converged Mahatma Gandhi Bunkar Bima Yojana .

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study will be as following objectives

3.1. To study about the employment opportunities of women weavers of Sualkuchi.

3.2 To study about the empowerment of the women weavers in the Sualkuchi.

3.3 To know about the living standard of the women of handloom industry of Sualkuchi .

4. REVIEW OF THE LATERATURES

Goswami (1999) in her book *Assam in the Nineteenth Century: Industrialization & Colonial Penetration* argued that the manufacture of the silk was left entirely in the hands of the women. Every household was in possession of a loom. Spinning and Weaving of both cotton and silk were carried out by women of the family principally for making clothes for personal use,

Goswami (2005) in her book *Indigenous Industries of Assam : Retrospect and Prospect* argued that rural industries form the backbone of a economy .In a state like Assam , where more than 85 per cent of the population lives in Assam , the promotion of this handloom industry is of utmost importance. Almost all the people were self –employed and manufacture their products in their own homes, generally for their own use and also for their commercial use. The loom was to a large extent the centre of the domestic economy, the only hope of salvation in an hour of distress or despair. Spinning and Weaving for example were a part of every woman’s work irrespective of caste or status. The major portion of the silk fabrics was woven primarily for home consumption but any surplus was traded with Bengal and the neighboring hill tribes for other goods.

Baishya (2005) in his book *Silk-Industry in Assam* clearly discusses about the handloom industry in Assam specially the Sualkuchi’s handloom industry .In spite of the host of competing glossy fabrics and man-made fibers. Sericulture on which the silk industry survives is by far the best rural industry to provide jobs and generate income in the rural areas .It also helps creating a humanized habitat of green cover in the face of the increasing ecological degradation around us.

Daimari (2005) in his book *Economic Development of Assam: Problem and Prospects* argued that cottage and handloom industries have great importance in an agrarian economy like Assam The rural families can sustain and run their livelihood on these industries.

Kalita (2018) in his book *Cloth Industry of Sualkuchi* clearly discusses about the strength challenges of the handlooms industry of Sualkuchi .He highlighted about the crisis of the handlooms ,its modernization ,open markets ,rising prices of the silk materials , impacts of G.S.T over the silk industry of Sualkuchi , Changing market economy and so on.

Sarmah (2016) in his book *Status of Women Engaged in the Handloom Industry in Assam* have discusses about the role of women engaged in the handloom sector, in the production of the handloom fabrics. He argues the handloom weaving activities have a glorious traditions in the economy of Assam as well along with the rest of the north east region .Such activities are intimately linked with the culture and traditions of the Assamese people since long past .He held that it is practiced by all sections of the people irrespective of caste, creed and community.

Phookan (2012) in his book *Handloom Weaving in Assam* clearly discusses about the important role played by the handloom sector in India’s economy .It provided 19 per cent of the country’s cloth production, contributes to the country’s export earnings. It is the oldest and largest industry. This industry is silk oriented.

Phookan (2010) in his book *Muga Silk* clearly discusses about the Assam’s muga silk or golden fibre .The production of this involves the large number of people in every step. It is not only a sensuous, durable but also strong and beautiful. The golden silk is widely distributed and cultured in the Brahmaputra Valley .He held that the skill to weave

is the primary qualification of a young girl for her marriage. Thus Assam perhaps has the largest concentration of handloom and weavers in India.

Bharali (2020) in his book *In The Historical Search Of The Sualkuchi* clearly discusses about the historical location of the Sualkuchi, its cultures, socio-political life of the people of Sualkuchi, religious ethos, education, its production process of handlooms besides the changing economy of Sualkuchi.

Schendel in his book *Reviving A Rural Industry: Silk Producers and Officials in India And Bangladesh 1880s to 1980s* clearly discusses about the reviving of the silk industry, rural-industrialization as a forwarding solution to underdevelopment, rural silk producers as well as silk development policy. The colonial government took on a responsibility for the revival of silk production. It marked the beginning of a new role for government as a development and planning agency.

Srinivasulu (2010) in his book *Textile Policy and Handloom Sector* have clearly discusses about the handloom weavers who are classified on the basis of organization of production into cooperative, master-weaver and independent weaver segments. He also talks about the government's role, argued that government should take steps to provide the weavers with semi-automatic looms and requisite training.

Mahapatra (1986) in his book *Economics of Cotton Handloom Industry in India* discusses about the socio-economic background of the handlooms weavers, employment and organization characteristics. Mahapatra in his book clearly suggested that credit facilities should be provided to the weavers.

Baishya (1989) in his book *Small and Cottage Industries: A Study in Assam* explained the problems faced the weavers in manufacturing silk fabrics and emphasized the efforts to change people's attitude towards the adoption of intermediate technologies. He said that the use of intermediate technology will benefit the silk industry in the future, Assam is not capable enough to exports products to other state and also to other country. For value addition and higher profitability, there is a need to switch over from traditional products to new products which are more appealing to capture new markets. At present only small portions of products are marketed outside the state and also in the overseas market

