

# WEAVING IN COLONIAL ASSAM; A STUDY IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract:** Weaving is a way of life in Assam. It is one of the brightest parts of Assamese culture and heritage. Assamese woman can weave excellent floral and geometrical designs in the clothes. Almost every Assamese household had one or more looms for weaving clothes of various designs and categories. In Assam, clothes were basically manufactured by the means of hand weaving. By rearing silk worms and producing silk thread from the cocoons of these worms Assamese women wove clothes. They produced thread also from cotton. Establishment of the British rule brought revolutionary changes into the clothing trends in Assam. Assamese people, who were once self-dependents in the matter of clothing then begun to use cheap mill made British manufactured garments and rejected their tradition of spinning and weaving. But during the time of the Indian National Movement the tradition of home spinning and weaving was popularized in the Brahmaputra valley by the Indian National Congress and in its initiative weaving in Assam regain popularity. Use of *Swadeshi* or *Khaddar* clothes and boycott of the foreign clothes was a significant ideology of Indian National Congress during the period of India's struggle for independence.

**Index terms:** Colonial Assam, Weaving, Spinning, Weaving Loom, Silk, *Khadi*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Clothing is one of the three primary needs of a human being. At the very beginning human used to wear barks and leaves of trees and skins of animals to protect themselves from cold, heat, rain and insects. Having a sense of beauty man gradually cultivated the sense of making themselves beautiful with dresses of various colours, designs and different materials. Clothing patterns and materials are influenced by climate, fashion, religion and eco-system. Cloth is an expression of personal taste and style, identity and ethnicity, of social standing and wealth; it is a statement of social values associated with gender behavior.

Assam is the eastern most part of India. In early days Assam was known as Pragjyotisha and Kamrupa. In the early Indian literature like the Hindu epics, the Puranic and Tantric literature there are references of Pragjyotisha and Kamrupa. Assam is situated between the ranges of the Himalayas, Patkai and Naga hills. Assam at present holds an area of 78,438 sq. km.

In the art of rearing silk worms and the weaving of the silk clothes Assam had earned reputation from ancient times. Women from almost every community in Assam indulged in spinning and weaving. Skill in the art of spinning and weaving was considered the highest attainment of an Assamese woman and when a marriage proposal was made the first question asked regarding the eligibility of a girl was whether she knew the *bowa-kota* i.e. spinning and weaving.<sup>1</sup>

## II. METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this study is historical. The study is based on both primary and secondary data. I have collected primary data through British official records, contemporary books, autobiographies of colonial Assam, *buranjies*, contemporary photographs etc. As sources of secondary data I am using books, research papers, articles, journals etc.

## III. DISCUSSION

### 3.1 The Art of Weaving in Assam

The art of sericulture and the rearing of different silk worms for manufacturing different kinds of silk clothes were known to the people of Assam from time immemorial. *Ramayana* mentions "the country of the cocoon rearers."<sup>2</sup> This country of cocoon rearers is believed to be kamarupa. The *Arthashastra* of Kautilya mentioned a place named Suvarna kundya which produced various silk garments such as *ksauma*, *dukula* and *patrona*. Historians are of the opinion that Suvarna Kundya is the Sonkudiha of modern Kamarupa.<sup>3</sup> Kautilya's reference to *kshauma*, *dukula* and *patrona* cloths may be taken to mean the *eri*, *muga*, *pat* silk of Assam. Kamarupa king Bhaskaravarman's presents to Harshavardhana consisted of *Kshauma* cloths "pure as autumn moon's light" and "the soft loin cloth smooth as birch bark."<sup>4</sup> The *Kalika Purana* described in details the stitched and unstitched dress of

<sup>1</sup> E Gait, *A History of Assam*, EBH Publishers, Guwahati, 2008, p.271

<sup>2</sup> S Rajguru, *Medieval Assamese Society*, Asami, Nagaon, 1988, p.293

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*

ancient Assamese people. It mentions different garments made of *karposa* (cotton), *kambala* (wool), *balka* (bark), *kosaja* (silk from cocoons) and hemp cloth (*sānavastram*). There was a special class of weavers in early Assam called *tantuvayas* who might have supplied the need of cloths.<sup>5</sup>

