



# Employment Opportunity in Handloom industry of Assam with special focus on Sualkuchi

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**Abstract :** Handloom industry is one of the oldest and largest cottage industries in India with standing ancient tradition dating back thousand of years for their excellent craftsmanship , representing the vibrant India Culture . Due to their unique rich variety , Indian handloom industry had a constant high demand in the Indian market as well as over the world for their craftsmanship and intricacy of the designs. Assam ,a north-eastern state is famous for rich traditional weaving culture. The Sualkuchi ,a block in the Kamrup rural district is regarded as the ‘Manchester of East’ due to its uniqueness in its high quality oriented product. The present paper is an attempt to trace the history of the weaving culture in Sualkuchi . The present paper is an attempt to study the employment opportunity in handloom industry of Sualkuchi cluster of Assam.

**Keywords :** Handloom, Manchester, Cottage industries , Employment , Sualkuchi

## Introduction

The handloom industry is presently regarded as the largest economic activity in India after agriculture , generating direct as well as indirect employment fore more than 3 million weaver households. India handloom created a special place for itself in India and abroad .With so many varieties of handloom from different states , India has collected a precious wealth of innovation.This has led to the emergence of India as one of the most richly cultured country . The handloom industry is primarily a rural –based economic activity with a vast majority of handloom households residing in rural areas . A vast majority of handlooms are located in the Northeastern region of India . Assam is the leading states accounting for nearly 46.8 per cent of the aggregate number of handlooms in the country . Sualkuchi is one of the town of Kamrup district in the state of Assam , a beautiful scenic area situated on the northern banks of the magnificent Brahmaputra River.The people of Sualkuchi indulged in weaving with a deep passion leading to its establishment as the prime producer of hand woven silk – muga and paat in particular .I t has a significantly unique position in the production of silk items , in the state of Assam , as well as in the country

## Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study will be as following objectives

[1] To know the background of the handloom Industry at Sualkuchi.

[2] To know the contribution of Handloom Industry to Socio-Economic development of weavers at Sualkuchi.

## Review of Literatures

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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### **Methodology**

The study is based on historical and analytical methods. For this both primary and secondary sources of data's are used. The primary data that are collected from by using a structured questionnaire and through personal interview and field visit. The secondary data are collected from published books, journals, articles, reports of government's departments, societies of handloom sectors. The respondents for the present study are the men and women weavers at Sualkuchi and government officials.

## Discussion

The legacy of Sualkuchi's weaving can be traced back to the 11th century BC . Karpsik (Cotton), dukula (Muga silk) , Khauma (eri/endi) and patroma ( mulberry or pat ) were manufactured in several units of Kamrup. From Tantikuchi of Bengal 26 weaving families were brought to Sualkuchi during the reign of Pala king –Dharma Pala under Pala Dynasty to encourage weaving in Sualkuchi.Dharmapala who ruled western Assam from 900 AD to about 1100 AD created Sualkuchi a weavers village close to modern day Guwahati. Silk was given royal patronage during that period and Sualkuchi was made an important centre of Silk weaving.At that time it was patronized by the king of Pala , later by the Ahom dynasties till Sualkuchi emerged as a complete silk weaving town by the 17 th century AD.Ahom kings were known to keep many costly muga sets in the royal storehouse for presentation to distinguish visitors to their court. Queens were personally involved in training weavers. The residents of Sualkuchi thoroughly imbibed the knowledge and skills of weaving and produced impressive products . This is a matter of pride for the weavers of Sualkuchi , who maintain their traditional skills in weaving by holding off the competition from the automated machine. Most of the houses have the Sal looms, and all the family members work as a team in weaving activities. The children acquire the skills of weaving at a very young age and skills are transferred from mother to daughter or son in a very young age. The entire family gets involved in the value chain of weaving. The handloom industry of Sualkuchi encompasses cotton textile , silk textile as well as khadi cloth which are ,in fact traditional cloth endowing high social and moral value in and outside the state.Sualkuchi is well known for silk textiles both mulberry and muga silk .In fact the muga “ the golden fibre is produced only in Assam ” and it has also tremendous export potentiality . Such activities are intimately linked with the culture and tradition of the Assamese people since long past.

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 .

### Conclusion

Thus the Indian textile Industry is highly diversified ranging from the traditional hand-woven sector to the capital intensive mill sector . The strength of the handloom industry is lies in the fact that it involves hardly any usage of capital and power , is eco-friendly and suitable for innovations and transformation concerning market requirement . Though there are some shortcomings regarding the working conditions , salaries, living conditions of the weavers still it has been providing as well generating direct as well as indirect employment for a huge numbers of weaver households.

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