5. METHODOLOGY

It was based on primary data that was collected from 100 respondents by using a structured questionnaire and through a informal personal interview and field visit methods. The secondary data were collected from published books, journals, articles, reports of government's departments, societies of handloom sectors were used relevant to the study. The respondents for the present study are the men and women weavers at Sualkuchi and government officials. Apart from backgrounds, the study also collected information on the socio-economic life of the weavers. For data survey, a structured questionnaire was used which contained simple, multiple choice question with relation to their age, gender specific, marital status, educational standards, working hours, Monthly income. Since the study is both qualitative and quantitative in nature hence all the above mentioned tools are used for data collection.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Handloom Sector has an enormous role in the socio-economic development. This sector focuses on improving the economic as well as the social needs, standards of the handloom weavers. It enhances the opportunities for employment generation for the handloom weavers as well as several other participants that are interested in the handloom industries which includes the minority people as well as the socially backward people. As an economic activity handloom sector occupies a place second only to agriculture in terms of employment. The sector with about 23.77 lakh handlooms provides employment to 43.31 lakh persons of whom 77.9 per cent are women and 28 per cent belong to schedule Castes and scheduled Tribes. Handloom sector contributes nearly 15 per cent of the cloth production in the country, also contributes to the exports earnings as 95 per cent of the World's hand-woven fabrics comes from India. It continues to be an important source of livelihood, especially for women, who form around 70% of the weavers or allied workers in the sector according to the Ministry of the Textile statements. In recent times also in order to provide boost to the Aatma Nirvar Bharat the Textile Ministry decided to provide the weavers the chance to sell their product on online mood to give them a new exposure in this era of globalization.

In order to understand the significance of Sualkuchi to India's handloom power, it is important to map it to the larger context of India's weaving Industry .It is believed that India stands first in terms of having the largest number of weaving looms in place accounting for 64% of the globally installed looms. More than 25,000 people are directly or indirectly employed under the silk industry in Sualkuchi. Sualkuchi alone produces more than 31 lakhs linear meters of silk fabrics valuing Rs. 9,000 lakhs approximately. Sualkuchi is Asia's largest silk weaving cluster, known for its handloom, traditional mekhela-chadars, and sarees, woven from mulberry, tassar and muga silk and has rich cultural heritages of its own. Sualkuchi offers a unique experiences of silk weaving practices right from rearing to reeling to weaving .Weaving is of both gender centric ,both male and female occupation in Sualkuchi . Both are engaged in making fabrics. The weavers are migrated from the neighboring areas of states .Many of the weavers belong to the tribes of Bodos , Rabhas , Karbi,etc who are known for their exemplary skill in weaving industry. During the long history of silk production in Sualkuchi, rural women folk took part in the silk production process. Weaving was almost exclusive preserve of females .It was not unusual to find both men and women weaving but this may be because under the Ahom ,Silk had become a specialized craft in Sualkuchi undertaken by professional weavers catering to the demands of the state .Professional weavers manufacture the silk but the chief manufactures are women. An attractive feature of weaving at Sualkuchi is the engagement of the whole family in to the possession .The weavers mostly do not have any institutional background in handloom weaving .They learned the art of weaving from their parents with regular practice .The reason behind almost all houses have the weaving loom in the backyard .Its inherent and unique strength is tied to heritage as Sualkuchi produces silk fabrics ranging from the Golden Muga (gold color silk) , the Ivory White Pat (white and off white silk). Out of which, Muga and Eri silk are native to only Assam in the World. Since the handloom industry falls under the unorganized sector of 90% of India's economy, the future is marked by unprecedented uncertainties. Weavers are incurring huge losses and are also under heavy debt. One of the major problems that weavers have been facing is the unavailability of raw-materials. Another growing issue has been protests of Assamese weavers against the sale of artificial silk or Banarasi silk with Assamese motifs in the name of Sualkuchi silk. This has become very common now due to increased commercialization where many apparel showrooms sell cheaper and duplicate silk Mekhela chadors .Further this sector is faced with various problems such as obsolete technology, unorganized production system, low productivity, Inadequate working capital, Conventional product range, weak marketing links .Further, handloom sector has been a weak competitors against power loom and mill sectors. Against this backdrop , the current research work will attempts to make an in depth study in to the life and misery of handloom households , their socio-economic development .It will covers households located in selected prominent areas of this sector . The study focuses on the participation and role played by women in handloom sector as most of the population mostly the women folk .Handloom weaving is a sector where women appear to have traditionally played a very important role.

Table 1- Age of Weavers

Serial No	Age	Respondents	Percent
1	18-40	55	55%
2	40-60	35	35%
3	Above 60	10	10%
4	Total	100	100%

Table 1 shows the age of the weavers. The weavers aged between 18 years to 40 years are more in number with percent 55percent. Weavers aged between 40 years to 60 years were found to be in second category that is 35 percent and aged above the age of 60 years are found to be less in comparison to the first two categories with only 10 percent.

Table2 - Category of workers

Serial no	Divisions	Respondents	Percent
1	Independent workers	40	40%
2	Paid workers	60	60%
3	Total	100	100%

Table 3 shows the numbers of paid workers were more than the number of independent workers. The paid workers numbered as 60 percent, while the numbers of independent workers or owners were 40 percent .

Table3 - Classification of Weavers

Serial no	Divisions	Respondent	Percent
1	Married weavers	60	60%
2	Un-married weavers	40	40%
3	Total	100	100%

Table 3 shows that 60 per cent of the weavers were married and 40 per cent of weavers were unmarried .

Table 4 - Education Of Weavers

Serial no	Level of education	Respondents	Percent
1	Primary	65	65%
2	Secondary	35	35%
3	Graduate	05	05%
4	Total	100	100%

Table 4 shows that almost 65percent of the weavers have passes primary level education, 35 percent have passed secondary level education,5 percent were graduate . Most of them deprive of school education due to the poor economic condition.

CONCLUSION

Women have always played an important role in the socio- economic development of the society Women enjoy a higher status in Assam with regard to the other states of India. There are various schemes to from Governments to promote the silk industry in the states with regard to handloom weavers . Women of Sualkuchi seemed to be out of the direct focus of that scheme. Weaving not only offer alternatives ,but also enhances the traditional craft making skill of women with safe access to start small business development opportunities .It further provides way to empowering women against the backdrops of poverty , hunger , gender discrimination . Malnutrition and so on. Thus by providing marketing facilities, aid of Government, Training facilities those women weavers will be able to earn a livelihood, raising socio-economic status in the society .

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