During the rule of the Ahoms in medieval Assam, multiple changes came to the production technology, classification and use of clothing. S.L. Baruah remarks that, "Textile industry of Assam reached a highest point of perfection under the Ahom government."<sup>6</sup> The credit of making weaving a universal practice among all class and caste of people in Assam goes to Momai Tamuli Barbarua, the minister of Ahom king Pratap Singha. He passed an order that in everyday all capable women had to spin two cospes of yarn before went to sleep. The village headman had to check out daily whether this order was carried out or not. Besides it, every household had to contribute to the royal stores annually one seer of home spun silk. This orders had far reaching effect of ensuring the self sufficiency of Assamese people in the matter of cloth. The Ahom kings had a large number of looms within the royal campus for production and supply of various kinds of clothes where a large number of expert weavers were engaged. Ahom administration appointed some persons for supplying yarn and other raw materials for the looms of the royal palace. King Rudra Singha (1696-1714) bought some new ideas, designs and techniques of weaving from other parts of contemporary India. He introduced Mughal style dress *Pāg* (turban), *Jama* (frock-coat) and *Izār* (*pajamas* or *pantaloons*) etc. in Ahom court.<sup>7</sup> The Ahoms introduced *muga* and *eri* silks in Assam.<sup>8</sup>

In the Koch kingdom also the silk industry made considerable progress under the patronage of Koch kings, where the Vaishnava saint Sankardev took up the project of tapestry weaving with the help of the weavers of Tantikuchi. The tapestry was 120 cubits long and 60 cubits broad. The weaving finished in a year and the designs were woven with a large variety of coloured threads. The cloth is known as the *Vrindavani Vastra*. Each scenes of the *Vrindavani Vastra* has its caption below it and these letters too were loom embroidered.

Assamese military generals or commanders of the mediaeval time had a special custom of wearing an evil-averting cloth known as *kavach kapor*. It is believed that if a woman can give such cloth to her husband, he can escape death in the battle field. The yarns for spinning this cloth must be made and spun the cloth within a single night.<sup>9</sup> It proves the skill of Assamese women in weaving.

The tribes of Assam had their own traditions of clothing. All the tribes of Assam weave clothes with various colourful and attractive designs. Different tribes and communities conciliated each other by presents of their hand spanned cloths.

### 3.2 Impact of British Colonial Rule upon Assamese Weaving Tradition

Establishment of the British colonial rule played a marked role in bringing dramatic changes to Assamese clothing trends and textile industry. In the matter of clothing and fashion statements, British carried and followed their own tradition which was at first strange in the eyes of the local people of Assam. But western fashion of clothing gradually, but slowly spread into Assamese society. The dress of Assamese women during the colonial period was consisted of a *mekhela*, a *riha* and a *chaddar*. During the later part of the Colonial rule blouse and petticoat also became parts of Assamese common women's clothing. Assamese men wore a *dhoti*, a sleeveless shirt or *fatahu chola*. *Gamocha* was also a main element of Assamese clothing. In the town areas, few Assamese males started wearing pants and shirts from early part of the colonial rule.

During the colonial period imported mill made cloth became easily obtainable in Assam in a cheap rate. So Assamese people stop the hard working practice of spinning and weaving and started wearing imported clothes. These imported machine made products were much finer and smoother than the Assamese handloom clothes. So, these imported clothes were easily attracted the people. Though the interior parts of Assam, the tradition of weaving continued, spinning and dyeing became extinct due to the competition from British and Indian machine spun yarn. Even in rural areas women began to weave clothes from mill made yarns. Till the pre-British times, the clothing requirement of the Assamese society was full filled by the hand loom productions of Assamese women and there was little trade in clothes. Emergence of clothing trade in Assam and introduction of the system of spot sale of clothes helped in the commercialization of clothing in the colonial period. Shops for selling yarns, unstitched cloths and readymade cloths were also emerged in the town areas.

But all people were not economically sound to buy clothes from the markets and they used clothes weaving by themselves. On the other hand there were some socio-religious prohibitions in using western clothes in the Assamese society. Some of the Assamese people did not used imported clothes as they consider it anti-nationalist. So they wore clothes by weaving clothes from hand spun threads. The best of Manchester products could not hold down the native *pat*, *muga* and *eri* weaving industry, as there were no substitutes for these products.<sup>10</sup>

### 3.2 Weaving Technology Used in Assam

Assamese people manufactured cloths by rearing silk worms and producing silk threads from the cocoons of the silk-worms. Cotton clothes were also produced by them. Techniques of handloom weaving were handed down in Assam from one generation to another. From a very young age Assamese girls acquired knowledge of weaving cloths. Assamese handloom industry was a cottage industry in which spinning, weaving and other processes were done by same person. Weaving technology remained almost same during the colonial period in Assam like the medieval times.

<sup>5</sup> Dr. P. C. Choudhuri, *The History of Civilization of the People of Assam*, DHAS, Guwahati, 1995, p 329-330-331

<sup>6</sup> S. L. Baruah, *A comprehensive history of Assam*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1985, p 437

<sup>7</sup> R. Das Gupta, *Art of Medieval Assam*, Cosmo Publication, New Delhi, 1982, p 191

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid* p 189

<sup>9</sup> Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, *Studies in the History of Assam*, Guwahati, 1965, p 67

<sup>10</sup> R Saikia, *Social and Economic History of Assam*, New Delhi, 2000, p.68

Weaving looms, that used by Assamese weavers during the colonial period can be classified under two groups- handlooms and power looms, based mainly on the motive power employed. Two types of handlooms were used in Assam; *Mati sāl* or throw shuttle loom and *kokālōt bondha sāl* or loin loom. *Mati sāl* or throw shuttle loom was used in the plain areas of Assam. In this kind of loom shuttle is thrown across the thread by hand. The production of this kind of loom is low but it can weave many specialized fabrics. This loom is fitted to four posts fixed on the ground. *Kokalot bandha sāl* or loin loom is a kind of primitive loom used by the people of the hilly areas of Assam. They are also called Back strap loom because this type of looms is attach to the body of the weaver with a back strap. These looms have no any permanent fixture or heavy frames. K. P. Bahadur described the working process of this kind of looms in this way, "The woman who weaves the cloth sits on a low stool, keeping the wrap tight by means of a leather strap against which she leans, the end of the strap being fastened to the back bar of the loom. The shuttle is passed over and under the warp, and the woof pushed in by a bit of wood."<sup>11</sup> Fly shuttle loom was invented by John Key in 1733 in Britain which revolutionised the weaving technology and make it less laborious than before. But this loom was not popular in Assam during the colonial times. Assamese weavers were not interested in these looms and preferred traditional looms as they did not liked to leave their age old practice.

Before the yarns produced by modern textile factories became easily obtainable, Assamese weavers used to dye their threads by indigenous dyeing process. In Assam people did not have the habit of dyeing cloth but they used to dye threads and large varieties of dye stuffs were used for dyeing. Barks, leaves, fruits and roots of different trees like *Achchugach*, *Majathi*, *Palash*, *Chandan*, *kujithekera*, *Borthekera*, *Tepartenga*, *Turmeric*, *Bhamrati*, *Jarath*, *Urahi*, *Leteku*, *Jammu*, *Bharathi*, *Silikha*, *Amlakhi*, *Madhuriam*, lemon, *kendu* fruits, pomegranate and lac, indigo, vermilion etc. were used as dyeing material in Assam.

Assamese handloom industry was basically silk oriented. The climate of Assam is suitable for the flora and fauna necessary for sericulture. Three kinds of silk worms are commonly reared in Assam - the mulberry silk worm (*Bombyx mori*L.), the *muga* (*Antheraea assamensis*) and the eri (*Attacus ricini*). The mulberry silk worms (*Bombyx mori*L.) are fed on the leaves of mulberry plants. In Assamese they were called *Pat palu*. This type of worms is of two kinds, one is *Bar pat* and the other is *Saru pat*, i.e. big and small respectively. *Saru pat* worms can be reared from two to six generations a year. But generally two generations are reared in the Assamese months of *Kati* and *Jeth*, respectively known as *katia* and *Jethua*. *Bar pat* worms are reared in the month of *Chot* and known as *Chotua*. The *Muga* silk are produced from *muga* silk worms (*Antheraea assamensis*). *Muga* silk dress was considered rich and valuable. *Muga* is not only charming and beautiful, but also durable and strong. These worms are generally fed on the leaves of the *Som* trees (*Machilus bombycina*). Sometimes the worms are fed on the leaves of *Dighlati* (*Tet. glauca*), *Patisonda* (*Cinn. obtusifolium*), *Domlati* (*Symplocos grandiflora*) and *Soalu* (*Litsaea polyantha*) trees. Best qualities of *muga* silk *Chapa-patia* and *Mejankuriare* produced from the worms which are fed on the leaves of the *Champa* (*Chapa*) and *Adakari* (*Tetranthera polyantha*) trees respectively. *Muga* silk worms are found wild in Assam and wild worms are called *Deo muga*. But the *muga* thread is not prepared from *Deo muga* but from the domesticated worms. *Muga* worms are reared five times in a year. These are known as *Jarua* (in the months of *Pusa* and *Magha*), *Jetuhua* (in the months *Jeth*), *Aharua* (in the months of *Asadha*), *Bhadia* (in the month of *Bhadra*) and *Katia* (in the month of *Kati*). The *Eri* (*Attacus ricini*) is a warm natural yarn found in Assam. The worms are fed on the leaves of *Eri* but it also feed on the leaves of *Kecheru* tree (*Heteropanax fragrans*). The *eri* worms can be reared round the whole year. In a year up to seven generation of *eri* worms can be reared. But generally three or four generations are reared. Of all the four varieties of fabrics of Assam, *eri* was the cheapest and the most common for daily use during winter seasons. Another kind of silk, called *tusser* (*Antheraea paphia*) was also produced in Assam. This variety of silk was produced from the worms feed on the leaves of *Kutkuri* (*Vanqueria spinose*), *Phutuka* (*Melastomamalabatricum*) and *Bogori* (*Ziziphus mauritiana*) tree. Though the people of Assam reared these worms during the days of the Ahom monarchy, later they had abandoned this practice. The Kacharis reared another kind of *tussur* worm which were feed on *kamranga* or *kordoi* (*Averrhoa carambola*) and *hidai* tree. Dr. P.C. Choudhury said that there was no difference between *tussar* and *muga*. But people generally considered *tussar* as inferior to *muga*.<sup>12</sup>

Cotton was collected in Assam from the trees called *Kapah*, *Simalu*, *Akan*, *Maduri* and *Chhewa*. The cotton collected from the *Simalu* tree was also used for the purpose of making paper. But with the availability of high quality cotton in the markets and the easy access of cheap mill made cotton thread, Assamese people gradually left cotton cultivation.

Traditionally Assamese women ornamented clothes through loom embroidery. Assamese people used *guna* in embroidery works. *Guna* is a kind of gold and the colour of *guna* threads are white and golden. Besides *guna*, different coloured threads were also used in embroidery work. In Assam textile motifs and designs are inspired by rich biodiversity of this region. Natural objects of aesthetic appeal such as flowers, birds, animals and geometric patterns and some religious motifs find expression in the fabrics of *pat*, *muga*, *eri* and cotton. In terms of design, Assamese weavers preferred *latakata* or creeper and *buta bosa* designs. Weavers of Assam seek to capture the essence of the changes through their use of new motifs.

### 3.3 Ideology of Khadi and its Impact upon Assamese Weaving Tradition

In the struggle for Indian independence, ideology of using *Khadi* or khaddar or hand woven cloth made from hand spun threads was an important part of Indian nationalism. Indian National Congress, which was the driving force of Indian freedom struggle, took the 'Swadeshi and boycott' program as a weapon of mass mobilization. Use of only home spun, hand woven cloth and boycott of foreign cloth was a popular part of this 'swadeshi and boycott' ideology.

The idea of *Khadi* gain popularity in Assam and after the visit of Gandhiji to Assam in 1921, this ideology spread to the every region of Assam. The custom of spinning and weaving regained popularity all over again in every household of Assam. At the looms where foreign threads were used for weaving clothes began to weave only *Khaddar* clothes. The Assam *khadi* received

<sup>11</sup> K. P. Bahadur, *Caste, Tribe & Culture of India: Assam*, New Delhi, 1977, p 29, 30

<sup>12</sup> S Rajguru, op.cit p 296

best recognition in the 41st session of Indian National Congress held at Pandu, near Guwahati in the year 1926. The huge Congress pavilion and the delegates' campus of the Pandu session of Indian National Congress were made of *khadi* produced at Nowgong. The idea of hand spinning and weaving was not a new concept for Assamese people. But the *Khadi* movement spread the idea of hand spinning and weaving not only as a household daily work, but also as a nationalist ideology. Earlier spinning and weaving was considered in Assamese society as only women's work, but in the nationalist strugglers both man and woman spun and weaved clothes.<sup>13</sup> Congress workers distributed cotton plants to produce cotton yarns and weaving implements like spinning wheels and *takuris* among the villagers to inspire them to produce *Khadi* clothes. Weaving schools were established in different parts of Assam. These schools and weaving teachers taught Assamese people improved weaving techniques like flying shuttle looms to enhance the production of *Swadeshi* clothes. Weaving was included in the nationalist schools as a part of school curriculum. C F Andrews wrote in an article named '*Khaddar* in Assam' (Published in 'Young India', 11 June 1925) that Assamese ladies were clothed from head to foot in *Khaddar*. He described the beauty of the clothes weave by the Assamese women as "new revelation of the beauty of *Khaddar* as a work of fine art". He again said that if this custom of using clothes woven by own hands could spread to the other provinces of India, at least among Congress households it would be a glorious achievement.<sup>14</sup>

As *Khadi* was costlier than and not as fine as the mill made clothes, a huge number of Assamese people did not found *Khadi* attractive. But, instead of these shortcomings, the program of *Khadi* helped in the revival of Assamese spinning and weaving to some extent.

### 3.4 Economic Importance of Weaving in Colonial Assam

The handloom played an important role in Assam's economy. It is not only a part of Assamese culture and heritage; it was also the largest indigenous economic activity of Assamese people after agriculture. Many Assamese families have been saved from economic collapse by their women folk's labor in weaving looms. Weaving is basically a cottage industry of Assamese people because it was mostly a part time work and it provides employment to the Assamese people (mainly women) in their spare time. Sometime clothes were exchanged for goods which were not individually and locally produced. Assam starts to commercialise clothing only after the coming of the British into Assam. In many parts of India weaving is a profession restricted to some selective community. But the absence of any special class reserved for weaving is a unique feature of Assamese society.<sup>15</sup> In Assam women of every caste, religion and social status indulged in weaving and spinning and considered it as one of their daily work. From the end of the 19th century the domestic use of Assamese silk became restricted because of the growth of demand for it outside Assam.<sup>16</sup> Assamese silk, mainly *muga* had a very high demand in Europe and it formed the main item of trade of the East India Company during the 18th and early 19th centuries.<sup>17</sup> Both *muga* thread and *muga* cloth was a considerable article for export from Assam. In Assam *eri* was common silk reared by almost every non- Aryan woman and other tribes. So it was produced largely in Assam and the domestic and local needs could be satisfied in every district, demand for *eri* in the local market was not high. Another cause of low demand of *eri* is its seasonal use. Some Marwari traders of Palasbari, Rangia, Tamulpur and Boroma in the Kamrup district made attempts to develop trade in *eri* textile. But as a commercial product *eri* had little scope.<sup>18</sup> Backward transportation system and the great physical distance from the mainland India had limited the industrialisation in Assam which also affected the clothing industry. Though there were enough raw materials available for the development, endogenous weaving industry did not developed in Assam. Lack of entrepreneur, limited local or outside market were some other causes of it. British tried to cultivate cotton and rear silk in Assam in a commercial basis. But they did not get any remarkable success in it. Assamese people were not interested in doing sericulture works in organized and commercial way. The peasants of Assam took little interest in raising non-food crop in an organized way. Besides, silk rearing required special skill and personal cleanliness of the person who rear *eri*, *muga* and *pat* worms is the secret of success. No absolute cleanliness and perfect handling can be expected from hired labourers. This is another cause of the lack of success in rearing worms.

## IV. CONCLUSION

Handloom weaving has a great importance in the socio-economic life of Assam since early times. Women from almost every community in Assam indulged in spinning and weaving. Establishment of the British colonial rule in Assam brought dramatic changes to Assamese weaving industry. Earlier Assamese society was self- dependent in fulfilling its clothing requirements. But with the availability of fine, smooth and cheap imported mill made clothes in Assam during the colonial period, Assamese women began to neglect the glorious tradition of spinning and weaving. Though weaving is continued till today with some ups and downs, spinning and dyeing lost its utility from the time when mill made yarns became easily obtainable. Assamese weaving technology and weaving equipment were remained same during the colonial period as earlier. In the plain areas people weave their clothes by weaving in the *Mati sāl* or throw shuttle loom and in the hill areas in the *kokālot bondha sāl* or loin loom. Though flying shuttle was introduced in Assam during the colonial period, Assamese people were not interested in this type of loom. During the Indian independence movement, Assamese weaving culture regained strength. In this movement, cloth played a very significant role and *Khaddar* or *Khadi* or hand span cloth became a symbol of India's self-reliance. Almost in every region of Assam, ideology of using *Khadi* cloth became popular. After his first visit to Assam, Mahatma Gandhi commented that Assamese

<sup>13</sup> H. Sarmah, *Bastrasilpar Itibritta*, Publication Board Assam, Guwahati, 1961, p. 170

<sup>14</sup> S. K. Bhuyan ,*op.cit*, p. 68

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid* p.66

<sup>16</sup> R Saikia, *op.cit*, p.71

<sup>17</sup> E Gait, *op.cit*. p. 271

<sup>18</sup> R Saikia, *op.cit*. p.68.

women weave fairy tales in cloth and every Assamese woman is a born weaver.<sup>19</sup> But traditional weaving 'culture' could not be successful in becoming a profitable 'profession' in colonial Assam and it remained only a spare time activity. Though sericulture was known to Assamese people since ages they didn't made any particular attempt to develop it into a distinct branch of cultivation.

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<sup>19</sup> Satis Chandra Kakati (ed), *Discovery of Assam* , Calcutta, 1964, p. 5